

Abraham BLOEMAERT (Gorinchem 1564 - Utrecht 1651)

Studies of the Head of a Young Woman, Legs and Hands and the Bust of a Woman

Red chalk and black chalk, heightened with touches of white chalk, with framing lines in brown ink.

Laid down.

Numbered 125 at the upper right.

178 x 158 mm. (7 x 6 1/4 in.)

Sheets of studies such as the present sheet were an integral part of Abraham Bloemaert's working method. While in some cases the different studies on a sheet – of heads, hands, arms, draperies, legs and so forth - were simply exercises, at other times the artist seems to have been working towards a painting, with the drawing intended to prepare different parts of a single multifigural composition. As Stijn Alsteens has noted of Bloemaert's study sheets, 'The dating of these drawings is difficult; it can be assumed that many were made from life, with a model posing. Some studies are preparatory for Bloemaert's painted compositions or print designs…In most study sheets, however, the artist seems to have had no specific…narrative in mind, and these collages of heads, limbs and drapery should be considered as part of the tradition of model sheets…However, it cannot be excluded that Bloemaert made them to accommodate collectors with a taste for such examples of pure, and superior, draftsmanship.'

This sheet of studies is likely to be a relatively late work by the artist. Both the facial type and the distinctive hairstyle of the two studies of the head of a woman in the lower part of the drawing occur in numerous paintings by Bloemaert of the late 1620s and 1630s. The hand drawn in red chalk at the top of the sheet was used for the hand of Adonis holding a spear in one of the artist's finest works; the large painting of Venus and Adonis of 1632, today in the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen.

The present sheet was part of a large group of around 140 studies by Bloemaert - mostly figure studies drawn in red chalk - that were at one time in the collection of the French landscape painter André Giroux (1801-1879), and were dispersed at auction in Paris in 1904. Most of these drawings are numbered on the upper right corner of the sheet, up to 162, which suggests that they may have formed part of an album, perhaps one assembled by one of the artist's sons. Jaap Bolten has suggested that the Giroux drawings were drawn between 1595 and 1630, and were not meant as preparatory studies for paintings but as a sort of model-book or sketchbook of motifs to be copied by Bloemaert's students. Cecile Tainturier has suggested, however, that the drawings in the Giroux album may be more precisely dated to the decade of the 1620s. Other drawings by Bloemaert from the ex-Giroux group are today in the collections of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Frits Lugt Collection (Fondation Custodia) in Paris, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Rouen, and elsewhere.

Artist description:

Abraham Bloemaert received his artistic training in Utrecht and Paris but, unlike many of his contemporaries, never travelled to Italy. Indeed, apart from two years in Amsterdam in the early 1590s, he worked in Utrecht from 1583 until his death, at the end of one of the longest careers of any Dutch artist of his era. Almost nothing is known of his work before 1590, however, and it is only after his brief stay in Amsterdam that he began to establish a reputation as an artist of note. Together with Cornelis van Haarlem and Joachim Wtewael, Bloemaert came to be one of the last major exponents of the Northern Mannerist tradition. Among his most important religious works are the altarpieces of God with Christ and the Virgin of 1615 in the Sint Janskerk in 's-Hertogenbosch and an Adoration of the Magi painted in 1624 for the Jesuit church in Brussels and now in Grenoble. Bloemaert enjoyed a very long and productive career of some sixty years, resulting in an oeuvre of around two hundred extant paintings, including landscapes, religious scenes, history subjects and genre scenes. He was a founding member of the painter's guild of Saint Luke in Utrecht in 1611, and established a drawing school in Utrecht not long afterwards. As a teacher, Bloemaert's influence was considerable, with artists such as Jan Both, Cornelis van Poelenburgh, Gerrit van Honthorst, Hendrick Terbrugghen and Jan Baptist Weenix all spending time in his studio.

Bloemaert was a gifted and prolific draughtsman, praised as such by his biographer Karel van Mander, who noted that the artist 'has a clever way of drawing with a pen, and, by adding small amounts of watercolour, he produces unusual effects'. He produced numerous studies for paintings and engravings - some six hundred prints after his designs are known - as well as several landscape drawings and many sheets of studies of heads, hands and arms. Some of the latter were reproduced as engravings by his son Frederik and published in the 1650s as the Konstryk Tekenboek, a sort of model-book for students. The Tekenboek proved very popular and was reprinted several times, serving to perpetuate Bloemaert's influence on later generations of artists. (Indeed, the 18th century French artist François Boucher published a series of etchings after Bloemaert's figure studies, known as the Livre d'etude d'après les desseins originaux de Blomart, which appeared in Paris in 1735.) The bulk of Bloemaert's enormous corpus of drawings, numbering around 1,700 sheets, appear to have been retained by his descendants for over fifty years, and it is not until the first half of the 18th century that they began to be sold and dispersed.