

Henri GAUDIER-BRZESKA (Saint-Jean-de-Braye 1891 - Neuville-Saint-Vaast 1915)

Torso of a Male Nude

Charcoal, red chalk and watercolour, with framing lines in charcoal.

Signed or inscribed Gaudier-Brzeska on the verso.

642 x 528 mm. (25 1/4 x 20 3/4 in.) [sheet]

Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was a hugely prolific draughtsman. As the artist's friend and biographer Horace Brodzky wrote, 'In his short working life as a sculptor, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska produced a great many drawings; in pastel, charcoal, wash and ink. In fact he exploited all the media available to an industrious draughtsman, but the great bulk of this work is either charcoal or ink. His pastels, very few in number, were usually done in strongly contrasted positive colours, something no doubt evolved from Gauguin, from 'Les Fauves' and the Cubists of Paris…In his charcoal drawings of the human figure, mostly made at an art class, he resorts to the simple flat planes introduced by the Cubists. These studies have a chopped-out wooden effect, very fashionable in 1912.' The same author further noted of Gaudier-Brzeska that 'As a draughtsman…he will remain among the élite, for his sinuous and vital contour. For as a draughtsman he was fully developed, but to reach his full stature as a stone-carver required more years than Brzeska was allowed to live.'

Two closely comparable watercolour and chalk studies of male nude torsos, both likely drawn in 1913 and of similar dimensions to the present sheet as well as sharing some of the same provenance, appeared on the London art market in 1984 and 2002. A study of a male torso drawn in red ink and black chalk, in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Orléans, may also be likened to the present sheet. In its powerful modelling, this drawing also bears a noticeable resemblance to a full-face Self-Portrait drawn in pencil, dated 1912, in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London.

The quick, caricature-like sketch of a man wearing a tricorne hat, at the lower left of the present sheet, is typical of Gaudier-Brzeska's line drawings.

The present sheet once belonged to the English artist, theatre designer and writer Claud Lovat Fraser (1890-1921), a friend of Gaudier-Brzeska, to whom he had been introduced by the art critic Haldane MacFall. As Brodzky recalled, 'Brzeska at this time saw quite a lot of Lovat Fraser, who had a studio in South Kensington, and showed a number of small pieces at Fraser's studio when the latter held a one-man show of his pictures. Lovat Fraser and Brzeska at this time were much together and were often in each other's studios… Brzeska was always busy; if not for himself, then for others. He found time to decorate Fraser's studio, painting the staircase and other woodwork in primitive colours.' Lovat Fraser acquired several drawings from Gaudier-Brzeska; one of these, a head of a Japanese woman in coloured chalks, is today in the British Museum.

Artist description:

One of the leading figures of 20th century sculpture, Henri Gaudier was born into a working-class family in France, the son of a carpenter. In 1910, while studying in Paris, he met Sophie Brzeska, a much older Polish emigré and author with whom he was to share the remainder of his brief life, and whose surname he added to his own, though they never married. The following year the couple moved to London, where they lived together as brother and sister for the sake of social acceptance. Gaudier-Brzeska soon began associating with prominent figures of the avant-garde in England such as the Vorticists Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis, as well as Jacob Epstein and Roger Fry. As a sculptor he eschewed smoothness and polished surfaces in favour of a rough-hewn style of direct carving. Gaudier-Brzeska first exhibited at the Allied Artist's Association in London, of which he was a member, and also showed at the International Society, with the London Group, and at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. His work was included in the inaugural Vorticist Exhibition at the Doré Gallery in London, which coincided with the artist's death. After the outbreak of the First World War, Gaudier-Brzeska returned to France to volunteer for the French army. The following year, in June 1915, he was killed in action, at the age of just twenty-three.

A memorial exhibition of Gaudier-Brzeska's sculptures and drawings, held at the Leicester Galleries in 1918, helped to bring his work to a wider audience. However, it was largely through the efforts of a young assistant curator of modern art at the Tate Gallery, H. S. 'Jim' Ede, that the artist's posthumous reputation was firmly established. Shortly before his death, Gaudier-Brzeska had willed the contents of his studio to his companion Sophie Brzeska. When she died intestate in a mental institution ten years later, the bulk of the artist's estate, including many sculptures and around 1,630 drawings, was acquired by Ede in 1927. Ede published a pioneering biography of the artist in 1931 and championed him as a major figure of 20th century art. He donated many of Gaudier-Brzeska's drawings to public collections in Britain and Europe, while others were sold in order to finance the establishment of his home, Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, as a museum.