

(ATTR.) Anne-Louis Girodet (1767 - 1824)

A Standing Nude Woman Holding Her Left Breast

Black chalk, with stumping, on buff paper.
462 x 356 mm. (18 1/8 x 14 in.)

The languid pose of the figure in this large drawing is a characteristic of Girodet's female nudes. Similar figures appear elsewhere in the artist's oeuvre, notably in a Danae painted in 1798 for a hôtel particulier in Paris and today in the Museum der Bildenden Kunst in Leipzig and, in particular, a late painting of Pygmalion and Galatea, exhibited at the Salon of 1819 and now in the Louvre, in which the female figure is holding her breast in a similar way. Although a number of preparatory drawings for the figure of Galatea are recorded in the catalogue of the posthumous Girodet studio sale in April 1825, only a handful are known today. Two of these studies are comparable to the present sheet in style and handling; a black chalk drawing of Galatea in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga in Lisbon and another large study of the same figure, accompanied by Cupid, in a New York private collection.

Parallels may also be found in other drawings by Girodet of mythological or allegorical subjects, such as preparatory drawing for a figure of Autumn painted in 1814 for the Chateau of Compiègne, known through a counterproof in the Musée Girodet in Montargis, or a rapid sketch for a composition of Pandora, also in the Musée Girodet, which includes a similar standing figure in the centre of the sheet. The present figure is also akin to the posed nude model in a drawing of a scene from antiquity depicting an artist in his studio, which was attributed to Girodet when on the Paris art market in 1972. Finally, it may be noted that a distinct resemblance in facial type is also found between the present sheet and a painting on porcelain of the Head of the Virgin, executed in 1834 by Athénaïs Paulinier after a design by Girodet, which is today in a private collection.

The purpose of this drawing, and the identity of the figure depicted, remains a mystery. While the gesture of a woman holding her breast was common in depictions of the nursing Virgin and Child, the present sheet cannot have been intended for such a composition.

Provenance:

Edwart Vignot, Paris
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 7 July 1998, lot 258
P. & D. Colnaghi, in 1999
Mrs. John (Dodie) Rosekrans, Venice and San Francisco
Thence by descent until 2011.

Exhibitions

New York and London, Colnaghi, Master Drawings, 1999, no.45.

Literature:

Julia Lloyd Williams, Rembrandt's Women, exhibition catalogue, Edinburgh and London, 2001, p.256, under no.71, note 10.

Artist description:

One of the principal history painters of the Napoleonic era, Anne-Louis Girodet entered the studio of Jacques-Louis David in 1783, at the age of sixteen. He won the Prix de Rome on his third attempt in 1789, when he shared the prize with Charles Meynier. He was in Italy between 1790 and 1795, working in Rome and Naples, and in 1793 sent back to Paris his first submission to the Salon, The Sleep of Endymion, an evocative painting which proved immensely popular and established his reputation. A huge theatrical canvas of a Scene from a Deluge was exhibited to much acclaim at the Salon of 1806, while two years later a painting of The Burial of Atala was equally celebrated. These paintings evoke a distinctly proto-Romantic sensibility at odds with the strict neoclassicism of the artist's Davidian training, although Girodet always remained first and foremost a history painter. As Neil MacGregor has succinctly noted, 'Girodet is the paradigm of the artist caught in a change of traditions, a man in whom neo-classicism and romanticism – however specially defined – coexisted in conflict. Reluctant to submerge his personality in an idealized aesthetic, unable to throw off its weight, he is the enfant terrible of late eighteenth-century French art.'

In 1810 Girodet was awarded a prize for the finest history painting of the past decade, the premier prix du concours décennal, for the Scene from a Deluge of 1806. (His master David's The Intervention of the Sabine Women of 1799 came second.) Several of Girodet's finest later works were of Napoleonic subjects, such as the Ossian Receiving the Shades of the French Heroes of 1801, commissioned by the First Consul for Malmaison. In 1809 he was entrusted by the Empress Josephine with the decoration of the Imperial apartments at Compiègne. After 1810, Girodet produced only a handful of history paintings, preferring instead to concentrate on portraiture. At the Salon of 1814 he exhibited fifteen paintings, three of which were acquired by the Crown. The end of that decade saw a falling off in his powers, however, exacerbated by bouts of severe depression and a weakened constitution aggravated by his habit of working late at night. After 1820 he seems to have largely given up painting and instead devoted himself almost exclusively to his writings, notably his epic poem Le Peintre, and to producing highly-finished drawings on literary themes. A popular teacher, Girodet had many pupils, of whom the most notable were Alexandre-Marie Colin, Léon Coigniet, Théodore Gudin and the brothers Achille and Eugène Deveria.

Girodet worked extensively as an illustrator, collaborating with the publisher Pierre Didot to provide superb illustrations for editions of Virgil, Racine and Anacreon. He is known to have regarded illustration as of equal importance to grand history painting, and the posthumous sale of the contents of his studio in 1825 included a large number of drawings for book illustrations and engravings, several of which achieved very high prices. The Girodet scholar Sylvain Bellenger has noted that, 'A devotee of literature, Girodet was especially concerned with the relationship between text and image…and he devoted himself particularly to illustrating literature. Nowhere better than in his illustrations for Racine's Phèdre and Andromaque did Girodet advance the sophistication and subtlety of literary illustration to

create profound historical compositions. He explained their importance in a letter to the Marquis de Pastoret…“It is a mistake for drawings to be nothing but drawings, and they require the same conception and almost the same study as a painting when one takes pride in giving them style and character; only the process of execution is different. The artist who succeeds at such drawings can be none other than a history painter.”’