

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Emile Österman
(Vingåker 1870 – 1927 Stockholm)

An academic study of Pierre Louis Alexandre

Signed lower right: *EÖsterman*

Dated upper right: *April 90*

Charcoal on paper

58 x 41 cm. (22 ¾ x 16 ¼ in.)

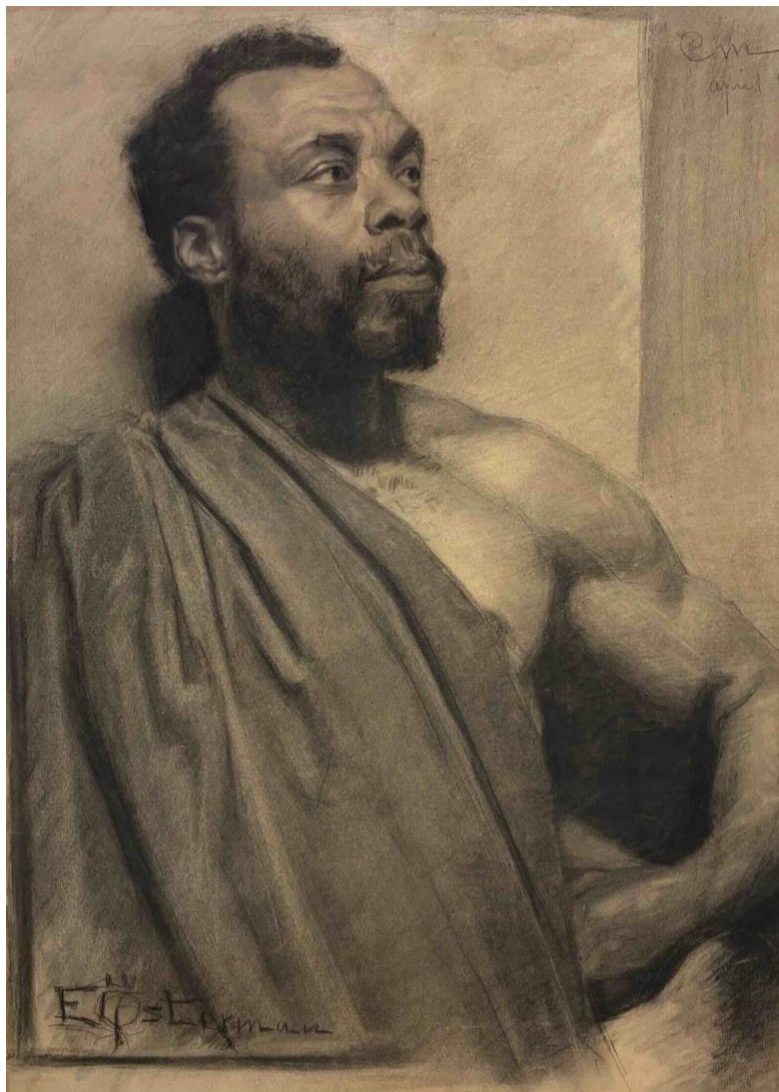
Provenance:

Karin Bergöö Larsson (1859-1928), Hallsberg;

Per Bergöö (1898-1984), Hallsberg;

Einar Werner (1899-1972), Stockholm, by 1933 at the latest;

By descent to Mats Werner, Stockholm, 2026.



This commanding academic study depicts the dock worker and professional model Pierre Louis Alexandre and was executed by Emil Österman in 1890, during the artist's studies at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. Drawn in charcoal with exceptional control, the sitter is shown half-length, turned slightly to one side, his chest partially draped and his head lifted in a pose that conveys dignity and physical presence.

The drawing demonstrates a striking level of technical accomplishment for a student work. Österman employs rich passages of shadow to model the head, shoulders and torso, achieving a sculptural solidity that reflects the Academy's emphasis on disciplined draughtsmanship and anatomical clarity. The musculature of the upper body is rendered with restraint and sensitivity, avoiding academic rigidity in favour of a monumental calm. The sitter's outward, slightly elevated gaze reinforces the sense of self-possession that defines the image.

Pierre Louis Alexandre occupies a unique and unusually well-documented position in late nineteenth-century Scandinavian art. Born in French Guiana in 1844, likely into slavery, he arrived in Stockholm in 1863, probably as a stowaway on an American ship. In the late nineteenth century, such a transatlantic crossing would typically have taken two to three weeks in favourable conditions and up to several months in adverse weather, offering some indication of Alexandre's determination and resourcefulness.

On arrival in Sweden, Alexandre found work as a dock labourer in Stockholm's harbour, though this employment was seasonal, as the docks froze from November to April. During the winter months he supplemented his income by working as a model at the Academy of Fine Arts (figs. 1 and 2). Archival records reveal that modelling was significantly better paid than dock labour: a receipt from 1878 shows that Alexandre earned 75 öre per session at the Academy, compared with an hourly wage of 25–30 öre at the docks.



Figs. 1 and 2, Pierre Louis Alexandre modelling in life classes at the Royal Swedish Academy



In Swedish sources he appears under the surnames Pettersson and Alexandersson, names assigned or adopted during his early years in Sweden. He seems to have married twice, fathered two children with his first wife, and lived at a number of addresses in Södermalm before dying of tuberculosis in 1905. In a society where the Black presence was extremely small, Alexandre would have been highly visible, and he appears to have been a familiar figure on the Stockholm docks. He was depicted by the caricaturist Albert Engström, among others, in the early 1890s.

Alexandre was portrayed by many of Sweden's leading artists, including Anders Zorn, Karin Bergöö Larsson (fig. 3), Oscar Björck (fig. 4) and Nils Larsson. With approximately forty known representations, he is undoubtedly the most frequently depicted Black sitter in Scandinavian art before 1900. The surviving evidence suggests that Alexandre was not merely a passive academic model, but an active and familiar presence within artistic circles, forming sustained professional, and in some cases personal relationships with the artists who portrayed him.



Fig. 3, Karin Bergöö Larsson, *Pierre Louis Alexandre*, 1879, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington



Fig. 4, Oscar Björck, *Pierre Louis Alexandre*, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm, Private Collection

The present drawing gains additional resonance in light of Alexandre's later artistic legacy. The National Gallery of Art, Washington, has recently acquired a painting of the sitter by Karin Bergöö Larsson (fig. 3), reflecting growing institutional interest in Alexandre not merely as a model, but as a historical figure whose life intersects questions of migration, labour, race and representation in nineteenth-century Europe. It is particularly significant that the present drawing was likely owned by Bergöö herself, suggesting a sustained personal and artistic interest that extended beyond the act of depiction. This provenance

points to a network of enduring relationships rather than a purely transactional model—artist dynamic and indicates that Alexandre was recognised within artistic circles as an individual of presence and character, worthy of continued attention and preservation.

Emil Österman went on to enjoy a successful career as a portrait painter, receiving commissions from Sweden's highest social and political circles and later serving as a professor at the Royal Academy. The present drawing therefore offers a rare glimpse of the artist at a formative moment, already displaying the technical authority, compositional assurance and psychological sensitivity that would underpin his later success.

A note on the provenance

The early provenance of the present drawing can be convincingly reconstructed both through its discovery context and through the group in which it was preserved. The work was rediscovered in Stockholm in 1972 by Mats Werner during the administration of his father Einar Werner's estate. The drawing was inside a portfolio containing more than two hundred academy studies, alongside a small number of finished drawings and prints. Its contents were highly specific: architectural and life studies, together with a single work by several students from the same female class at the Royal Swedish Academy of Fine Arts attended by Karin Bergöö. The presence of the present drawing within this context indicates that it likely originated within Bergöö's immediate artistic circle and entered the folder as a personal gift or keepsake, consistent with late nineteenth-century artistic practice.

The portfolio appears to have remained within the Bergöö family household in Hallsberg, the home of Karin Bergöö's parents and later the site of Carl Larsson's decorative cycles for the Ferdinand Boberg-designed villa. The most plausible route by which the folder left the Bergöö household is through Per Bergöö, Karin Bergöö's nephew, who experienced financial difficulties in the early twentieth century and was a long-term legal client of Einar Werner. The Washington painting of Pierre Louis Alexandre by Bergöö (fig. 3) is known to have been transferred to Werner as payment in kind, and while the folder itself is not explicitly documented, the circumstances strongly suggest that it may have accompanied or followed this transfer. By 1933 at the latest, the portfolio was in Werner's possession, after which it remained stored and untouched until its rediscovery. While the contents were largely dispersed at auction in 1983, Österman's charcoal study was retained by Mats Werner until 2026.