

Studies in Classical Beauty

Ancient Greek artisans of the “Classical” period (ca. 480–330 BCE) brought the human figure to a momentous, artistic apogee, an Olympian climax of timeless beauty that indelibly marked western culture for centuries to come. Almost overnight, the rigid artifice that had long straightjacketed the human figure in the art was wholly rejected and eradicated. Abstracted musculatures now yielded to idealized grandeur, rigidity gave way to relaxation, and stoic calm replaced emotion. Nudity continued, but now it beckoned proudly, heroic and unabashed. Even clothed figures seemed naked, enticing with superhuman anatomies barely concealed beneath sensuous webs of clinging drapery. Like none other before them, the Classical Greeks exalted the human body to near divine status.

The impact of the Greek legacy was profound, stretching across centuries of western art. Beginning in the Renaissance (ca. 1400–1600), artists meticulously labored to recapture the ancient Greek vision, and would continue that mission for centuries to come. The selection here represents original prints and drawings dating from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, which exhibit Classical ideas and styles in varying degrees, with subjects ranging from simple studies to historical events to mythological fantasies.



Giovanni Battista Cipriani (Italian, 1727–1785)

Venus and Cupid

Ca. 1750–1780

Black and red chalk on white paper

(64.92)

The Florentine Giovanni Cipriani trained in Italy but mostly worked in England for wealthy British patrons as a painter, engraver, and furniture designer. His elegant chalk drawing represents a reclining Venus, a subject that harkens back to a Venus reclining on a shell from Pompeii (under Bourbon excavation at this time). In Cipriani's version, however, the setting is pastoral, like the subject as painted by Renaissance artist Giorgione, about 1510. Here the goddess reclines outdoors under a red drape as a playful Cupid peers at her through the fork of a tree. The sensuous curves and softly rendered medium coalesce into a work of lyrical harmony typical of classically inspired works.



William McLaren(?) (Scottish, 1923–1987)

Drapery Studies

1930s/40s?

Graphite with heightening in white on gray-green paper
(65.195)

While the Museum lacks information on this work, it may have been a study for a larger composition, such as a painting. With its emphasis on crisp, voluminous, classicizing drapery, it calls to mind the numerous enthroned madonnas of Renaissance Europe. Sinuous line and chiaroscuro add to its Renaissance-like beauty though it is probably a twentieth-century work. If a work of William McLaren, it may be a study for one of the classical murals he painted for several British country houses.



Anonymous (Italian, 17th–19th c.)

Apollo

Red chalk on paper

Gift of Mr. David T. Owsley (65.321)

The god Apollo is depicted here as *kitharoidos*, a word used by the ancient Greeks to identify the god as a lyre player. Flowing hair and soft, fluid lines give the god an androgynous appearance, a demeanor also captured by Late Classical and Hellenistic Greek sculptors. The unknown artist probably based the drawing on an ancient statue of the god in Italy. There are several likely candidates that can be seen in Roman museums today.



Tommaso Minardi (Italian, 1787–1871)

Flora(?)

Ca. 1850

Red chalk on paper

Gift of Mr. David T. Owsley (65.322)

Tommaso Minardi was an Italian painter and art historian who mostly worked in Rome, where he was a professor of drawing at the Accademia di San Luca. Here he is perhaps depicting, Flora, the Roman goddess of Spring walking through an idyllic landscape carrying a flower, the symbol of her domain. Though she strides forward, she poses in classical *contrapposto*, and her diaphanous garment recalls Graeco-Roman statuary. The curious shawl-like overfall across her chest is decidedly unclassical, however, and it creates a more modest appearance compared to the overt sensuousness of many classical female figures.



Marcantonio Franceschini (Italian, 1648–1729)

Study of a Draped Female Figure

Ca. 1675–1725

Red chalk on buff paper

(69.1073)

Marcantonio Franceschini was an Italian painter of the Baroque period who had a long career painting grand religious and mythological works for the aristocracy. His prolific studio also trained many noteworthy artists of the period. His red chalk rendering illustrates a draped female gazing skyward. The pose, in classical *contrapposto*, with hand holding an unfinished staff, recalls goddesses such as the queenly Hera/Juno. The sketch may be a study for a figure in one of his paintings.



Anonymous (Italian, 17th c.)

Sea Deities

Ink on paper

Gift of Prof. and Mrs. Saul S. Weinberg in memory of Bernard Weinberg (73.273)

With a fanciful procession of sea deities, this anonymous artist displays knowledge of the figural friezes of ancient Roman marble sarcophagi (coffins), which frequently depict mythological subjects. This procession is led by a marine centaur who carries a goddess posed in elegant torsion, as she turns to face him. A merman follows, his serpentine tail rising behind him as he confronts a goat-fish behind him. The goat-fish carries a second goddess who languidly reclines on its back as she reaches around and grabs hold of its beard. It seems to rear its head in protest, but the goddess, oblivious to his reaction, turns her attention toward two putti (winged cherubs). Additional putti ride dolphins and further compliment the fantasy theme of the composition.



Otto van Veen (Flemish, 1556–1629)
Zeuxis and the Five Women of Kroton
Ca. 1575–1625
Brush and oil sketch on paper
(79.77)

Though the sturdy proportions of these figures reflect Northern European traditions rather than the idealized proportions of the Italian Renaissance and classical antiquity, the subject is one deeply rooted in the Classical Greek world (5th c. BCE). Zeuxis was a famed painter of Magna Graecia (southern Italy) known for creating images that were so lifelike that viewers were duped into believing they were real. One anecdote relates an incident when the artist wanted to paint the beautiful Helen, the amorous Spartan queen of Trojan War fame. Zeuxis was not satisfied with one model, and thus launched a search to find the five most beautiful women from whom he could reproduce the best characteristics for his painting of Helen. He is shown here beginning his work, surrounded by his five beauties said to have come from the ancient city of Kroton (modern Crotone). This work is thought to represent a lost painting of the same subject by van Veen.



Translation of the French stages:

1. Frog

2. Still a frog, perhaps the same as the first.

3. Genius in the genus of frogs; the head points further forward.

4. Ceases to be a frog.

5. This is neither a frog nor can it be determined [what it is].

6. Something that this profile is or is not, the mouth is less foolish.

7. Approaching more of a lamb.

8. Beginning to show a good character, but remains foolish.

9. Where the nose begins, there the character of the beast ends.

10. Neither beast nor man.

11. A bit less beast and a bit more man.

12. Does not have enough nose to characterize the human physiognomy.
13. Announces an extreme weakness, but showing goodness at the same time.

14. The forehead is of a stupidity far below human stupidity.

15. The gradation of the forehead is not exact.

16. The human form is more strongly pronounced.

17. The forehead and the nostrils hold even more of the man.

18. Good-natured, but weak.

19. Very common.

20. Weak.

21. More noble but superficial.

22. The nose is suddenly very delicate and the eye weaker.

23. The gradation is not sensitive enough.

24. The head of Apollo.

Anonymous (French, 19th c.)
Publisher: Charles Bance the younger (French, 1771–1863)
Gradation de la tête de grenouille jusqu'au profil d'Apollon, d'après les idées du célèbre Lavater (Gradation from the head of a frog to the profile of Apollo, after the ideas of the famous Lavater)
Ca. 1810
Etching, engraving, and aquatint on paper
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund (2013.6)

The “famous Lavater” referenced in the title of this print is Johann Kaspar Lavater (Swiss, 1741–1801), a writer, theologian, mystic, and physiognomist. In addition to being a frequent arbiter on morality from his role of pastor, Lavater also espoused the idea that physiognomy related to specific character traits, thus equating beauty with internal virtue, ugliness with moral turpitude, and forehead height with intelligence. Lavater published these ideas in a handsomely illustrated book (*Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* [*Physiognomic Fragments for the Promotion of Human Knowledge and Philanthropy*]), which became exceedingly popular in France, England, and Germany. Though Lavater’s ideas gained currency in his day, the roots of these thoughts went back to classical antiquity and the idea that the divine (embodied by perfected Olympian gods) was invariably beautiful, whereas ugliness (embodied by the countless monsters and mutants of mythology) was always evil. This print, which Lavater featured in his book, was meant to show a range of faces and gradations of beauty, from the basest (a frog) to ultimate beauty, embodied by the god Apollo. Each would have virtues and vices commensurate with the specific appearance. Oddly enough, this strange display also had resonance in evolutionary thought of the day, and Charles Darwin himself would later own a copy of the ten-volume French edition, which contained this image. He left behind the volumes heavily inscribed with his own annotations.



Hand colored by Arthur B. Davies
as suggestion for color proof. Hand-colored

Arthur Bowen Davies (American, 1862–1928)

Pompeian Veil

Ca. 1923

Hand-colored etching with aquatint

(74.10)

An influential and important proponent of early modern art, Arthur Bowen Davies is much remembered today as a key organizer of the famed New York “Armory Show” of 1913. He counted many early twentieth-century modernists among his friends, and even financially supported some of them, including John Flannagan, Rockwell Kent, and Marsden Hartley. Though a vehement supporter of modernism, Davies’ own artistic style was somewhat eclectic, frequently oscillating between modern trends and traditional representations. Historian Robert Hughes rightly noted his “dream-like maidens and frieze-like idylls,” which were clearly influenced by classical antiquity. Davies’ many trips to Europe, including Italy (where he eventually died), undoubtedly influenced the artist. The print displayed here was probably done after a trip he made to Pompeii in 1922. The elegant female sitter adjusting a piece of diaphanous drapery was probably inspired by some of the nude female subjects of Pompeii’s famed frescoes. The pencil notation on the etching indicates that it was hand-colored by Davies, suggesting the appropriate colors for the future prints of *Pompeian Veil*.