

Thomas LAWRENCE (Bristol 1769 - London 1830)

The Beautiful Washerwoman

Black and red chalk, with stumping.

632 x 413 mm. (24 7/8 x 16 1/4 in.)

Only a few drawings of genre, landscape or history subjects by Thomas Lawrence are known, and this large sheet is one such example. Executed with delicate touches of black and red chalk, it is likely datable to the 1790s. It is among the largest known drawings by the artist, and is also unusual in his drawn oeuvre on account of its genre subject. Indeed, this fine drawing can be seen as Lawrence's contribution to the popular 18th century English genre known as the 'fancy' picture; scenes of everyday life that usually involved an element of narrative or storytelling, often of a sentimental nature, and were imbued with 'quasi-religious or social implications, [and] with an emphasis on poverty, benevolence and sympathy.' An antecedent of Victorian subject paintings, the 18th century 'fancy' picture included depictions of children, street urchins, maids, market women, shepherds, beggars and so forth, in the form of portraits or character studies. Although he painted very few genre subjects, it may be noted that Lawrence's diploma work upon his election to the Royal Academy in 1794 was just such a 'fancy' painting of a Gypsy Girl, which remains today in the collection of the Royal Academy in London.

The artist was also particularly admired for his portraits of young children, whom he depicted with great sensitivity and charm. Kenneth Garlick has observed that 'Lawrence was noted for his success not only in drawing children but also in identifying with them. They loved him, and his quick, sympathetic eye could catch their movements to perfection.'

The first known owner of this large drawing was the poet, politician and patron of the arts Richard Monckton Milnes, 1st Baron Houghton (1809-1885). Educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a member of the Apostles Club, Milnes travelled around Italy and Greece, publishing an account of his tour in 1834. Elected as a Conservative MP for Pontefract in 1837, he was raised to the peerage by Lord Palmerston in 1863. Elected to the Royal Society in 1868, Milnes was a poet and writer, and a noted patron of such authors as Algernon Charles Swinburne and Alfred Lord Tennyson.

The present sheet was later inherited by his only son, the Liberal politician and statesman Robert Crewe-Milnes, 1st Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945), who lent the drawing to the Royal Yorkshire Jubilee Exhibition in 1887, and thence passed to his youngest daughter, Lady Mary Evelyn Hungerford Crewe-Milnes, later Mary Innes-Ker, Duchess of Roxburghe (1915-2014).

Exhibitions

Saltaire, The Royal Yorkshire Jubilee Exhibition, 1887, unnumbered.

Artist description:

The leading portrait painter of his generation in England, and indeed arguably in Europe, Sir Thomas Lawrence was, from his early childhood, recognized as a brilliant and gifted draughtsman, and it was through his drawings that he established his initial reputation. (When he first exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1787 he showed a total of seven works, all of which were drawings or pastels.) Indeed, his abilities as a draughtsman are all the more notable in that it was a skill in which he was, for the most part, self-taught.

The importance of drawing in Lawrence's artistic process throughout his career cannot be overstated. He began each portrait painting by drawing in oiled black chalk on the canvas, and also created a large number of both preparatory studies and autonomous portrait drawings, deftly executed in red and black chalks. As Cosmo Monkhouse noted of Lawrence, 'As a draughtsman, especially of faces and hands, he is scarcely equaled by any English artist…His most perfect works are his drawings in crayon and pencil, which he continued to execute throughout his life.' More recently, Michael Levey has further noted of the artist that, 'It is not just that Lawrence had been profoundly trained – self-trained – as a draughtsman and that he continued to draw expertly throughout his life. For him, drawing was the method by whereby he pinned down his prime visual sensations.'

Lawrence's ability as a draughtsman continued to be praised long after his death. Writing in 1913, one noted art critic wrote that, 'Of the many who admire Sir Thomas Lawrence, as one of the most individual and fascinating of English portrait painters, few realise that he was greater with the pencil than with the brush; and that the grace and elegance which characterise his art are more superbly expressed in the delicate tints of water-colour than in the heavier, more solid, and more opaque oil pigments…Lawrence thought in pencil what he expressed in oil. Unlike his great contemporaries and predecessors, he found it necessary to make elaborate drawings from his sitters before setting down their likeness in color. Thus it is almost only in his drawings that he attained that perfect ease and spontaneity of expression which is the hall-mark of a great master.'

It has been noted that, among Lawrence's contemporaries, perhaps only Jean-Baptiste-Dominique Ingres in France may be said to have been his equal as a draughtsman in the delicacy and precision of

his technique. It was also Lawrence's close study and appreciation of the great draughtsmen of the past that led him, once he had achieved considerable success, to assemble one of the finest collection of Old Master drawings ever put together in Britain.