

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Virginie Demont-Breton
(Courrières 1859 – 1935 Paris)

Study of arms for "L'a.b.c."

Signed and inscribed, lower right: *Virginie Demont Breton / pour l'a.b.c.*
Charcoal and pencil on paper

49.7 x 32.2 cm (19 5/8 x 12 5/8 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 relates to the artist's painting *L'a.b.c.*, as confirmed by the inscription at the lower right of the sheet. The original artwork's present whereabouts remain unknown: one can only speculate that the final composition represented a grammar lesson, either received by, or imparted to, a young woman.

Our sheet is devoted to the isolated study of a lady's forearm and hand holding a book. Two alternative positions are explored: an upper study, more fully modelled and a second, more schematic variant below. Charcoal establishes volume and weight through soft tonal modelling along the forearm and rolled up sleeve, while pencil refines the contours. Small adjustments - most evident in the lower, likely earlier study - underscore an exploratory process aimed at resolving the most convincing, naturalistic action.

A comparable instance of multiple trials of a key anatomical passage on a single sheet is found in Demont-Breton's drawing *Le bébé Pissenlit* (fig. 3), where a central infant study is surrounded by separately worked details of limbs, to refine the final composition.

Some of her drawings can be found in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, for example *Young Woman Sewing* (fig. 4).



Fig. 3, Virginie Demont-Breton, *Le bébé Pissenlit*, pencil and charcoal on paper, 35 x 55 cm, private collection.



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