AUGUSTIN DE SAINT AUBIN
(Paris 1736 – 1807)

Portrait of woman

Black chalk on paper
10,5 x 8 cm, oval

Provenance:
Private collection, France

This portrait concentrates several features that are consistent with Augustin de Saint-Aubin's style, including his detailed and delicate approach to portraiture, which was well-suited to chalk drawing. Saint-Aubin, active in the second half of the 18th century, was known for his refined drawing and light touch, particularly in portrait miniatures and works depicting aristocratic figures.

The delicate shading and soft hatching used in the face and clothing highlight Saint-Aubin's precision. His portraits often emphasized subtle gradations of light and dark, bringing a lifelike quality to the sitter's features. Saint-Aubin frequently worked with graphite, chalk, and other dry media for both preparatory studies and finished portraits. His technique often involved meticulous attention to detail, with fine cross-hatching and careful use of shading to create depth.

The portrait is contained within a neat oval, which is typical of miniaturist or small-scale portrait formats often favored in the 18th century. Saint-Aubin frequently used such formats for intimate depictions of individuals. The soft expression and composed frontal view are characteristics often seen in his works, where the sitters maintain a formal, yet approachable demeanor. The attention to the delicate features, especially the eyes and mouth, is indicative of his ability to capture likeness with both realism and elegance.

There is often a sense of grace and restraint in his works. Even when the subject is relatively simple, the refinement in the handling of light and shadow gives it an aristocratic feel. Saint-Aubin's portraiture, especially of women, tended to emphasize femininity and grace. He often captured his sitters in formal yet softened postures, with an emphasis on their facial expressions rather than elaborate background details. His style for depicting hair was often stylized with attention to detail in individual curls or the overall form, as seen in the light, almost ethereal handling of the sitter's hair in this sheet.

The ruffled neckline of the garment shows here a loose, sketchy quality in the treatment of fabric, a technique Saint-Aubin might have used for less formal studies, even though he was highly skilled in rendering detailed textiles. The woman in this portrait appears to be dressed in a fashion that would fit the latter half of the 18th century, particularly with the ruffled neckline and the delicate, lacy treatment of the fabric. Saint-Aubin was highly skilled in drawing fashionable women, often capturing intricate details of lace, silk, and soft textiles. His style in rendering fabric can sometimes range from very detailed in formal portraits to more suggestive, as in this looser, sketch-like portrayal of the sitter's clothing.

Saint-Aubin often used simple oval framing for his portraits, similar to this one. Many of his miniatures or intimate portraits, including those of aristocratic or bourgeois women, were done in oval formats, emphasizing the sitter without including elaborate backgrounds.

To confirm an attribution to Augustin de Saint-Aubin, it's important to compare this drawing with other documented works, particularly his smaller-scale portrait drawings. See for instance: Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of Charles Germain de Saint Aubin*, pencil, black chalk heightened with white, D. 13 cm, Inv. 4072, Fondation Custodia Paris; Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of woman*, pencil, red chalk, stumping, 19,9 x 14 cm Fondation Custodia Paris; Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of Charles Germain de Saint Aubin, 46 years aged*, pencil, black chalk heightened with white, Inv. 1956-12, Pierpont Morgan Library New York;

Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of young man*, black chalk, 11,8 x 9,2 cm, Inv 1967-17-105, Museum of Fine Arts (California Palace of the Legion of Honor), San Francisco; Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of young man*, 1766, black chalk, pencil, stumping, 15,7 x 11,2 cm, RF 52318, Louvre Museum Paris; Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of woman*, black chalk, pencil and pastel, 18,9 x 15 cm, RF 52327, Louvre Museum Paris;

And last example Augustin de Saint Aubin, *Portrait of Boileau*, pencil, 22,3 x 16,3 cm, provenance: Mr and Mrs John J. Emery, Cincinnati.

Augustin de Saint-Aubin was active during the second half of the 18th century, a time when French portraiture was highly focused on elegance, lightness, and subtle expressions of personality. The Rococo aesthetic had a strong influence on his work, leading to portraits that were decorative yet reserved. His contemporaries, such as his brother Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, Jean-Baptiste Greuze, and other portraitists, shared a similar approach, though Augustin's works often stand out for their clean, minimalistic approach.

Saint-Aubin's portraits typically reflect the Rococo's softer lines and a focus on lighthearted elegance. This style can be seen in the gentle curvature of the sitter's face and the overall light, airy feeling of the drawing, especially in the treatment of the hair and neckline.

Augustin de Saint-Aubin was a prominent French engraver and draftsman, celebrated for his delicate portraits, exquisite engravings, and his contributions to 18th-century French art. He belonged to a highly artistic family and played a crucial role in the world of printmaking and drawing during the height of the Rococo period.

He came from a family deeply involved in the arts. His father, Gabriel-Germain de Saint-Aubin, was a goldsmith, and several of his siblings, including Gabriel de Saint-Aubin and Charles-Germain de Saint-Aubin, were also accomplished artists. Gabriel, in particular, was a notable

painter and engraver, while Charles-Germain was known for his elaborate embroidery designs and also contributed to the arts.

Augustin trained under the engraver Étienne Fessard and also studied at the Académie de Saint-Luc. His academic background equipped him with strong technical skills in engraving and printmaking, disciplines in which he would later excel. As a young artist, Augustin quickly made a name for himself with his refined engravings and portraits. He was particularly drawn to portraiture, where his elegant, intimate depictions of aristocratic and bourgeois subjects gained significant attention.

In the 1770s, Saint-Aubin was appointed Dessinateur du Cabinet du Roi (Drawer to the King's Cabinet), a prestigious position that allowed him to produce illustrations and designs for official royal publications and state commissions. This role further cemented his status as a significant artist at the French court, giving him access to elite patrons and important commissions. He produced designs for royal festivities and ceremonies, including celebrations held by the French monarchy, and his work became synonymous with the refinement and luxury of the era's court culture.

Although primarily known for his engravings, Augustin de Saint-Aubin was also a masterful draftsman. He produced many exquisite portrait drawings and miniatures, often using pencil, chalk, and wash. These smaller works were typically intimate portraits of individuals, frequently drawn in an oval format, as seen here.

Though he never officially became a member of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, he worked closely with many academic artists and was respected for his technical prowess and contributions to French art. He was, however, a member of the Académie de Saint-Luc, a guild for artists who were not part of the Royal Academy, and he exhibited there throughout his career.

Augustin's work is deeply rooted in the Rococo style, which was characterized by lightness, elegance, and ornamentation. Although Augustin's career spanned the height of the Rococo, he lived into the early 19th century and witnessed the transition to Neoclassicism. In some of his later works, there is a shift toward more restrained, classical forms, although he never fully abandoned the delicate elegance of his earlier Rococo style. Augustin passed away just as the Rococo style was giving way to the more rigid, classical forms of the early 19th century, but his legacy as a master engraver and portraitist remains significant.

The main differences between Augustin de Saint-Aubin and his famous brother, Gabriel de Saint-Aubin, lie in their approach to subject matter, style, and artistic focus. Despite both being highly talented and coming from the same artistic family, they developed distinct identities in the French art world of the 18th century. Augustin is best known as an engraver and portraitist. He produced elegant, refined works, especially portraits of aristocratic and bourgeois figures, often in intimate formats like miniatures or small drawings. Gabriel, on the other hand, was primarily a painter, draftsman, and illustrator, but his fame comes largely from his drawings and sketches of Parisian life. While he did create some engravings, his artistic personality was more eclectic and experimental than Augustin's. His drawings are often loose and spontaneous, filled with energy and movement. Gabriel's work has a sketch-like, quick quality, often showing a sense of immediacy and direct engagement with the world around him.

In essence, Augustin was the more formal, polished, and technically precise artist, producing refined portraits and engravings for aristocratic and official audiences. Gabriel, in contrast, was more free-spirited and experimental, focusing on everyday life, quick sketches, and capturing the vibrancy of Parisian street scenes. Augustin's work is marked by elegance and control, while Gabriel's is marked by spontaneity and energy.

The present *portrait of woman* fits many of the characteristics of Saint-Aubin's style, especially in the fine rendering of the face, subtle expression, and the lightness of touch.