

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Abraham BLOEMAERT (Gorinchem 1564 - Utrecht 1651)

Four Studies of the Head of an Old Man

Red chalk, heightened with touches of white gouache, on buff paper, with double framing lines in brown ink.

A study of a female nude seen from behind drawn in red chalk on the verso.

285 x 187 mm. (11 1/4 x 7 3/8 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. 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This unpublished sheet of studies by Bloemaert contains four studies of an old bearded man of a distinctive type and physiognomy that is found in many of the artist's religious paintings. Although none of the four heads in this drawing can be identified as exact preparatory studies for specific figures in

paintings, very similar heads occur in such works of the 1620s and 1630s. The head at the upper left of the sheet, for example, is close to one in an Adoration of the Shepherds of 1623 in the Sint Jakobskerk in The Hague, while the head at the lower left is similar to that of Saint Joseph in an altarpiece of The Adoration of the Magi of 1623-1624, today in the Musée de Grenoble. Similarly, the centrally placed head in this drawing is akin to that of the saint in an easel painting of Saint Paul at Prayer of 1631, in the collection of the Centraal Museum in Utrecht.

The red chalk study of a posed female nude on the verso of this sheet is a rarity among Bloemaert's drawings, as most of the artist's relatively few studies of female nudes are drawn in pen and ink. Similar female nudes seen from the back occur in a handful of works by Bloemaert, such as a painting of The Judgement of Paris of c.1592 in a private collection and The Flood of c.1590-1595 in the Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven, or a circular drawing of Lot and his Daughters of c.1600-1605 in a private collection.

Unlike the vast majority of Bloemaert's sheets of studies in red chalk, this drawing does not seem to have been part of the large group of around 140 drawings by the artist that were at one time in the collection of the French landscape painter André Giroux (1801-1879), and which were dispersed at auction in Paris in 1904. The ex-Giroux 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. The present sheet does not bear a number and thus is unlikely to have come from the Giroux album.

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'étude 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.