**Richard Müller,** *Praying Monk*

Tschirnitz 1874 – 1954 Dresden

oil on canvas

24 by 17 inches (60.5 by 44 cm)

monogramed and dated center right: *‘1919’*

also signed, dated and titled on the verso

provenance: Private Collection, Bavaria

literature: Corinna Wodarz, *Symbol und Eros: Die Bildwelten Richard Müllers (1874-1954) mit dem Katalog des Gesamtwerks*, Göttingen, 2002, possibly the “Büssender Mönch,” p. 718 of “Werkverzeichnis” disk, no. M0000.67.

note: The extraordinary Richard Müller (figs. 1a-b) had a long and sometimes contentious career as a painter, print maker, and teacher in Germany from the late 19th century until his death in East Germany in 1954. He had been born, the son of a weaver, in the Bohemian city of Tschirnitz (now in Czechoslovakia), and in 1888, at age 14, began to study and work at the Royal Saxon Porcelain Manufactory in Meissen just outside of Dresden. Two years later he was admitted, as one of the youngest students ever, to the Academy of Fine Arts in that major city. There he not only studied painting and drawing with several academic masters, but also had the good fortune to meet the Symbolist artist Max Klinger (1857-1920) who introduced him to the art of etching. Müller developed a meticulous technique which he employed for original compositions that often had an erotic or macabre sensibility. In 1900 he received a gold medal at the Paris Exposition and was also appointed to a professorship at the Dresden Academy, where he was a colleague of the more reserved Osmar Schindler. Despite his traditional approach and rigorous emphasis on realistic drawing, Müller was to have great influence, helping to establish the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) movement and teaching among others Otto Dix and Georg Grosz. During World War I he saw limited action but was able to make many studies of the conflict. In 1933, he became President of the Dresden Academy, but two years later, under the Nazi regime, he was forced out, and his work suppressed. Nevertheless, he was listed as an important artist and thus protected from serving in the war effort. He remained in Dresden during the years of Communist rule and suffered for his supposed complicity with the Nazis. He was not able to exhibit his work and as an artistic and social outcast, produced mainly small paintings and drawings. His wife of fifty years, the American concert singer Lillian Sanderson died in 1947, and he designed her gravestone. He continued trying unsuccessfully to reclaim his place in the German art world and died at age 80 in Dresden-Luschwitz on May 7, 1954. The artist’s estate and collection was stored at Albrechtsberg Castle in Meissen. Then in 1970 the Dresden art dealer Horst Kempe purchased the entire estate, which then passed to his son Frank’s Galerie Saxonia, transferred to Munich in 1975. Only in 1974 with a major exhibition at a gallery in Hamburg was Müller’s work once again recognized and begun to be made more generally available, resulting in a museum exhibition in Leipzig in 2013.

From his earliest years Müller was possessed of an incredible technical proficiency, that enabled him to invest his varied compositions with an almost photographic realism, but tempered by a vibrating life-like presence. That quality is especially evident in this focused painting of 1919 of a praying monk. The figure set against a plain background is almost fully obscured by his heavy brown cloak and hood. Just his face in profile and his hands pressed in prayer around his rosary are visible. But this tight pose and the undulating rhythm of the material all combine to convey an overwhelming spiritual power. Muller has created a modern icon of prayer recalling early Netherlandish types by van Eyck and Memling.

Despite his many secular and even erotic themes, Müller did on occasion reveal a more spiritual side. In the early years of the 20th-century he painted some rather shocking depictions of the Dead Christ.[[1]](#endnote-1) Earlier he had painted portraits of members of the clergy or religious orders (figs. 2a-b).[[2]](#endnote-2) Throughout his life he also often visited the Franciscan monastery of Kaaden near Carlsbad, not far from his hometown of Tschirnitz, and even depicted it in one of his prints (figs. 3a-b).[[3]](#endnote-3) There he found striking and unusual subjects among the resident monks. Sometimes, as in the 1907 *Preaching Monk* (fig. 4a),[[4]](#endnote-4) they are in vivid close-up, but more often they are depicted in prayerful attitudes, such as the present painting and also in a study of another *Monk in Profile* of 1936 (fig. 4b), or going about their daily cloistered life accompanied by a variety of animals as in a *Praying Monk with Chicken* of 1931 and a *Franciscan Monk with a Cat* from as late as 1945 (figs. 4c-d).[[5]](#endnote-5)

Due to Müller’s prolific production and the wide dispersal of his works both during and after his lifetime, an absolutely complete catalogue of his paintings is nearly impossible. Thus, this painting does not appear in Corinna Wodarz’s chronological listing of his paintings, but it may be the unlocated “Monk” from the artist’s estate inventory that she numbers M67.

1. Wodarz, M1908.01 and M1909.01. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., M1899.01 and M1901.01. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Rolf Günther, *Richard Müller: Leben und Werk*, Dresden, 1995, no. 133. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., ill. 12 and WodarzM1907.02. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Wodarz M1931.02 and M1945.05. Sales at Villa Grisebach, Berlin, December 1, 2007, no. 231; November 30, 2012, no. 310. Piguet, Geneva, April 27, 2013, no. 485. Another of an *Abbot and Dogs* was sold at Damien Leclere, Marseille, September 22, 2018, no. 525. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)