

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

CHRISTOFFER W. ECKERSBERG

Blåkkrog 1783 - Copenhagen 1853
Danish School

SEATED FEMALE NUDE

Graphite on paper

H. 212 mm; W. 163 mm

Signed upper right: *E*

verso sketch (cut) of the legs and an arm of a woman sitting on a sofa; the figure 369 inscribed in the margin.

DATE: c. 1840

PROVENANCE: Private Collection

Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg, who was a contemporary of the author Hans Christian Andersen and the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, was the founder of the Danish Golden Age through both his art and his teaching at the Copenhagen Academy. His reforms there were inspired by Jacques-Louis David's pedagogy in Paris and advocated the creation of painted studies from life.

Training in Copenhagen

Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg (1783-1853) was born in Schleswig and grew up in Blans, where he received initial training from local artists. He started his education at the Royal Academy of Copenhagen in 1803, where he practiced drawing from life under artificial light. As he was from a modest background, he earned his living by making preparatory drawings of popular subjects for prints and painting landscapes. However, he was ambitious and aimed for a career as a history painter. Eckersberg was influenced by Nicolai Abraham Abildgaard (1743-1809), the director of the Academy at the time, and also by the portrait and landscape painter Jens Juel (1745-1802) who had recently died. In 1809, Eckersberg won the Academy's Gold Medal, which provided funding for him to continue his education in Paris and then Rome.

Working from the Nude in Paris

Eckersberg arrived in Paris in October 1810, travelling with his patron, the collector Tønnes Christian Bruun Neergaard (1776-1824).¹ There, he discovered working from the female nude, which was common in a private context where, with German painters, male and female models posed in turn.²

Eckersberg entered David's studio in September 1811 and for a year benefitted from his demanding teaching. Drawing was practiced in this famous studio, but so was painting from the male nude in natural light during the day rather than artificial light in the evenings, as was the case at the Academy. This difference favoured more precise observation and more subtle

¹ His book published in Paris in 1801, *Sur la situation des beaux-arts en France*, confirms the extent of Neergaard's knowledge about contemporary art and artists.

² Two letters by Eckersberg dated June and July 1811 refer to this private academy. His journal also documents the fact that he employed nude female models at his own expense. See Neela Struck, *Le corps humain. Entre le nu et le dévêtu*, exh. cat. *C.W. Eckersberg 1783-1853, Artiste Danois à Paris, Rome & Copenhague*, Paris, Fondation Custodia, 2016, p. 92.

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treatment of shading. Eckersberg, who was gifted with great acuity in the study of the forms and colours of the human body, was praised by David.³

Plein air in Rome

The time Eckersberg spent in Rome, from 1813 to 1816, proved to be decisive for his artistic development. In Rome, he benefitted from the help and advice of the sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen (1770-1844). Eckersberg's views of the city, painted entirely outside in oil, do not have a spontaneous character, but are striking in their carefully constructed compositions and their unusual points of view. These paintings, which were not intended to be sold, were hung later in his apartment in Charlottenborg where his students could see them.

Career as a Versatile Painter in Copenhagen

After his return to Copenhagen in 1816, Eckersberg became the most sought after portrait painter in Denmark until the mid-1820s. He was elected to the Danish Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1817. He received 8 commissions for history paintings for the palace of Christiansborg, mostly during the 1820s and 1830s. Seascapes were his favourite subjects during the final decades of his career, and scenes from daily life again occupied an important proportion of his work.

Eckersberg in this way practiced all the genres of painting, his works are marked by his interest in clear narrative without any dramatic effects, served by the depiction of carefully observed reality, paying particular attention to the geometry of light effects. Linear perspective became an essential component of his teaching at the Academy. In his two treatises on the subject, published in 1833 and 1841, he defined rules for constructing space as well as for creating shadows.

The Danish Golden Age

Through his paintings and teaching at the Copenhagen Academy, Eckersberg was the founder of what is called the "Golden Age of Danish Painting". This development in the first half of the 19th century was characterised by refinement in the treatment of colour and light, combined with profound reflection on composition. Painters such as Købke, Lundbye, Rørbye, and Hansen combined great precision in drawing and perfectly mastered technique and poetry in the elements seen through their fugacity fragility, and purity.

The Reformation of Teaching in Copenhagen

Appointed professor at the Copenhagen Academy in 1818, Eckersberg and his colleague Johan Ludvig Lund (1777-1867), who had also studied with David, set about reforming art education in Denmark. In 1822, they proposed introducing courses in painting at the Academy, as until then this training had previously only taken place in private workshops. While the master-student system would continue for a long time to come, the first painting classes were held during the day, mainly with live models, all of them male. The other major innovation, introduced by the Academy in 1833,⁴ was working from female models, which was still forbidden in most European academies for reasons of decency. For example, this was not authorised at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris until 1863.⁵ The Copenhagen Academy thus

³ David Jackson, *Danish Golden Age Painting*, New Haven and London, 2021, p. 31, note 13.

⁴ Exh. cat. *L'Âge d'or de la peinture danoise 1800-1850*, Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, 5 December 1984 – 25 February 1985, p. 164.

⁵ At the Accademia degli Incamminati in Bologna, artists worked from female nudes around 1600 and at the London Royal Academy from the end of the 18th century. See Barbara Eschenburg, *Pygmalions Werkstatt. Die Erschaffung des Menschen im Atelier von der Renaissance bis zum Surrealismus*, Munich, 2001, p. 30.

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stood out as a precursor of art education in Europe. From 1839 onwards, Eckersberg also organised summer classes devoted to the study of models in natural light. These classes, during most of which female models posed, were held from 1839 to 1841, in 1843 and 1844, and again between 1847 and 1850. Eckersberg took an active part, drawing and painting small works like our drawing, although he advised his students to work on larger formats.

In his studies of female nudes created between 1833 and 1844, Eckersberg always showed the model in a defined space, seeking a balance between the forms of the body and that of his composition. While working from life, he actively composed, often transforming reality into a genre scene by adding accessories. The result is an image of almost photographic realism, thanks to the tight framing of the composition and the use of clear, natural light. Eckersberg's later nudes were more portraits of naked individuals than studies of models.

Well-Coiffed Nude

A series of drawings of female nudes by Eckersberg dating from around 1833 depict women wearing a drape over their hips.⁶ In our drawing, the model's arms, delicately resting on her thighs, seem to act in the same way as this covering. The superimposition of the hands is so precisely calculated that a small opening is visible between them. The woman, seated in profile, seems to be trying to protect her nudity from view, so the gaze finally focuses on her hair, detailed with as much care as the rest of the composition.

⁶ Erik Fischer, *Tegninger af C.W. Eckersberg*, Statens Museum for Kunst, Kobberstiksamlng, Copenhagen, 1983, p. 179, no. 15.

