

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Virginie Demont-Breton
(Courrières 1859 - 1935 Paris)

Study of a boy pulling a rope

Signed lower right: *Virginie Demont-Breton*
Charcoal and pencil on paper

32.5 x 50.5 cm (12 13/16 x 19 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.

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.

It shows a nude boy frontally, his body engaged in the act of pulling a rope. The composition is structured around the diagonal created by the outstretched arms, generating a sense of muscular tension. The child's anatomy is rendered with close attention to the distribution of light and shadow, rendered through an exact *chiaroscuro* - a similar technique can be seen in her *Study of a young boy for "La Trempée"* (fig. 3).

Light enters from the left, modelling the body through graduated tonal passages. The head is only summarily indicated: facial features are lightly suggested, and the hair is sketched with loose, economical strokes.



Fig. 3. Virginie Demont-Breton, *Study of a young boy for "La Trempée"*, graphite on paper, sale, Drouot Estimation, Paris, 28th January 2022, lot 37.

Demont-Breton was particularly drawn to children from working-class fishing communities, whom she depicts either absorbed in play along the shoreline or engaged in the physical tasks through which they participate in the everyday manual labour of their families (see for example figs. 4-5).



Fig. 4. Virginie Demont-Breton, *In clean air*, 1907, oil on canvas, private collection.



Fig. 5. Virginie Demont-Breton, *After the Storm*, oil on canvas, private collection.

