

Sir Edwin Landseer

An Ecorché Study of the Head of a Horse

Black, red and white chalk on blue-grey paper.
A sketch of a lion and the torso of a youth in pencil on the verso.
500 x 310 mm. (19 3/8 x 12 1/4 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE SNITE MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME, SOUTH BEND, INDIANA.

Throughout his life, Edwin Landseer made countless studies and sketches of animals, in oil, watercolour, chalk and pencil. Most of these are unrelated to his larger finished paintings, and seem to have been done as exercises or to capture the appearance of an unusual animal or breed. This magnificent ecorché study of the head of a horse is among the finest of a small but significant group of anatomical studies of animals dating from the early years of Landseer's independent career, which the artist kept among the contents of his studio until his death.

Landseer had begun his formal training in 1815 with the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, who encouraged his young pupil to study the anatomy of various animals. Seven years later, Haydon recalled in his diary that Landseer 'dissected animals under my eye, copied my anatomical drawings, and carried my principles of study into animal painting! His genius, thus tutored, has produced solid & satisfactory results.' Haydon felt, however, that in later years Landseer did not credit the elder artist's support and influence, noting in a diary entry of February 1824 that, 'The higher a man is gifted by nature, the less willing he is always to acknowledge any obligation to any other being, however just or

decent. This applies to Edwin Landseer particularly. He is a young man of most extraordinary genius, but his genius was guided by me, & first brought to notice by my enthusiastic recommendation of him. When his Father brought him to me with his other Brothers, I advised him to dissect animals, as I had done. I lent him my dissections from the Lion, which he copied, and when he began to shew real power, I took a portfolio of his drawings to Sir George Beaumont's one day at a grand dinner, & shewed them all around to the nobility, when they retired to their coffee…In short, I was altogether the cause of bringing him so early into notice.'

Despite Haydon's disparaging account, it seems that Landseer did credit his master with imparting a precise knowledge of anatomy to his young pupil. As the eminent Victorian painter William Powell Frith was later to recall of Landseer, 'I have often heard Edwin say that he owed no little of his success to Haydon's insisting upon dissection of animals as a vital element in the practice of an animal painter, just as he maintained that a thorough knowledge of the human form could not be acquired without the information that dissection only could give.' Landseer is also known to have attended the classes in anatomy held by the Scottish surgeon and anatomist Charles Bell at his Great Windmill Street School of Anatomy in London.

The present sheet is part of a group of youthful drawings by Landseer - including several large ecorché studies of horses, dogs and cats drawn in black and red chalk – acquired at the artist's estate sale by the Welsh landowner Charles William Mansel Lewis (1845-1931). Mansel Lewis was himself an amateur artist, installing a studio in his home at Stradey Castle in South Wales. He purchased a large number of works from the six-day Landseer estate sale, held at Christie's in May 1874. As Richard Ormond has noted, 'The lots that Mansel Lewis bought at the Landseer sale were almost entirely examples of his early work, in the form of oil sketches, chalk and pencil drawings and ecorché studies of flayed animals…They were sketches acquired for private study by a well-to-do connoisseur who was himself a practising artist...Only a collector of a special kind would appreciate the artistry and scientific know-how that had gone into the production of these painfully precise studies of flayed horses, cats and dogs. They are not for the squeamish and it would require an artist's eye to appreciate their significance in the training of England's most brilliant animal painter of the nineteenth century. In these records of dissected animals Landseer built up a profound knowledge of anatomy, which was the bedrock on which his art was built…They are both accurate representations of skinned animals and examples of virtuoso draughtsmanship…Landseer goes beyond the conventions of scientific illustration to infuse his studies with character, life and movement.' A group of eleven anatomical drawings by Landseer formerly in the Mansel Lewis collection – ecorché studies of dogs and cats, in black and red chalk - have recently been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

Richard Ormond has dated these anatomical studies by Landseer to between 1817 and 1822, and has further written that 'Landseer's superb anatomical drawings reveal how essential to his art was his knowledge of animal forms. From the beginning, it was the extraordinary naturalism of his works, quite as much as his technical ability, which so impressed his contemporaries. Such studies gave him the assurance of a virtuoso style in which to explore his powers of imagination in painting.'

Provenance:

The artist's studio sale ('The Remaining Works of that Distinguished Artist, Sir E. Landseer, R.A., Deceased'), London, Christie's, 8-14 May 1874, probably lot 981 ('Anatomical Studies – in chalks. 16')
Charles Mansel Lewis, Stradey Castle, Llanelli, South Wales
Thence by descent until 2010.

Exhibitions

London, Royal Academy of Arts, Paintings and Drawings by Sir Edwin Landseer RA, 1961, no.149; Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art and London, Tate Gallery, Sir Edwin Landseer, 1981-1982, no.6.

Literature:

Richard Ormond, Sir Edwin Landseer, exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia and London, 1981, p.44, no.6, fig.6; Susan Owens, ''Ecorché' drawings by Edwin Landseer', The Burlington Magazine, May 2012, p.341, fig.45, p.343, p.344, Appendix No.10.

Artist description:

One of the most popular and successful artists of Victorian England, Edwin Landseer was widely regarded as the greatest animal painter of his day. His interest in animal subjects was manifest from a very early age, and accounts for many of the precocious artist's earliest drawings. These are often not only of dogs and farmyard animals but also of wild beasts, which Landseer would have seen and sketched at the menageries at Exeter Change and the Tower of London. Trained in the studio of Benjamin Robert Haydon and, from 1816, at the Royal Academy Schools, Landseer had by the age of fourteen already exhibited at the Royal Academy and the Society of Painters in Oil and Watercolours. He was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1826, at the age of only twenty-four, and rose to become a full Academician in 1831.

Landseer made his first visit to Scotland in 1824, and returned there almost every year thereafter. He was particularly fond of the Highlands, where he would spend the autumn months hunting, fishing, shooting and sketching. He gained the patronage of several noble and aristocratic families, and enjoyed a position of some regard at the court of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, who were to become among his most loyal patrons. Several of his paintings were engraved – many by his older brother Thomas - and these prints widely sold and distributed; indeed, Landseer may be claimed to have been the most published artist of the period. Despite suffering a nervous breakdown in 1840, at the height of his success, he continued to paint and to receive important commissions. Knighted by Queen Victoria in 1850, Landseer was commissioned in 1857 to sculpt four bronze lions to be placed at the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square in London. This was to be his last significant commission, and occupied much of his time over the next decade. His nervous condition, aggravated by alcoholism, became more acute near the end of his career, and by the last few years of his life he seems to have worked very little before his death in 1873.