Stephen Ongpin Fine Art

Herbert James Draper (London 1864 - London 1920)

Study of a Young Woman: Study for Halcyone

Black and white chalk on blue-grey paper.
Squared for transfer in black chalk.
Inscribed and dated Ruth T 1914 in white chalk on the verso.
322 x 503 mm. (12 3/4 x 19 3/4 in.) [image]
482 x 635 mm. (19 x 25 in.) [sheet, including overlap]

Drawn in 1914, this large sheet is a study for the sea nymph at the lower right of Halcyone (see comparative image), one of the largest and most ambitious of Draper's late paintings. Completed in 1915 and exhibited at the Royal Academy that year, the painting, which measures over two metres in length, was acquired from the Academy exhibition by the collector John Hall, one of Draper's loyal patrons, for his home in Eccleshall in Staffordshire.

When Halcyone was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1915, it was accompanied by some lines written by the artist: 'How Halcyone in her bereavement was transformed by water nymphs, and rejoined her mate in eternal summer in the form of the bird that bears her name.' The subject is taken from the legend of Ceyx and Halcyone. One of the daughters of Aeolus, the god of the winds, Halcyone (or Alcyone) was distraught over the loss of her husband, King Ceyx of Thessaly, who had drowned while on a sea voyage. Draper's painting shows Halcyone preparing to throw herself into the sea to join her husband in death. However, the water nymphs took pity on her and transformed her and Ceyx into kingfishers, the birds seen in the painting above the head of Halcyone. Kingfishers (known as halcyones, or halykon, in Greek) were said to have the power to calm the wind and waves while they nested on the sea during the winter solstice.

The model for this drawing was a young girl named Ruth Torr, an artist's model from Clerkenwell in London who, with her elder sister May, posed several times for Draper. The drawing on the verso of the sheet, depicting the upper half of a man's trousers and what appears to be an artist's palette, is inscribed Ruth T and may depict Draper himself. The artist is known to have given drawing lessons to some of his models, and it may be supposed that the sketch on the verso is by Ruth Torr, who was about fourteen years old when this drawing was made.

Provenance:

Among the contents of the artist's studio at the time of his death, and stamped with the studio stamp H.J.D. (not in Lugt) on the overlap
By descent in the family of the artist
Julian Hartnoll, London, in 2001
Private collection, Madrid.

Exhibitions

London, Julian Hartnoll, A Second Exhibition of Drawings by Herbert Draper (1864-1920), 2001, no.30.

Literature:

Simon Toll, Herbert Draper 1863-1920: A Life Study, Woodbridge, 2003, p.159 and p.197, No. HJD171.iv.

Artist description:

Herbert Draper entered the Royal Academy Schools in London in 1885, winning a silver medal for life drawing the following year. He first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1887, and in 1888 won a travelling scholarship which allowed him to spend time in Paris, where he completed his studies at the Académie Julian under Jules-Joseph Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. In 1889, Draper won the Royal Academy Gold Medal and another scholarship, and spent much of 1890 travelling around Europe, visiting Spain and Italy. On his return to England, Draper began working as a painter and illustrator, with a particular penchant for mythological subjects.

Although Draper was never an associate or member of the Royal Academy, despite being proposed several times, he exhibited regularly at the Academy, showing large narrative paintings of Classical or romantic themes. In 1894 his painting The Sea Maiden attracted considerable attention and praise, while three years later his painting The Foam Sprite was acquired by a museum in Australia. A painting of The Lament for Icarus, painted in 1898, won the gold medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, and was later acquired by the Tate Gallery. Other museums to purchase paintings by the artist included the Manchester City Art Gallery and galleries in Bradford and Preston. Draper also was responsible for the monumental ceiling decoration of the Drapers' Hall in the City of London, a commission received in 1901 on the recommendation of Sir Edward Poynter. In later years Draper produced more portraits, for which he became quite well known. He died, somewhat in obscurity, in 1920, at the age of fifty-seven.

As a draughtsman, Draper worked in a manner akin to that of most Victorian artists, such as his friend Lord Leighton, producing individual figure studies in chalk for each of his paintings. Most of his drawings are preparatory studies for paintings, and he seems to have only rarely made drawings for their own sake. In 1904 an exhibition of sixty-five of his drawings and oil sketches was held at the Leicester Galleries in London.