

WILLEM
DE KOONING

A GROUP OF DRAWINGS

DICKINSON

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FIG. 1

Ambassador Mehdi Vakil with George Bush Sr.

DE KOONING: THE DRAWINGS AN INTRODUCTION

Everywhere there are drawings. More accurately, de Kooning is always drawing. He can't help himself.¹

Although he first established his reputation as an abstractionist, Willem de Kooning felt himself increasingly drawn towards representational subjects towards the end of the 1940s. He is most famous for his depictions of women, and executed his first series of *Woman* paintings between 1940 and 1945. His second series, which began with *Woman* in 1948 (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, USA), was even more radical. The *Woman* paintings are simultaneously voluptuous and menacing, drawing on references as disparate as Paleolithic fertility figures and 1950s pin-up models. Many of the figures have a fixed stare and a ferocious, toothy grin, about which de Kooning said: "First of all, I felt everything ought to have a mouth. Maybe it was like a pun...maybe it's even sexual...But anyhow I used to cut out a lot of mouths and then I painted those figures and then I put the mouth more or less in the place where it was supposed to be."²

As early as the 1940s, de Kooning began relying on the act of drawing as a means of synthesising his ideas for his paintings. He developed a system of tracing elements of his painted works onto sheets of vellum, subsequently using these images as the foundations for new drawings. Traces of oil paint can often be found on his sheets of vellum, as in *Untitled* (1964). Unconcerned with the drawing as a finished product, de Kooning did not distinguish between preparatory studies and finished works, and would often cut his drawings and recombine them into new arrangements. Most of his tracings relate to paintings that include a figure. De Kooning was obsessed with the act of drawing. As the noted de Kooning scholar Thomas Hess observed, "de Kooning's studio is filled with and haunted by

[drawings]. I can think of no painter since Ingres whose intellectual powers have been brought to bear so insistently and methodically on the act of drawing ... De Kooning draws continuously. As Valéry wrote, it is a way of thinking.”³

Forging his own path ahead of his fellow abstractionists, de Kooning played with multiple media and experimented with techniques to achieve organic and fluid compositions. He would layer pieces of vellum onto one another in order to discover new forms within an image, or he would draw with one or both eyes closed, using his left hand in place of his dominant right, or even drawing with both hands at the same time. De Kooning hoped that by suppressing his innate abilities he might discover new compositions, and according to Richard Shiff’s theory, he deliberately disorientated himself in order to “escape any conventional sense of composition.”⁴

The drawings that make up this group elegantly summarise de Kooning’s enduring preoccupation with the female form. He considers how a woman stands, sits or reclines, describing her contours with a decisive and elegant line and in varying degrees of abstraction: his women range from the figurative, in which we can discern eyes, nose and mouth, to the entirely abstract, in which the form appears in a state of metamorphosis. The works also emphasise the degree to which the act of drawing remained critical to de Kooning’s artistic process, whether in pencil, pastel or charcoal.

This group of works is also noteworthy for its provenance, as they were once owned by the Dr. Mehdi Vikal (Fig. 1), the Iranian Ambassador to the United Nations (1959 – 1970), and later to the Vatican. His interest in modern art was noteworthy, featuring in a newspaper article from 1976 during his tenure as Iranian Ambassador to the Vatican, when he hosted a group of art historians at his residence in Rome: “The group was entertained at a cocktail reception...his home is filled with beautiful example of modern art...”⁵ Vikal’s personal friendship with de Kooning allowed him to purchase *Untitled*, (1964) directly from the artist’s studio – a privilege reserved only for the artist’s closest friends.

ENDNOTES

- 1 B. Richardson, “Willem de Kooning ‘Tracing Experience’ in *Willem de Kooning: Vellums*, New York, Feb. 2001, p. 10
- 2 D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, New Haven and London, 2001, pp. 51 – 52
- 3 T. Hess, *Willem de Kooning*, New York, 1959
- 4 R. Shiff, “Painting’s Potential”, in *Willem de Kooning: Paintings 1983– 84*, exh. cat, Matthew Marks Gallery / Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 1997, p.7
- 5 M. Mann, “The scene was Rome, the subject art”, in *The Times Herald Record*, Middletown, New York, 8 Aug. 1976, p. 131

UNTITLED (FIGURES): A PAIR OF
DRAWINGS, 1954

each signed lower left *de Kooning* and further inscribed *to Janit and Carlo
from Bill*

charcoal on paper laid on canvas

49.5 x 61.5 cm. (24 ¼ x 19 ½ in.) each

PROVENANCE

Acquired directly from the artist.

Private Collection, New York.

Anon. Sale; Sotheby's, New York, 16 Nov.1995, lot 252.

Ambassador Mehdi Vakil; and by descent.

Private Collection, USA, acquired directly from the above.

In this pair of drawings, a female figure is seen from both the front and the back, and de Kooning has chosen to focus on her torso with its exaggerated characteristics of breasts and buttocks. These images merge abstraction and representation, as his intention of depicting a female form is clear, yet the loose handling of the medium, crude line delineation and smudges allow for a certain sense of ambiguity. Paired figures offered de Kooning the opportunity for enlightened play. His use of charcoal enhances the attitude of the drawings, and its ease of application and erasure becomes part of the fabric of the image.

The works illustrate de Kooning's highly varied use of charcoal, juxtaposing dark, thickly drawn markings with smudged and erased areas. The figures torso is especially varied, while the legs are drawn several times over, with layered experiments in line drawing, shading and erasure. As with many of his drawings, de Kooning signed these sketches and dedicated them to his friends, although we have yet to determine the identities of "Janit and Carlo". The personal and purposeful nature of the drawings reinforces the importance placed on them by de Kooning himself.



UNTITLED, C. 1964-65

signed lower right *de Kooning*
charcoal on vellum
114 x 90 cm. (44 ⁴/₅ x 35 ²/₅ in.)

PROVENANCE

Ambassador Mehdi Vakil; and by descent.
Private Collection, USA, acquired directly from the above.

This image is striking both for its size and for its subject. In the spring of 1964, de Kooning commenced work on a series of large-scale drawings and paintings of a woman in a rowboat, reclining with her legs splayed. The subject may originally have been inspired by a figure de Kooning observed at Louse Point, not far from his new studio building. In many of these rowboat drawings, the contours of the boat itself are more clearly defined, but here its form appears reduced to the curved line at lower right and the pair of parallel arcs in the upper left. The form extending across the figure's right thigh, which appears in a number of similar drawings as well as in painted and sculpted versions of the subject, may be the foot and leg of a second figure leaning over her (Figs. 1-2). De Kooning made hundreds of drawings on vellum, a translucent material, using charcoal to create skeletal compositions. The tracings were then re-used repeatedly as guides to the construction of paintings. The charcoal lines were either traced or transferred onto the canvas to create a "twinning" image.

Drawing remained critical to de Kooning's process in the 1960s as a smaller-scale means of testing out ideas. The charcoal medium offered a wider range of tonal and textural possibilities, and drawings such as this one dating from the mid-late 1960s illustrate his mastery of the medium and his obvious pleasure in handling it.



1.



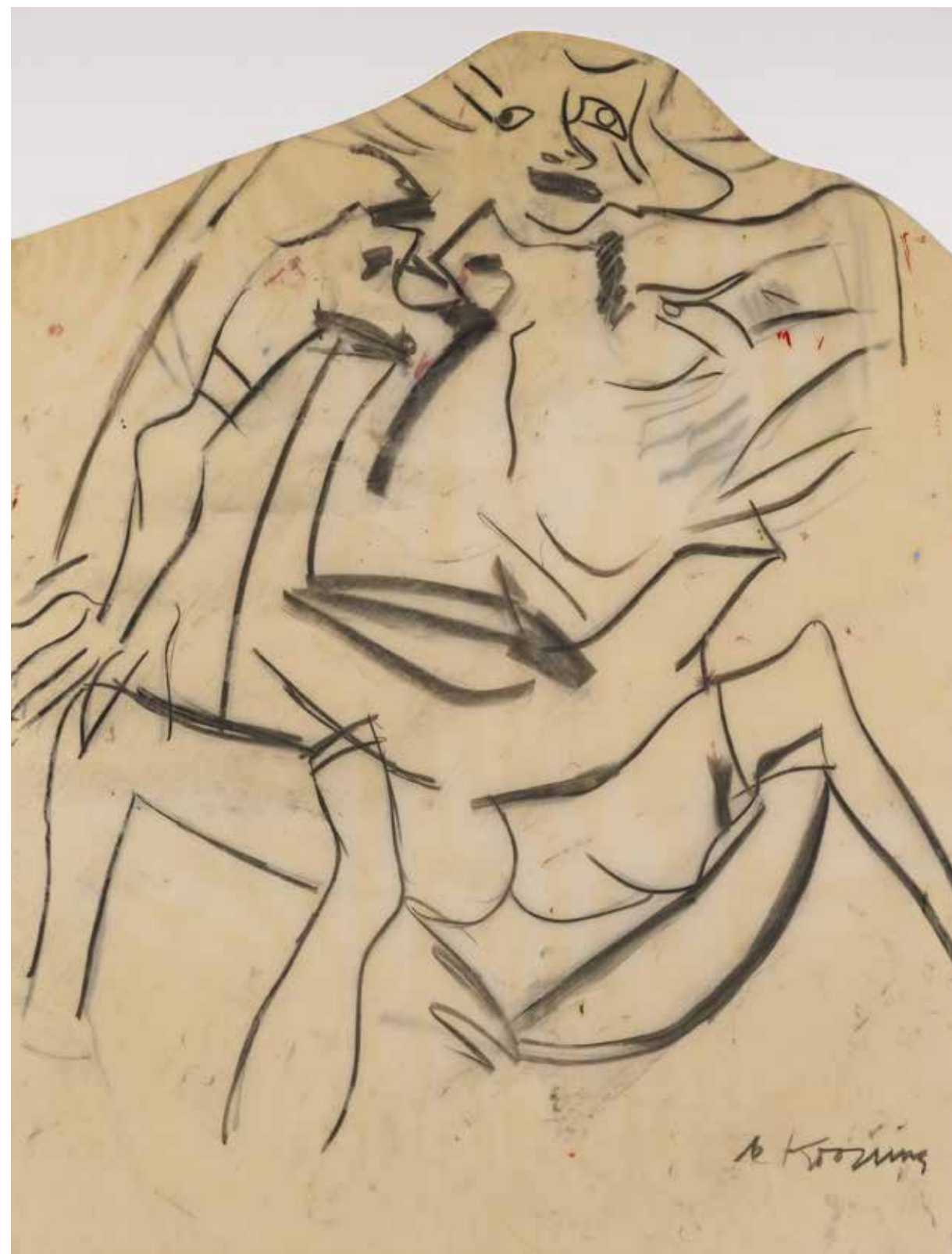
2.

FIG. 1

GIRL IN BOAT, 1964
pencil on tracing paper
24 x 17.8 cm.
Hirshhorn Museum
and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution

FIG. 2

THE VISIT, 1966-67
oil on canvas
152.4 x 121.9 cm.
Tate Gallery, London



UNTITLED (SKETCHES OF WOMEN), C. 1955

signed lower right *de Kooning*

variously inscribed *Max Roger (?)*; *fifteen*; and *Mrs. Lloyd*

pencil and pastel on paper

60 x 47 cm. (23 ⁵/₈ x 18 ¹/₂ in.)

PROVENANCE

Benefit Auction for the Living Theatre, New York.

Mr. and Mrs. Robert Scull, New York, acquired from the above sale.

Estate of Robert C. Scull sale; Sotheby's, New York, 11-12 Nov.

1986, lot 10.

Private Collection, New York, acquired from the above sale.

Anon. Sale; Sotheby's, New York, 19 Nov. 1996, lot 21.

Ambassador Mehdi Vakil; and by descent.

Private Collection, USA, acquired directly from the above.

LITERATURE

T.B. Hess, *Willem de Kooning Drawings*, Greenwich, 1972, p. 200 (illus. pl. 83).

J. Elderfield, *De Kooning: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2011, p. 288 (illus. fig. 8).

In the catalogue to the 2011 de Kooning retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, John Elderfield described this page of small sketches: "In 1955, [de Kooning] made a fascinating demonstration drawing, which confirms that he did compose from bodily details. At bottom right, a woman stands before a canvas, her right shoulder, arm, and hand becoming a motif for a smaller canvas behind them. Scattered around are sketches of additional canvases designed from enlarged bodily contours – or perhaps models for or records of the independent pastels that proliferated in this period, some of which may be imagined as tryouts for details of large compositions" (J. Elderfield, *op. cit.*, p. 288).



The meaning of the inscriptions “Max Roger” and “fifteen” are not entirely clear, but “Mrs. Lloyd” may refer to the wife of the investment banker H. Gates Lloyd, who donated de Kooning’s *Black Friday* (1948) to his alma mater, Princeton University.

This page of sketches once belonged to pioneering post-war and contemporary art collectors, Robert and Ethel Scull. The Sculls (Fig. 1) began collecting in the 1950s, when there was virtually no existing market for American contemporary art. Using the limited funds from the taxicab business founded by Ethel’s father, the couple bought first-rate Abstract Expressionist works by artists including Still, Guston and de Kooning. The following decade, they added Rauschenberg, Chamberlain and Johns to their growing collection, and began exploring an interest in Pop Art.



FIG. 1
Robert and Ethel Scull
with (L-R) the artists James
Rosenquist, George Segal
and Andy Warhol

UNTITLED (WOMAN), C. 1950-53

inscribed lower left *souvenir to Paul from Bill de Kooning*

pencil and pastel on tracing paper

60 x 47 cm. (23⁵/₈ x 18¹/₂ in.)

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, acquired directly from the artist *circa* 1959.

Anon. Sale; Sotheby's, New York, 3 May 1995, lot 247.

Ambassador Mehdi Vakil; and by descent.

Private Collection, USA, acquired directly from the above.

This sketch is perhaps the most decidedly abstract rendering of a woman in the Vakil group. Most of de Kooning's tracings relate to paintings that include a figure. Moreover, while many were executed in graphite, others were gradually transformed, either by being affixed to and incorporated into the surfaces of his paintings, or with the addition of vivid colour. Here, what began as a pencil sketch has been layered with pastel in bright shades of red, green and cobalt.

This figure appears to be undergoing a process of metamorphosis – from flesh to paint, from shape to figure – and parts of it appear suddenly as the eye jumps from colour to contour, trying to catch a glimpse of a familiar part of the anatomy.



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