

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Jacques-Louis David
(Paris 1748 – 1825 Brussels)

Study for the Portrait of the Countess Vilain XIII (verso: Study for Mars and Rhea Silvia), c. 1816

Black chalk on paper. Inscription in quill and black ink at the top right of the *verso*: '4'.
12.8 x 7.4 cm. (5 x 2 7/8 in.); with frame: 29.5 x 34 cm. (11 5/8 x 13 3/8 in.)

Provenance

Collection Dreesmann;

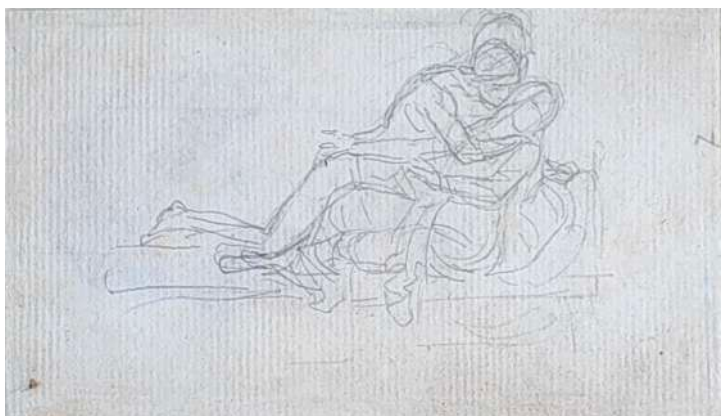
Collection of Madame Angélique Mongez (1775-1855), student of David;

Collection Hippolyte Destailleur (1822-1893);

With Agnews Gallery, London;

Anonymous sale, Bonhams, 27 April 2016, lot. 263;

Private collection.



We would like to thank Prof. Pierre Rosenberg for the help provided in cataloguing the present work and for his confirmation of the drawing's belonging to Jacques-Louis David's notebook 14, after the examination of the work.

This graceful sheet by Jacques-Louis David (1748 - 1825) presents on the *recto* a black chalk study of a woman's head for the *Portrait of Countess Vilain XIII* (Fig. 1), painted by David during the first year of his Brussels exile in 1816 and exhibited today at the National Gallery in London. While the orientation of the head slightly differs from the finished work, the identical hair, the elongated face and the neckline of the dress leave no doubt as to the identity of the sitter of this preparatory drawing. The existence of the present sheet corroborates the hypothesis that the portrait was first composed without the little girl, in David's familiar three-quarter-length format. David was working from the head down and could easily have inserted the second figure without much modification.



Fig. 1. Jacques-Louis David, *The Portrait of Countess Vilain XIII* (detail), 1816, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London.

The portrait was commissioned by Countess Sophie Vilain, former lady-in-waiting to Marie-Louise and wife of Count Vilain XIII, ennobled by Napoleon in 1811. After the fall of Napoleon, Vilain XIII was made Chamberlain to King William I of the Netherlands and was elected to the States General, where he joined forces with the liberal party. In May 1816, when his wife was sojourning in Brussels for the sittings with David, he was in The Hague for the meeting of the Royal assembly.¹ Five letters from Sophie to her husband were sent between 31 May and 5 July 1816, evoking her appointments with the exiled painter. From

¹ Philippe Borde, *Jacques-Louis David. Empire to Exile*. The J. Paul Getty Museum Los Angeles, California and Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Williamstown, Massachusetts, 2005, pp. 298-299.

the correspondence, we know that it took an entire session for him just to paint Sophie's forehead and eyes, and another for her nose and cheek. Three months pregnant, she found the sittings particularly tedious, though she was pleased with the likeness, as were the other women in her entourage. When she questioned the whimsy of dressing up while David concentrated on painting her hair, he justified it, saying it was "necessary for the overall effect."² Similarly to these letters, the present drawing is a precious and detailed account of the artistic process David followed at the time.

Even though we are now aware of how the Vilain family originally came into contact with him in the first place, we can safely assume that the presence of the celebrated painter in Brussels and his availability towards private commissions were no secrets to the local aristocracy. When David departed Paris in late January 1816, he indeed embraced the role of portrait painter more fully than ever before. Brussels offered neither a vibrant contemporary art scene, a royal court, nor a domestic environment capable of stimulating his creativity. His portrait production until his death was somewhat uneven: six portraits in 1816 to cover the costs of settling in, followed by two in 1817, two in 1820, one in 1821, and another in 1824. Interestingly, the present sketch for the Portrait of the Countess Vilain XIII appears in the notebook between a study for a portrait of the Queen of the Netherlands and a study for a portrait of William I himself. The adjacent *folio* 2 in notebook 14 is also a preparatory work for a portrait then carried out by the artist, the study for the Portrait of General Gérard painted by David in 1816 (Figs. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2. Jacques-Louis David, *Portrait of General Étienne-Maurice Gérard*, 1816, Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum, New York.
Fig. 3. Jacques-Louis David, *Study for the Portrait of General Étienne-Maurice Gérard*, Black chalk, Folio 2 notebook 14, Dreesmann Collection.

² Ibid. p. 299.

The *verso* of our drawing can instead be connected to the two founding myths of Rome, famously transposed in painting by David: the rape of Lucretia and the rape of Rhea Silvia by Mars. The first subject matter was widely identified by art historians in David's *oeuvre*, while the painter's interest in the subject of Mars and Rhea Silvia was only confirmed thanks to the 1997 rediscovery of a sketch belonged to Angélique Mongez (Fig. 4). That drawing, dated 1821, seems to have been the culmination of the painter's research on this mythological subject. Mars is standing and holding Rhea Silvia who appears to be fainting. The *verso* offers a different composition: Rhea Silvia is lying on a bed on which Mars is seated, looking at the vestal virgin. This drawing illustrates the evolution of David's creative process centred on this theme. The composition presented in our drawing allows us to expand our understanding of these classical Roman subjects in David's work, with the famous theme of the rape of Lucretia by Tarquin. The nudity of the man represented here is reminiscent of the abovementioned sketch of Mars and Rhea Silvia, while an iconographic shift appears to have occurred between the two. Specifically, the rape of Lucretia is rather treated by David in notebook 7 while the composition of our work argues for a connection to notebook 14.³



Fig. 4. Jacques-Louis David, *Mars and Rhea Sylvia* (*recto*) and *Study for the Composition of Mars and Rhea Sylvia* (*verso*), 1821, Pen and black ink, gray and light brown wash (*recto*) and black crayon (*verso*) on paper, Private collection.

³ All the numbering used in this sheet makes direct reference to the work of Pierre Rosenberg, Louis-Antoine Prat, *Jacques-Louis David 1748-1825: catalogue raisonné des dessins*. Milan, 2002.

An in-depth study of the catalogue raisonné of Jacques-Louis David's drawings allows us to identify the present drawing with the missing *folio 4* of the Dreesmann collection's notebook (notebook 14 in the catalogue raisonné). The dimensions of the present work (12.8 x 7.4 cm.) are comparable to those of the *folios* of notebook 14, the smallest one by David (13.2 x 7.7 cm.). Moreover, the inscription '4' in pen and black ink at the top right of the front could further corroborate its belonging to notebook 14, from which the folio 4 is indeed absent. Several *folios* are missing from this notebook, and some could be identified with certainty as for drawing no. 426 (folio 46) now at the Montauban Museum (Figs 6-8).

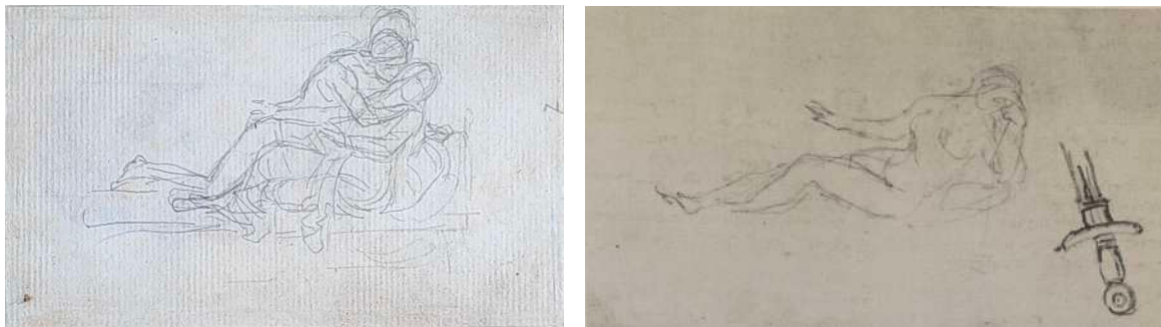


Fig. 5. Our drawing / Folio 7 verso, notebook 14 (n°9 from the original numbering).



Fig. 6. Folio 13 back of the notebook 14, *Naked man approaching a lying naked woman*, (n°15 from the original numbering).

Fig. 7. Folio 12 front, *Two studies for Mars and Rhea Silvia* (n°14 from the original numbering).

Fig. 8. Dismembered Folio, *Study for Mars and Rhea Silvia* (n° 46 from the original numbering), Montauban Museum.

Indeed, notebook 14 contains a series of studies for *Mars and Rhea Silvia* which culminated in 1821 in the Mongez collection drawing.⁴ The *verso* of our sheet presents a naked man wearing a helmet, on top of a clothed woman lying on a bed, pushing him away from her. It therefore fits perfectly with the overall theme of notebook 14. Even if the drawing has been traditionally associated with David's *Cupid and Psyche*, the visual analysis made here allows us to question the scene represented. The same goes for *folios 9 recto* and *11 verso*, also representing a naked woman, to be associated with a study for *Mars and Rhea Silvia* rather than *Love and Psyche*. As shown here, the subject matter of Mars and Rhea Silvia fits precisely into the spirit of notebook 14, and the same can be said for the study of Countess Vilain XIII on the *recto*.

As mentioned, the present drawing was previously in the collection of Madame Angélique Mongez (1775-1855), distinguished French Neoclassical painter and pupil of Jacques-Louis David. She was herself portrayed by the master together with her husband Antoine Mongez during the Bruxelles years and she owned several drawings from David, including an album (RF 9136) now held at the Louvre.

In conclusion, the formal elements of the sheet (dimensions, technique, inscription, date and place of creation) all point towards it being formerly part of notebook 14. In addition, the subject matters of both the *recto* and the *verso* fit perfectly into the spirit of the notebook from the Dreesmann collection. The provenance of Angélique Mongez and Destailleur only supports this hypothesis, and the knowledge of a missing sketch on the theme of Mars and Rhea Silvia confirms the attribution of our work to David.

⁴ A previously lost drawing on the theme of Mars and Rhea was presented during David's posthumous sale in 1826, under number 153. This sketch could correspond to our work, and the complete provenance would then be 'Sale David, Angélique Mongez, Hippolyte Destailleur'. Alternatively, the work may simply have been previously acquired by Madame Mongez, whose interest in the subject is confirmed by her drawing of *Mars and Rhea Silvia* dated 1821.