

Jan Harmensz. MULLER (Amsterdam 1571 - Amsterdam 1628)

A Seated Female Figure (Venus?)

Pen and brown ink, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, with framing lines in brown ink.
Traces of a fragmentary inscription at the lower left.
Inscribed Muller on the verso.
233 x 120 mm. (9 1/8 x 4 3/4 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONALMUSEUM, STOCKHOLM.

E. K. J. Reznicek has identified a corpus of around sixty drawings by Jan Harmensz. Muller. As a draughtsman, Muller's work – in pen and ink, wash, or chalk - can be divided into two distinct groups. The majority of extant drawings by the artist are vigorously drawn studies, free and painterly in effect, which show the particular influence of Bartholomeus Spranger's studies in pen and ink wash. The present sheet, however, belongs with a smaller group of drawings by Muller characterized by a technique derived from the example of Hendrick Goltzius. In these drawings, forms are precisely delineated in pen and ink hatching, a technique readily associated with the work of a printmaker. Among drawings by Muller in this technique are several examples of large and highly finished virtuoso pen drawings on parchment, of the type made popular by Goltzius and known as 'federkunststücke'.

This elegant, refined drawing is a characteristic example of Muller's pen drawings copied after, or inspired by, the work of the Mannerist sculptor Adriaen de Vries (1556-1626). Muller produced a number of engravings after sculptures by de Vries, and also often took inspiration from the sculptor's works for his own, independent compositions. The pose and Mannerist form of the female figure in this drawing finds close stylistic parallels, for example, with the seated nymphs at the base of de Vries's Hercules fountain in Augsburg, completed in 1602, or the figures of the so-called Ceres and Venus on his Neptune fountain, executed between 1615 and 1618 and now in the park of Drottningholm Palace in Sweden.

The pose of the figure in this drawing appears to be loosely based on a small bronze statuette by de Vries of a Seated Female Figure (Prudence) of c.1611, formerly on the art market in Germany, which Muller also used as the basis for an engraving. A similarly posed figure is also found in de Vries's earliest surviving monumental sculpture, a Mercury and Psyche of 1593 in the Louvre, of which Muller produced three engravings showing the work from different angles. Also similar is the standing figure of Psyche in Muller's large and elaborate pen drawing on parchment of The Sleeping Cupid Spied Upon by Psyche, signed and dated 1607, formerly in the collection of Pierre Crozat.

Although the graceful, nude figure seen here, possibly intended to represent Venus, is not found in any surviving print by Jan Harmensz. Muller, this drawing may have been intended for an engraving that was never executed or completed.

Provenance:

Bob P. Haboldt & Co., New York, in 1990
Private collection.

Artist description:

A gifted engraver and draughtsman, Jan Harmensz. Muller was the son of Harmen Jansz. Muller, a printmaker and art dealer who ran a successful print publishing business. Trained by his father, Muller was also particularly influenced by the work of Hendrick Goltzius, in whose Haarlem studio he is believed to have served an apprenticeship in the second half of the 1580's. He is thought to have lived for some years in Rome and Naples in the latter part of the 1590's, but this remains conjectural. While he published a number of engravings after his own designs, Muller seems mainly to have worked as a reproductive engraver, producing numerous prints after the works of Goltzius, Cornelis van Haarlem and other Haarlem Mannerists.

Muller was related by marriage to the sculptor Adriaen de Vries, who worked at the court of the Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, and gained useful contacts with artists working there. As such, he also published a number of important engravings after the work of artists active at the Prague court, notably de Vries, Bartholomeus Spranger and Hans von Aachen. Indeed, although Muller seems never to have visited Prague himself, it is largely through his reproductive prints that the artistic style of the leading artists of the Prague court was disseminated and popularized throughout Europe.

In the first quarter of the 17th century he also produced engravings after portrait paintings by Rubens, Michiel van Mierevelt and others. Towards the middle of the 1620's, however, Muller seems to have given up printmaking to take over the successful family publishing business, which he had inherited in 1619. Around a hundred prints by Muller are known, most of which are after the work of other artists; the largest extant group of prints by him is in the collection of the Albertina in Vienna. Although paintings by Muller are recorded in several inventories and in his will, only one painting may be firmly attributed to him today.