

# COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

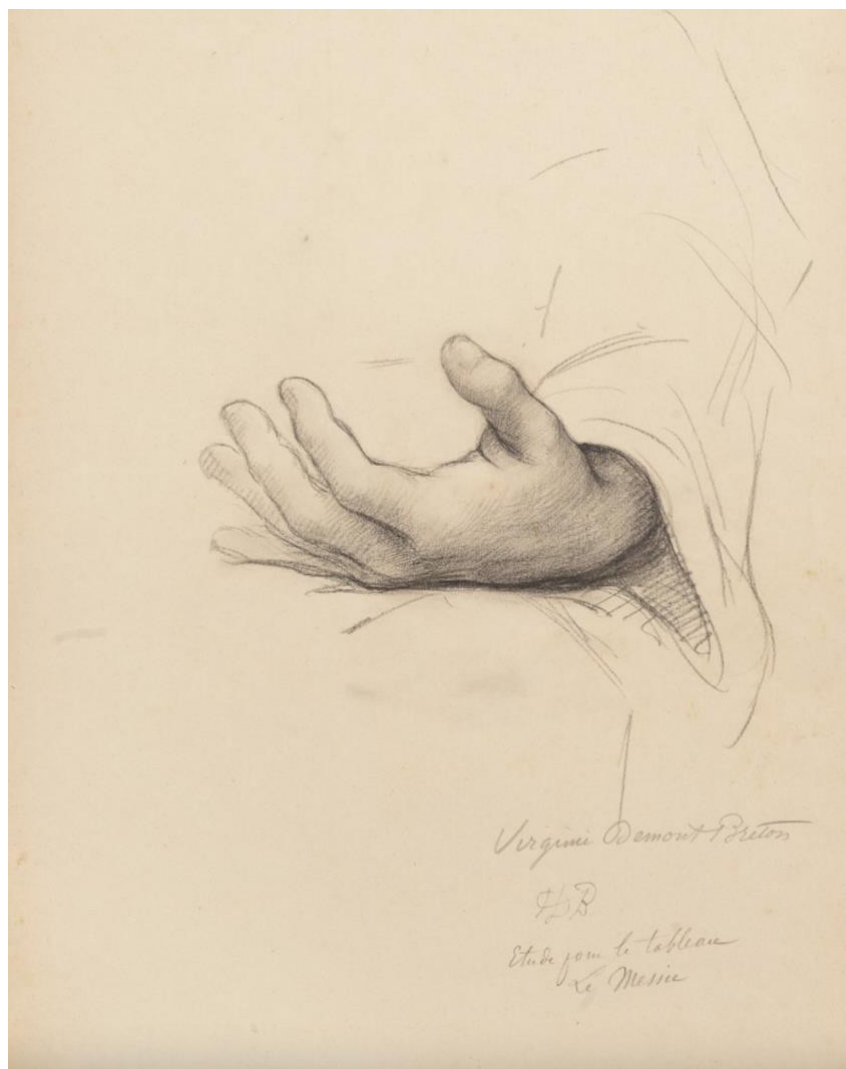
Virginie Demont-Breton  
(Courrières 1859 – 1935 Paris)

*Study of a hand, for the painting Le Messie*

Signed, monogrammed and titled lower right: *Virginie Demont-Breton / VDB / Etude pour le tableau Le Messie*

Pencil on paper

41 x 32.5 cm. (16 ¼ x 12 ¾ in.)



An ardent advocate for women artists, Virginie Demont-Breton grew up around painting. Her father Jules Breton and her uncle Émile Breton were both celebrated landscape painters and encouraged Demont-Breton to pursue an artistic career from an early age. A precocious talent, Demont-Breton had her first work accepted by the Salon in 1879 at the age of nineteen, the first important step in a highly successful career marked by many official awards, recognitions and state purchases. Alongside exhibiting regularly at the Salon, Demont-Breton won a Gold Medal at the Amsterdam Exhibition of 1883, and again at the Expositions Universelles of 1889 and 1900. Demont-Breton served as President of the *Union of Women Painters and Sculptors* from 1895 to 1901 and became only the second woman, after her mentor Rosa Bonheur, to be decorated with the Légion d'honneur in 1894. In 1913 she was elected to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts Antwerp.

This type of success, at the time usually reserved for male artists only, makes Demont-Breton an important and pioneering figure amongst the female artists of her day. Beyond this, her position as President of the *Union of Women Painters and Sculptors* enabled her to press the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts to open its doors to women, and allow them to compete for the Prix de Rome. Demont-Breton was well aware of the prejudice suffered by women artists over the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, writing in her essay *Le femme dans l'art* that:

*'When we say of a work of art, 'It's a woman's painting or sculpture,' by this we understand, 'It's a weak painting or a pretty sculpture'. And when we judge a serious work that emanated from a woman's brains and hands, we say, 'It's painted or sculpted like it came from a man.' This look at two expressions is sufficient to prove, without need for further comment, that there is an initial bias against woman's art'.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1880 Demont-Breton married the landscape artist Adrien Demont, like her a native of Northern France. Initially settling in the Parisian suburb of Montgeron, the couple soon moved to the little fishing community of Wissant on the Opale coast, where they oversaw the construction of the Tymphonium, a Neo-Egyptian villa. A group of young painters joined the couple, forming the Wissant School, active between 1890 and World War I. Early on in her career Demont-Breton had focussed mainly on portraits and maternal scenes. At Wissant, however, the local residents and fishermen, and their daily travails, became her main source of inspiration. (fig. 1).

The present work is a study for the left-hand of the Virgin Mary in a painting entitled *Le Messie*. The picture's present whereabouts is unknown but the composition can be determined from an engraving dating to 1891 (fig. 2). This preparatory sheet, and the full work itself, must therefore date from this year, or perhaps a little before, and demonstrate her continued interest at this time, just as she had moved to Wissant, in themes of maternity and femininity. Elegant in its simplicity, the study is evident of Demont-Breton's great skill as a draughtsman: the economical and selective lines used to create the form of the sleeve are juxtaposed beautifully with the masterful use of shading which builds up the volume in the hand, the focal point of the composition.

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<sup>1</sup> Virginie Demont-Breton, 'La femme dans l'art' in *Revue des revues*, 1 March 1896, p. 451.



Fig. 1, Virginie Demont-Breton, *Le mousse*, oil on panel, 41 x 32 cm, Private Collection

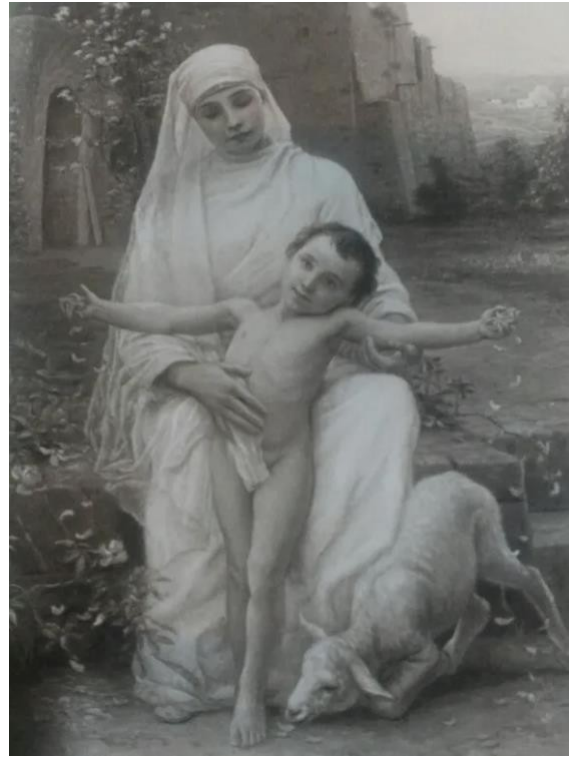


Fig. 2, Virginie Demont-Breton, *Le messie*, engraving, Private Collection