

John FLAXMAN (York 1755 - London 1826)

A Scholar, a Cleric and a Soldier: Three Youths Inscribing a Monument

Pencil, pen and brown ink and pale brown wash, with framing lines in pencil.

Faintly and indistinctly inscribed in pencil at the lower right.

Inscribed John Flaxman in a modern hand on the verso.

144 x 111 mm. (5 5/8 x 4 3/8 in.) [image] 159 x 123 mm. (6 1/4 x 4 7/9 in.) [sheet]

The epitome of the Neoclassical idiom in English art, John Flaxman's drawings are characterized by a purity of line, and, as David Bindman notes, are 'governed primarily by outline and contour, to which tone and colour are usually subordinated.' His draughtsmanship, as manifested in the numerous published engravings after his drawings used to illustrate the works of Homer and others, was highly influential on such artists as Jacques-Louis David and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres in France and the Nazarene painters in Germany. Many of Flaxman's drawings were studies for funerary monuments.

As one scholar has noted, 'Flaxman loved to draw children of all ages, either grouped or singly, and in some of his sketches he captured them in the most playful of moods...' Among stylistically comparable drawings of children, executed with a lightly shaded wash, is a study of Four Girls Reading in the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens in San Marino and a Study for a Monument to the Reverend John Clowes, drawn in 1818, in the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven.

The sculptor and poet Thomas Woolner, R.A. (1825-1892), a founder member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, is likely to have purchased the drawing at the auction of part of the contents of Flaxman's

studio at Christie's on 26 April 1876, to judge from a letter written by Woolner to his friend, the critic and poet Francis Turner Palgrave, on the same day: 'Dear Palgrave, You will see by the enclosed that I have got you many lots [of Flaxman drawings] all good, and most of them cheap…They are so lovely that they must wait awhile before I can tear my heart to part from them. I got a few bargains. To my mind the most valuable of all the lots was 94 - Portrait of Flaxman by himself: an inimitable chalk drawing highly finished, and certainly the best portrait of him in the world. I gave…guineas, but would not take 10 times that sum for it. It is life size.'

Provenance:

Probably the Flaxman studio sale ('Catalogue of the remaining works of John Flaxman, R.A., comprising a marble bas-relief, models in plaster and wax, original designs in pen and water colour; also, gold and silver medals…'), London, Christie's, 26 April 1876
Thomas Woolner, R.A., London
Thence by descent; Sale ('From the collection of T. Woolner, R.A.'), London, Sotheby's, 5 May 1948, part of lot 23 ('About seventeen studies for Monuments, Portrait Groups and Illustrations to Aeschylus, the Book of Enoch, etc., mostly pen and ink and wash, a parcel')
P. & D. Colnaghi, London
Bought from them in November 1949 by Ray Livingston Murphy, New York
His posthumous sale, London, Christie's, 19 November 1985, lot 30
Private collection.

Artist description:

The son of a plaster castmaker and sculptor, John Flaxman was a sickly child and spent much of his youth drawing the casts in his father's workshop. He first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1770, at the age of fifteen, and won a silver medal. The same year he entered the Royal Academy Schools to study sculpture, and there met William Blake and Thomas Stothard, who were to become close friends. After his graduation in 1775 Flaxman was employed, alongside his father, as a designer at the Wedgwood factory, where his drawings for porcelain decorations were characterized by a strong linear style. He also continued to exhibit his work almost every year at the Royal Academy, and began to receive sculptural commissions for funerary monuments. In 1787 he was able to travel to Italy with the financial assistance of Wedgwood and other patrons. Although he had only planned to stay in Italy for two years, he was to remain in the country until 1794, achieving considerable succeess and counting among his patrons the Earl of Bristol, Georgina, Countess Spencer, and Thomas Hope. While in Italy he also made numerous drawings, notably illustrations to the literary works of such classical authors as Aeschylus, Homer, Hesiod and Dante, many of which were engraved and widely disseminated.

Flaxman returned to England with an established international reputation, and embarked on a highly successful career as a monumental sculptor, with significant commissions for tomb monuments and statues for Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, and elsewhere. Elected a full member of the Royal Academy in 1800, he was by now regarded as the leading English sculptor, and ten years later was appointed the first Professor of Sculpture at the Royal Academy Schools. Flaxman remained much in demand as a sculptor until the end of his career, while his work as an illustrator reached a climax in the publication of his illustrations to Hesiod, engraved by William Blake, in 1817.