

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Virginie Demont-Breton
(Courrières 1859 - 1935 Paris)

Study of a young girl

Charcoal and pencil on paper

50 x 36.5 cm (19 3/4 x 14 3/8 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.

The present drawing appears to function as a working study grounded in direct observation rather than as a resolved compositional design. To date, no finished painting can be securely connected to it. The informality of the pose, the unidealised physiognomy, and the summarily indicated object held against the figure's body (a fishing net?) may also point to a sketch taken from life.

The drawing reflects Demont-Breton's enduring interest in recording the everyday lives of women, particularly the hardships faced by peasants and sailors' wives and daughters (see for example, fig. 3).

It showcases her mastery of line, with the dress and the load she carries outlined with spare, economical strokes - allowing for later adjustment in paint - while the more detailed treatment of her head and upper body anchors the viewer's gaze. These contrasts draw attention to the girl's gesture and motion, capturing the physical dignity of labour with striking immediacy. Some of her comparable works can be found in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, as for example *Young Woman Sewing* (fig. 4), and with Elliott Fine Arts (fig. 5).



Fig. 3. Virginie Demont-Breton, *Lady on the Beach*, 1899, oil on canvas, private collection.



Fig. 4, Virginie Demont-Breton, *Young women sewing*, pencil and charcoal on paper, 64 x 49.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris



Fig. 5, Virginie Demont-Breton, *Young Woman Fisherwoman*, pencil and charcoal on paper, 50.5 x 33.2 cm, Elliott Fine Arts, London.