

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Virginie Demont-Breton
(Courrières 1859 - 1935 Paris)

Study of hands for "Les Méduses Bleues"

Signed and titled lower right: *Virginie Demont-Breton / Pour les Méduses Bleues*
Charcoal and pencil on paper

50 x 32.8 cm (19 3/4 x 12 7/8 in.)

Provenance:

By descent in the family of the artist, until 2025.



Virginie Demont-Breton played a significant role in advancing the position of women in the art world at the turn of the century, marking her as an important and pioneering figure at the time. Born into an artistic family - her father Jules Breton and her uncle Émile Breton were both distinguished painters - she and her husband, the landscape artist Adrien Demont, led the group known as the 'Wissant School.' Named after the fishing village on the Opale Coast where they settled, this circle of French and Belgian artists was active between 1890 and World War I.

Demont-Breton had her first work accepted at the Salon in 1880 at the age of twenty, and quickly achieved widespread recognition, receiving her first medal in 1881 and ultimately being named Officer of the Légion d'honneur in 1914. Her paintings were admired by Vincent van Gogh, who is known to have made a copy of her work *Man at Sea* (figs. 1 & 2).



Fig. 1, Virginie Demont-Breton, *L'homme est en mer*, oil on canvas, 161 x 134.5 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 2, Vincent van Gogh, *Man is at Sea*, oil on canvas, 66 x 51 cm, Private Collection

An ardent advocate for women artists, Demont-Breton became active in the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors in 1883 and served as its President from 1895 to 1901. Owing to the Union's tireless efforts, women were granted access to the École des Beaux-Arts in 1896, enabling them to use the library and attend lectures on perspective, anatomy and art history. By 1897, they were permitted to sit entrance examinations and enrol in painting and sculpture classes, and in 1900, women were finally allowed to join the same ateliers as their male counterparts. From 1903 onward, they were also entitled to compete for the prestigious Prix de Rome.

This elegant sheet is a focused anatomical and compositional study directly related to Demont-Breton's painting *Les méduses bleues*, isolating several hand positions, explored from slightly varied angles - most notably the child's hand resting on the companion's shoulder and the hands pressing against his knees as the figure lean forward toward the jellyfish. Each hand is treated as an independent problem, yet together they form a coherent investigation of balance, shadowing, and interaction.

This drawing should be considered alongside Demont-Breton's separate study of the jellyfish motif - *Étude pour les méduses bleues*, recently on the art market (fig. 4) - which similarly isolates a single element of the composition for close observation.

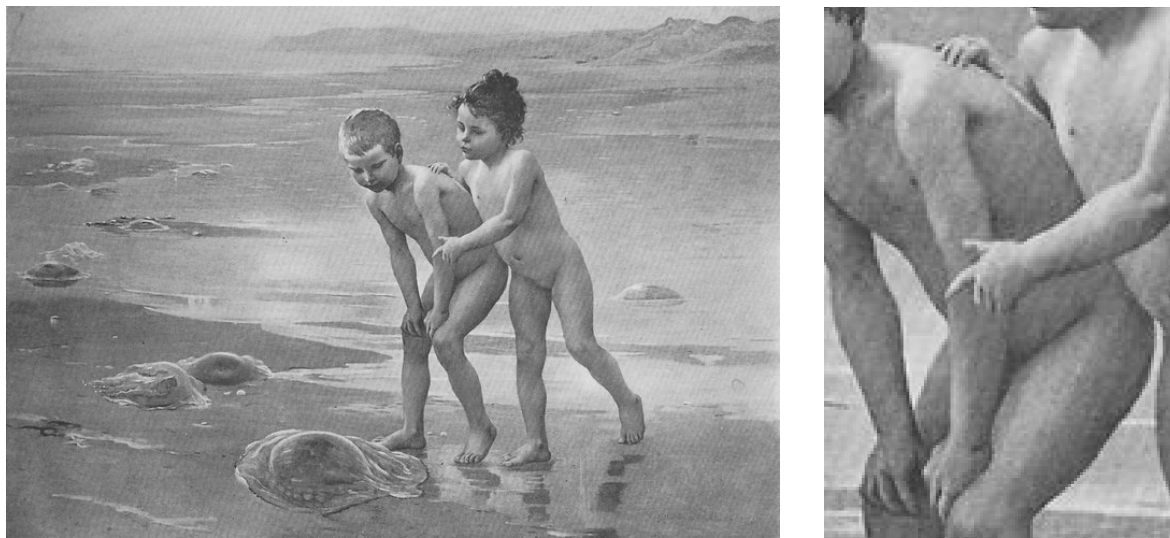


Fig. 3. Virginie Demont-Breton, *Les méduses bleues*, oil on canvas, whereabouts unknown.



Fig. 4. Virginie Demont-Breton, Study for '*Les méduses bleues*', oil on panel, 48x61cm, sale, Paris, Primardecò, 27th September 2024, lot no. 14.