

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Charles Verlat  
(Antwerp 1824 – 1890)

*Self-portrait as a wounded man*

Signed upper right: *Verlat*  
Black heightened with white  
50.1 x 44.3. cm. (19  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 17  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.)

Provenance:  
Dominic Cabello, Plymouth.



Charles Verlat's *Self-portrait as a wounded man*, along with its pendant *Self-portrait as a terrified 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.

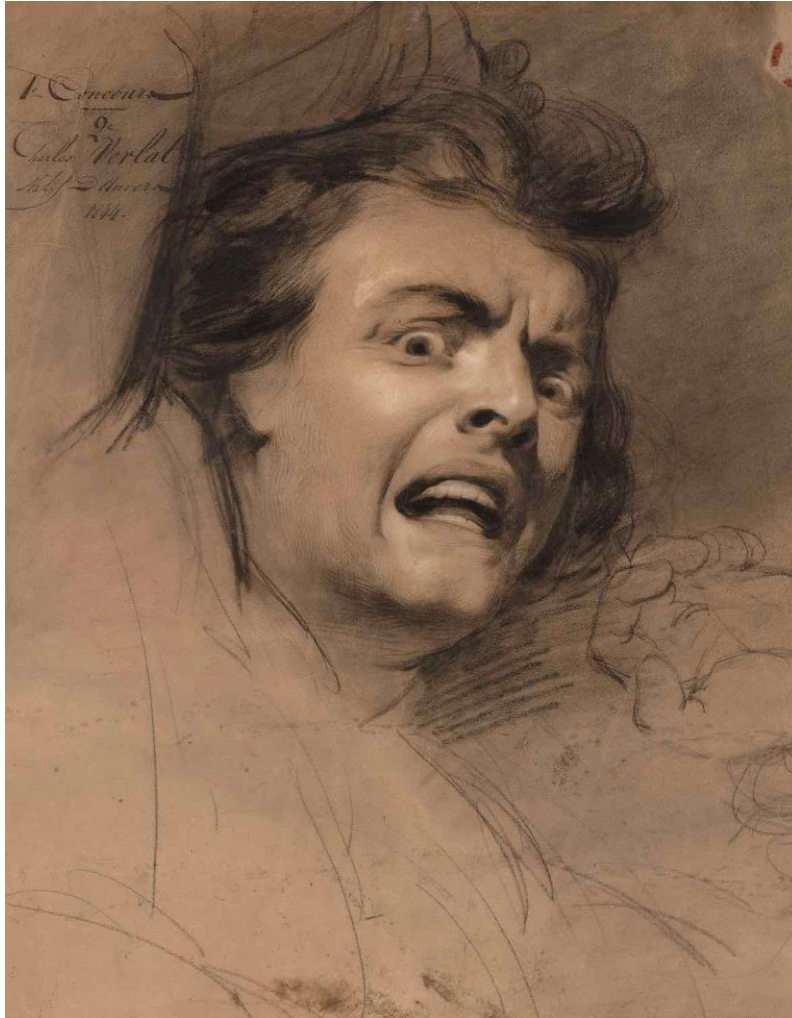


Fig. 1, Charles Verlat, *Self-portrait as a terrified man*, black chalk heightened with white, 62.2 x 45.1 cm, Colnaghi Elliott Master Drawings

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 wounded 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*.

The closest equivalent within Le Brun's series of expressions for Verlat's wounded man is the head depicting pain of the soul (fig. 2). Verlat uses Le Brun's image as the basis of his own, with the head turned to the side, the mouth open and eyebrows furrowed. The Belgian artist however takes the composition further, placing the suffering patient in bed, hair damp with sweat, blood dripping out of the corner of his bandage and a tear forming at his eye. He seems to writhe in misery and torment. Made feverish from a head wound, his pain is physical as much as, or more than, mental.



Fig. 2, Charles Le Brun, *Pain of the soul*, pencil on paper, 25.2 x 20.1 cm, Musée du Louvre

Fascinatingly, though probably coincidentally, Verlat's drawing dates to the same year as Courbet's own *Self-portrait as a wounded man* (fig. 3). Although the two artists would come

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

to know each other during the 1850s, in 1844 both were at the outset of their respective careers and had not met. Their shared imagery subscribes to the romantic theme of the artist made heroic by suffering, although Verlat's visceral pain is in counterpoint to Courbet's more tranquil repose.



Fig. 3, Gustave Courbet, *Self-portrait as a wounded man*, oil on canvas, 81.5 x 97.5 cm, Musée d'Orsay