Henri Matisse (Le Cateau-Cambrésis 1869 - Nice 1964)

Standing Female Nude

Charcoal and pencil, with white and grey oil paint, on buff paper.
Signed and dated H Matisse 50 at the lower right.
510 x 324 mm. (20 1/8 x 12 3/4 in.)

Throughout his career, Matisse was captivated by the female nude, which became his favourite subject and, broadly speaking, the basis of most of his work. As he wrote in 1939, 'My models, human figures, are never just 'extras' in an interior. They are the principal theme of my work. I depend absolutely on my model, whom I observe at liberty, and then I decide on the pose which best suits her nature...Their forms are not always perfect, but they are always expressive. The emotional interest they inspire in me is not particularly apparent in the representation of their bodies, but often rather by the lines or the special values distributed over the whole canvas or paper and which form its orchestration, its architecture...It is perhaps sublimated voluptuousness, something that may not yet be perceptible to everyone.'

Perhaps nothing characterizes Matisse's drawings better than his numerous line drawings executed with a brush or pen. Despite their apparent simplicity and spontaneity, however, as the artist himself noted, these fluid pen drawings 'are always preceded by studies made in a less rigorous medium than pure line, such as charcoal or stump drawing, which enables me to consider simultaneously the character of the model, her human expression, the quality of surrounding light, the atmosphere and all that can only be expressed by drawing. And only when I feel that I am drained by the work, which may go on for several sessions, that my mind is cleared and I have the confidence to give free rein to my pen.'

Matisse's large charcoal drawings, of which this is a superb example, are among his finest works as a

draughtsman. The artist used charcoal throughout his life, relying on its adaptability and taking full advantage of its potential to be worked and reworked, erased and stumped, to create a wide range of tones. As John Elderfield has noted, there is a particular appeal in the artist's working drawings in charcoal: 'We know that Matisse most prized those works in pure, uncorrected line. It is certainly arguable, however, that witnessing the struggle to achieve purification is more rewarding an experience than sight of the chaste result. The sublimity of Matisse's charcoal drawings, in which he searches and erases, and rubs down the forms, only to draw them again and again, tends certainly to support that proposition. In each of these works, a true picture of creation, and, superimposed, of its realization, is revealed.'

Drawn a few years before Matisse's death, at the same time that he was producing his abstract paper cut-outs, this large drawing was one of only a handful of simple yet powerful studies of the female nude that the artist produced towards the end of his career. In 1950, the same year that this drawing was made, Matisse made his last sculpture, while his final painting dates from the following year. Weakened by poor health, he was confined to his bed for much of the day, and channelled his artistic energies into drawings and paper cut-outs. Indeed, for much of the final years of his career, drawing took precedence over most other artistic activity. As one scholar has aptly noted, 'in the last years of his life, Matisse demanded more of his drawings than of his paintings.'

That Matisse was still immersed in studying the female form as he entered his eighth decade provides an indication of his incessant need to try out new ideas and concepts through his drawings. It is interesting to note, however, that in a late drawing such as this, Matisse's basic conception of the female nude had changed little from the work of his earlier years. There is, for example, a striking similarity - in both pose and style, as well the angular, geometric forms - between the nude in the present sheet and those found in the seminal large painting Bathers by a River in the Art Institute of Chicago, painted in stages between 1909 and 1917.

The use of white and grey gouache to add form and volume to the figure in this drawing shows that the artist was still, at this stage of his already long and successful career, continuing to experiment with the materials and techniques of his drawings. Stylistically and technically, the present sheet can be compared in particular with a charcoal drawing of a Standing Nude, signed and dated 1951.

Matisse's charcoal drawings of the late 1940's and early 1950's are among his most striking and expressive works, and sum up a lifetime of study of the nude form. As John Elderfield has noted, 'In these late works, Matisse's draughtsmanship is stripped to its minimum and expanded in its scale.' This magnificent, large drawing is a fine testament to the artist's undiminished skills as a draughtsman at the age of eighty-one.

Provenance:

Galerie Maeght, Paris
Private collection, Paris
Marc Blondeau, Geneva
Stephen Mazoh, New York
Vivian Horan Fine Art, New York
Acquired from them by a private collection, New York
Anonymous sale, New York, Sotheby's, 3 May 2005, lot 33
Jan Krugier and Marie-Anne Poniatowski, Geneva.

Exhibitions

New York, C & M Arts, Henri Matisse: A Survey of Drawings, 1996; Munich, Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung, Das ewige Auge – Von Rembrandt bis Picasso: Meisterwerke aus der Sammlung Jan Krugier und Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski, 2007, no.154.

Literature:

Christiane Lange and Roger Diederen, ed., Das ewige Auge – Von Rembrandt bis Picasso: Meisterwerke aus der Sammlung Jan Krugier und Marie-Anne Krugier-Poniatowski, exhibition catalogue, Munich, 2007, pp.324-325, no.154 (entry by Michael Semff).

Artist description:

Henri Matisse placed drawing almost on a level with painting as a form of artistic expression, noting that 'For me, drawing is a painting made with reduced means.' As Isabelle Monod-Fontaine has noted, however, 'Matisse became a great draughtsman through hard work, without the prodigious facility that Picasso had demonstrated from the age of thirteen or fourteen.' Working primarily in ink and charcoal, 'Matisse had impressive command as a draughtsman, able to optimise the properties of several drawing mediums and, hence, their visual impact. He moved from one medium to another, modifying his working methods according to his aims.' Matisse's drawings are almost always complete, finished works of art, and generally served a purpose beyond that of merely preparing his paintings. As John Golding has pointed out, 'Matisse's drawings were seldom actual studies for paintings, and even when they are preparatory to a painting of the same subject they were almost invariably conceived and executed as drawings in their own right.'