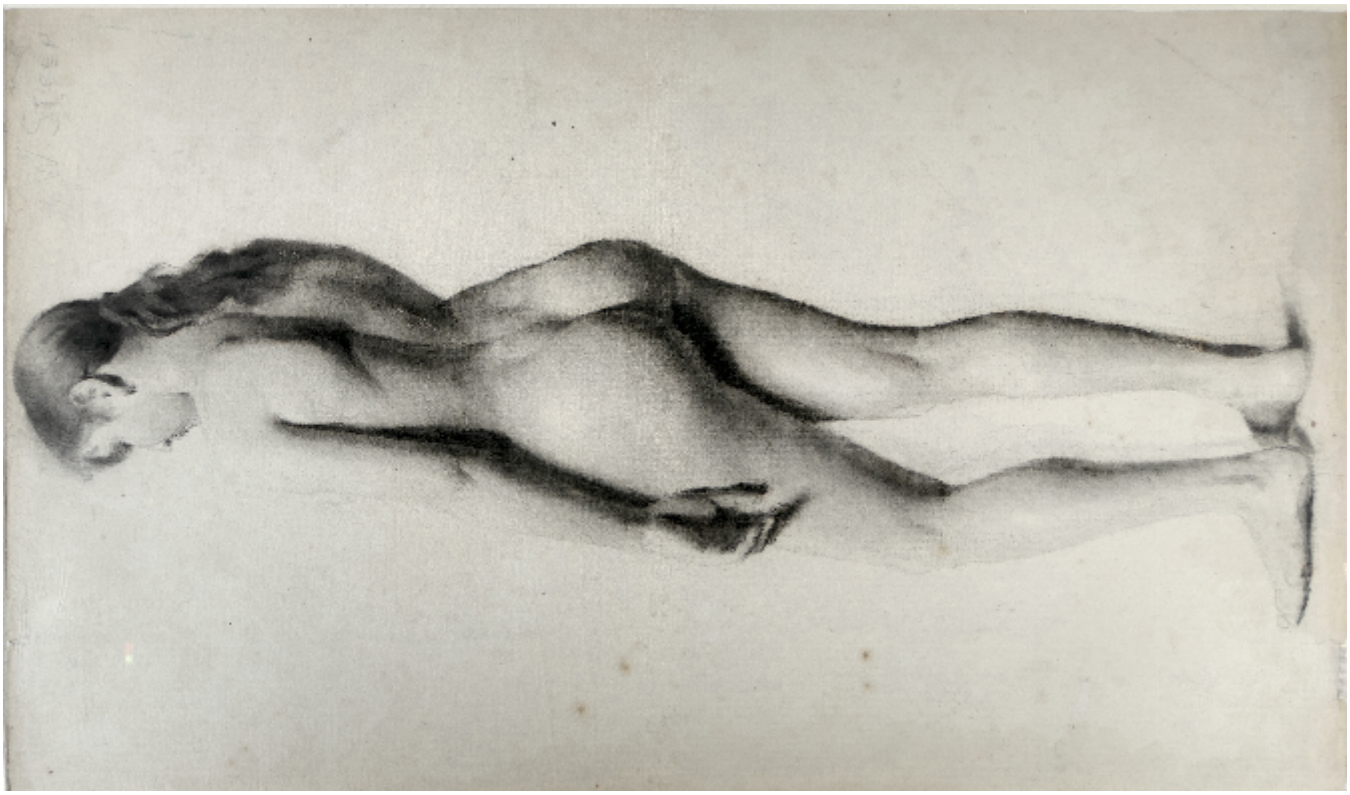
Académie Life Study

Philip Wilson Steer O.M, R.A, R.W.S

Sold



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REF: 1195

Height: 61 cm (24")

Width: 35.5 cm (14")

Framed Height: 70 cm (27.6")

Framed Width: 45 cm (17.7")

Description

This beautiful and subtle charcoal ‘academie’ life drawing dates from Steer's period of study in Paris, at either the Académie Julian, where he was in 1882-3, or the École des Beaux-Arts in 1883-4. There are relatively few paintings and relatively little correspondence dating from Steer's time in Paris, and no other academie drawings that we are aware of. It is on watermarked handmade Michallet paper, which came in a single size of 515 x 360 mm, with a tight grain that held charcoal well, making it very popular for life drawing in the Parisian art schools. Augustus John is reported to have commented on its use at the Slade, and D.S. MacColl noted that Steer retained a stock of Michallet paper for his later watercolours.

The ‘W STEER’ inscription to the upper right would appear to have been written over the original, similar but rubbed charcoal signature. As Bruce Laughton writes in his monograph on the artist, he was commonly known as ‘Wilson Steer’, without the Philip, when a young artist, and signed such pictures as ‘What of the War’(1883) ‘, with P. Wilson Steer’. He was also in the habit of signing in capital letters, for example, ’Tired Out’ of 1885. The Salson Naturalists, whom Steer and his young colleagues admire, also were in the habit of capitalising their signatures. However, the main reason for capitalisation in the present work may have been for ease of identification among all the other studies in the life room, or as a label if it was to be hung on the atelier wall, which was the practice for selected drawings.

In a letter home of 7 December 1882, Steer wrote, ‘I don't much care for copying it is rather dry work I don't think I shall do any more after this one ... next week I shall try and paint the model, hitherto I have only drawn in charcoal and shaded with the same.’

The careful observation of light and shade in the present drawing, with less reliance on hard outlines than many 'academies' being made by his contemporaries in the Paris art schools, seems to presage his later depiction of the figure in his paintings, and to echo a maxim recorded by D. S. MacColl:

‘Steer did not see in line. At the Slade School, in the nineties, when, under the influence of Fred Brown and Henry Tonks, the expression of form by line was almost a cult, I once sat behind Steer as he drew the model's head for another student from the end of the semicircle about the model's throne. The girl's head was a delicate projection from cast shadow and penumbra towards the light: Steer said, 'Why all this line? there is no line.'

As well as the quality of the drawing in the present work and the acute observation of light and shade, the ability to represent flesh that we also see in Steer’s subsequent paintings shines through here.

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