Seurat’s Study of a Pair of Legs for the Painting *Bathers at Asnières*, 1884

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Fig. 1 Georges Seurat (1859–1891), *Study for the painting “Bathers at Asnières” 1884*, 1883–84. Conté crayon, 240 x 305 mm. Bequest of Elisabeth Bonnier. Nationalmuseum, NMH 50/2014.
Acquisitions/Seurat’s Study of a Pair of Legs

Alongside the Louvre, the Nationalmuseum owns one of the most significant collections of pre-20th-century French drawings. In large part, this is thanks to one man – Count Carl Gustaf Tessin (1695–1770). During his visits to France and his stay in Paris 1739–42, Tessin attempted to come by as many works on paper by contemporary and earlier masters as he could. He was one of the bidders in the famous Paris sale of 1741, in which the drawings collection of the affluent banker and art collector Pierre Crozat went under the hammer, and was able to acquire at that one auction some 1,600 Old Master drawings. When Tessin finally sold his collection to the King Adolf Frederick in the early 1750s, it was as good as complete and would become part of the Royal Museum’s holding of art. In 1866 it was transferred to the newly opened Nationalmuseum.

A later collector of significance was the sculptor Johan Tobias Sergel (1740–1814). As a student in Rome in the late 1760s and much of the 1770s, Sergel regularly exchanged drawings with his peers at the French Academy there. The sheets that came into his possession in this way would be acquired by purchase by the Nationalmuseum in 1875.

Once the collections of Tessin and Sergel had come into public ownership, however, there was for many years insufficient funding, knowledge and interest to fill the gaps in the holding by means of an ongoing programme of acquisitions. Not until the 1960s was this problem recognised and an attempt made to remedy it by means of a more targeted and active acquisitions policy. The main emphasis in that context was on works originating in the late 18th and the 19th century.

For a long time, a really black, representative drawing by the French Neo-Impressionist master Georges Seurat (1859–1891) was high on the Nationalmuseum’s list of priorities. In 2014, this wish was fulfilled by a magnificent bequest by Mrs Elisabeth “Peggy” Bonnier of a drawing she had received as a 50th birthday present from her husband, the publisher Gerhard Bonnier. Previous owners of the drawing included the well-known New York-based art gallery Jacques Seligmann & Co.

The Nationalmuseum’s new acquisition, a drawing of a pair of legs bent at the knees (Fig. 1), is a detailed study for one of the figures in Seurat’s famous colossal painting Bathers at Asnières from 1884, now in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 2). The painting, set in the industrial suburb of Asnières on the north bank of the Seine, 6.5 kilometres from the centre of Paris, shows a group of workmen cooling themselves by the river on an oppressively hot summer Sunday. Absorbed in their own thoughts, they are depicted in severe, statuesque poses as they gaze out over the surrounding landscape. To the right, parts of the wooded island of La Grande Jatte can be seen; in the background, we can make out Asnière’s new railway bridge.

The drawing now acquired by the Museum is a study for the figure in a straw hat sitting to the left in the painting (Fig. 3). The technique is typical of Seurat’s method of working with highly textured paper and conté crayon, which consisted of a compressed mixture of graphite and charcoal with additions of wax or clay. All the lines are subordinated to entire planes and surfaces in varying values of black, produced by applying differing amounts of pressure to the crayon. Although a study for a larger work, the drawing is also a closed composition in its own right, with the leg forming a light, diagonal band across the picture plane.