

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Charles Verlat  
(Antwerp 1824 – 1890)

*Self-portrait as a terrified man*

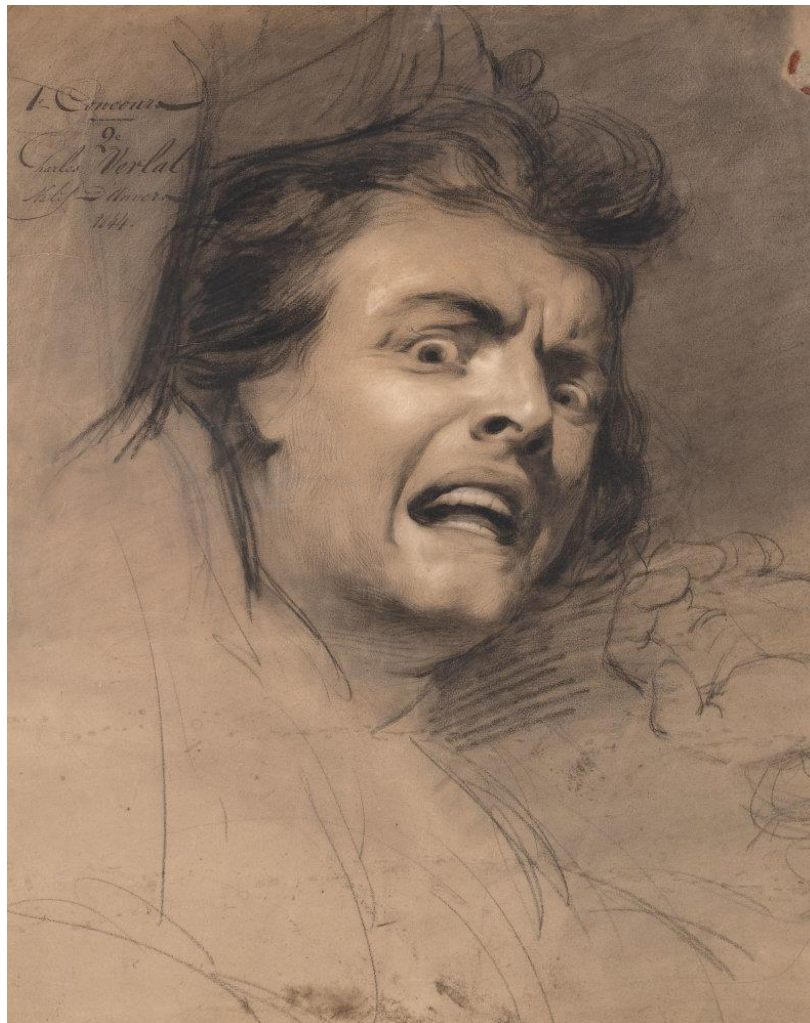
Signed and inscribed at upper left: *1er Concours / 2e / Charles Verlat / Natif D'Anvers / 1844.*

Black heightened with white

62.2 x 45.1 cm. (24 ½ x 17 ¾ in.)

Provenance:

Dominic Cabello, Plymouth.



Charles Verlat's unforgettable *Self-portrait as a terrified man*, along with its pendant *Self-portrait of the artist as a wounded man* (fig. 1), are significant rediscoveries within the Belgian artist's graphic oeuvre. As submissions for the 1844 *têtes d'expression* competition at the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts, in which Verlat won second place according to the inscription, these sheets give incomparable insight into the young artist's activities as a promising student at the school to which he would return forty years later as director.



Fig. 1, Charles Verlat, *Self-portrait as a wounded man*, black chalk heightened with white, 50.1 x 44.3 cm, Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings

Born in Antwerp in 1824, Verlat was destined for a career in art, leaving formal education at the age of fourteen to devote himself to painting and drawing. After studying at the Antwerp Academy and a brief sojourn in Rome, Verlat moved to Paris, where he studied at the French Academy under Ary Scheffer and Jean-Hippolyte Flandrin, before opening his own studio in 1852. Verlat started to gain major commissions from the Belgian government at this time, going on to have his first significant international success with a gold medal at the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855. Over the course of the 1850s, the artist's style, under the influence of Gustave Courbet, moved away from Romanticism towards a more realistic idiom.

In 1869 Verlat left Paris for Weimar, where he established a painting class at the Grand-Ducal Saxon Art School. Remaining in Saxony for six years, Verlat moved in Weimar cultural circles, befriending Franz Liszt. In August 1875 the artist travelled to Cairo and then, after six months, on to Jerusalem, where he would live for two years. Returning to Antwerp in 1877, Verlat, by now a significant name in European painting, was offered the role of paintings professor at the Academy, becoming director in 1885. In this role he clashed with the young Vincent van Gogh, due to the latter's unconventional style. A multi-faceted painter, Verlat was active in all genres, though is best-known today as a history painter and a painter of

animals. Writing in 1895, Max Rooses said of him that 'not since the death of Rubens had the Antwerp School known so strong and imaginative an artist'.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, *Self-portrait as a terrified man* demonstrates these dual aspects so valued by Rooses and displays the young artist's supreme confidence and technical ability at the outset of his career. The self-portrait is a *tête d'expression*, an academic exercise involving a study of the face intended to evoke a particular state of mind. Originating with Charles Le Brun's highly influential lecture delivered to the French Academy in 1668, *têtes d'expressions* quickly became a cornerstone of academic training. By the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, following the example of the French Academy, competitions for the most accomplished *tête d'expression* were an annual event at the European academies, alongside more prestigious competitions such as the *grand prix de peinture*.

For a face displaying terror (fig. 2), Le Brun wrote that the artist should depict 'the eyebrows raised high in the middle, and the muscles which produce this movement should be very prominent and swollen, pressing against each other and drawn down over the nose...the eyes must appear wide open, the upper eyelid hidden under the eyebrow, the pupils placed towards the lower part of the eye...the mouth should be wide open...the hair bristling...finally, everything must be very marked'.<sup>2</sup> Le Brun's text and his illustrations were published in 1727 and the Antwerp Academy would have possessed a copy, allowing Verlat to follow these instructions closely. Certainly, his attempt matches up to, and perhaps even surpasses, the French Academician's own effort in terms of impact and intensity. This is in no small part thanks to Verlat's addition of an upraised arm and a hand with fingers curled in tension. Drawn with more cursory and dynamic lines, these elements enhance the sense of action and motion.



Fig. 2, Charles Le Brun, *Terror*, pencil on paper, 25.2 x 20.1 cm, Musée du Louvre

<sup>1</sup> M. Rooses, *Oude En Nieuwe Kunst*, Ghent 1896, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup> C. Le Brun, *Les expressions des passions de l'âme*, Paris 1727, p. 4.

In terms of its quality, originality and animation, Verlat's drawing can be best compared to Franz Xaver Messerschmidt's character heads of the 1770s, which the Belgian may have known of through engravings, and, most pertinently, to Joseph Ducreux's now world-famous series of self-portraits in different emotional states, above all his *Surprise en terreur*, recently acquired by the Stockholm Nationalmuseum.



Fig. 3, Joseph Ducreux, *Surprise mixed with terror*, oil on canvas, 66.5 x 52.5 cm, Stockholm Nationalmuseum