

COLNAGHI



Willem de Kooning
(Rotterdam 1904 – New York 1997)

Untitled (Two Women), 1899

Charcoal on paper laid on canvas
24 1/4 x 19 1/2 in.
49.5 x 61.5 cm. each

Each signed and dedicated 'Janet and Carlo from Bill'

Provenance

Private Collection, New York;
Anon. Sale Sotheby's New York, November 1995;
Private Collection.



"The Women had to do with the female painted through all the ages, all those idols, and maybe I was stuck to a certain extent; I couldn't go on."

Willem de Kooning

COLNAGHI

Willem de Kooning was born in 1904 in Rotterdam. After leaving school early, he worked as an apprentice house painter whilst attending night classes at the Academie van Beeldende Kunsten. In 1926 De Kooning migrated to the United States as a stowaway. Once settled in New York he again worked as a house painter before dedicating himself to his art entirely in 1930, with periods of teaching at both Black Mountain College and Yale University. A major turning point in his career was meeting Arshile Gorky, whose influence and friendship helped solidify De Kooning's maturation as an artist. It was then De Kooning and his contemporaries formed the Abstract Expressionist movement for which his *Women* series of paintings and drawings, which he first began in the late 1930s, is the most iconic. De Kooning focused on his famous images of women for three decades, most of the canvases are in the permanent collections of major museums around the globe, such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, The Hirshhorn Museum, the Whitney Museum, The Tate Gallery, the Kunstmuseum Basel, among others.

While De Kooning regularly painted women in the earlier stages of his career, it was not until 1950s that he began to exclusively paint and draw women.

Untitled (Two Women) dates from his most iconic and fruitful period of his women works. The 'Women' series, when it was first shown in the 1950s, was highly controversial due to its daring figuration at a time when abstraction seemed ubiquitous. The series explored Freudian sexual concepts through an explosive painting technique, which rooted him firmly onto the map of avant-garde artists.

The buxom, vampish females, knotted up in swathes of abstraction in the present pictures eschew his earlier more ladylike forms in favour of a new and violent direction. De Kooning himself said, however, "Beauty becomes petulant to me. I like the grotesque. It's more joyous." Inspired in part by Pablo Picasso's work, they featured a wholly original approach to deconstructing the figure. "I

COLNAGHI

don't paint with ideas of art in mind. I see something that excites me. It becomes my content," the artist once explained.

By the beginning of the 1950s de Kooning had traded deliberateness for velocity. The figures in the three *Woman* drawings from the mid 1950s are made up of swarms of graphite marks in constant motion, smeared or removed almost as quickly as they were laid down.

Untitled (Two Women) dissolves the figure into a haze of smudged charcoal, but the image is nonetheless provided a flickering energy by sinuous lines that arc back and forth like sheet lightning in black.

Despite de Kooning's widely celebrated skills in draftsmanship, de Kooning strived to avoid what he considered the pitfalls of virtuosity. He used experiments like drawing with his eyes closed to break old habits and discover new means of expression. He often used charcoal, facilitating an even faster mark-making, the examples on view here describe figures with an immediacy the artist likened to snapshots of women in movement.

Condition

This work is in very good condition overall. There is evidence of handling and wear to the edges of each sheet, most notable along the right edge of the left sheet, where there is evidence of adhesive residue, likely from when the paper was laid down to the canvas. On the right sheet scattered 1/16 inch long tears are visible along the bottom edge. There are two pinpoint white media accretions visible on the right sheet, 6 inches from the left side of the center axis and 2 inches from the top edge in the upper right quadrant. Framed under glass.