

ATTRIBUTED TO JEAN-BAPTISTE GREUZE

(Tournus 1725-1805 Paris)

Study of head of a girl, expressive head (recto)

Study of head of a girl (verso)

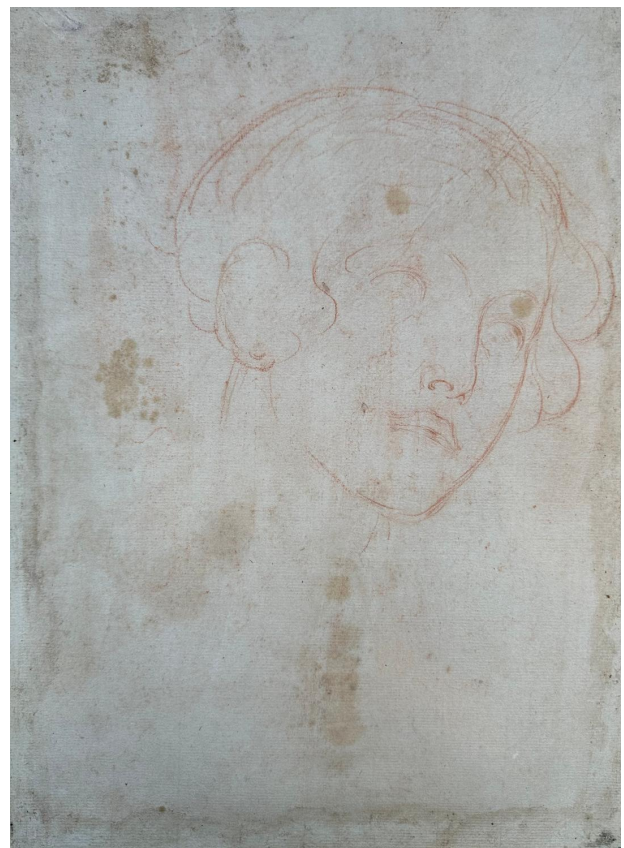
Red chalk on paper

39 x 27,5 cm

Provenance:

Sale, Mes Ader, Picard, Tajan, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 29 November 1989, lot 62;

Sale, Me Aguttes, 25 march 2021, lot n°58 (as « Jean Baptiste Greuze »)



Through the 18th century French master Jean-Baptiste Greuze established his career with wholesome « moral » subjects like *Filial Piety* and *The Village Betrothal*, but he is best known for paintings and drawings of a different flavor: bust-length canvases or drawings of misty-eyed young women, their eyes raised. His drawings of expressive heads were celebrated during his lifetime and are always eagerly sought after by collectors. Greuze's expressive red chalk heads demonstrate that no other French artist of his time wielded red chalk with much finesse and assurance.

There are few drawings which seem to portray an essential aspect of Greuze's talent so well as this kind of head of a girl with raised eyes. It can be compared to numerous studies both painted and drawn. The ambiguous expression, a mélange of innocence and perversity, rendered with an extraordinary economy of means, its evidence of Greuze's fine sense of psychological penetration. The artist is not only the moralizer who wishes to instruct by means of his pictures, thus identifying himself with the great history painters of the past, he is also a subtle observer of the most ambiguous feelings and is able to convey them with moving skill.

Greuze expressed his period's interest in strong emotions and sentiments. Expressive heads had a long tradition in France, starting from the teachings of Charles Lebrun who, in 1668, had proposed to codify the expression of specific passions in an Academy lecture. His teachings were published in 1698. Many of Greuze's heads directly refer to Lebrun's models, others develop expressions independently. It is, however, their modern sensibility which truly distinguishes these drawings from the work of Lebrun and his followers, providing the viewer with a sense of the sitters' being truly drawn from life and therefore less formulaic in their depiction.

This moving study is exemplary of Greuze's analysis of facial expressions, for which he was much admired by his contemporaries. It is close to young woman and girl in paintings as the *Study of girl*, oil on mahogany panel, 44,4 x 37,8 cm, N. P.388, in the Wallace Collection, London and the *Portrait of a young girl*, oil on panel, 47 x 32,5 cm, Sothebys Monaco, 13 June 1982, lot 79.



And more specially it corresponds quite precisely, both in the pose and in the hairstyle of the young woman, to the *Girl in Blue dress*, circa 1800, Oil on mahogany panel, 40,5 x 31,8 cm, N. P425, Wallace collection, London. The French title derives from the fanciful historic Spanish costume (in fact a seventeenth-century dress), popularized in the early eighteenth century.



The present work, executed in a delicate combination of red chalk, is a highly refined and well-preserved example of one of Greuze's, expressive studies of heads, known as *têtes d'expression*, which he produced from the 1760s on. The artist executed this study with nothing more than sharpened red chalk. Greuze's control of the medium is exquisitely demonstrated in his variety of hatching and cross-hatching throughout the drawing, coupled with areas of shadow, skillfully created by rubbing his chalk against the grain of the paper.

Like many painters, Greuze had produced studies of individual heads early in his career. Some of them were nature studies, others specifically prepared figures in his larger narrative paintings. From the late 1770s, these « expressive heads » developed into a separate genre, often erotically charged, and into a main field of his activities. Greuze's heads exist in large numbers, and he developed them more systematically after he had fallen out with the Academy. Many of them were executed by studio members, and there are general questions of attribution concerning the group.

Greuze's public position changed when he was reminded by the Academy in 1767 to hand in his reception piece the subject of which was unusually left open. As an unexpected decision, he chose a history scene, *Septimius Severus Reproaching Caracalla*. The Accademy only accepted him as a genre painter squashing Greuze's ambition to be received as a history painter and full member. Both the Academy and the critics did not consider Greuze apt for the grand genre. As a result of the scandal, Greuze did not exhibited at the Salon again until the Revolution, but only in 1800, 1801 and 1804. Instead, he joined other exhibitions like the Salon de la Correspondance and staged private shows. His international fame continued, and he worked for a wide range of important patrons. Although he was highly regarded, his style fell increasingly out of fashion, and Greuze and his workshop produced increasing numbers of expressive heads that were commercially viable. Greuze died in Paris on 21 March 1805.