

LE CLAIRE KUNST SEIT 1982

FÉLIX VALLOTTON

1865 Lausanne - Paris 1925

Femme dans sa cuisine – La mère de l'artiste dans la cuisine

Black chalk on paper; 1884.
Inscribed and dated lower right: *fv 84*.
418 x 268 mm

PROVENANCE: Galerie Paul Vallotton, Lausanne – Alfred Vallotton, Paris – Private collection, Paris

LITERATURE: Marina Ducrey, *Félix Vallotton, l'oeuvre peint. Catalogue raisonné*, Milan 2007, II, repr. p.9 –
Marina Ducrey, *Vallotton*, Milan 2007, p.9 (French and German editions)

EXHIBITIONS: Félix Vallotton, Kunsthau Zürich 1928, no. 187 (mistakenly listed as a pencil drawing) –
Max Bill, Jakob Probst, Leo Steck, Félix Vallotton und Walo von May, Kunsthalle Bern 1930, no. 51 (titled *Intérieur de cuisine* [Kitchen interior]) – *Félix Vallotton: Bilder, Zeichnungen, Graphik*, exhibition organized by the Pro Helvetia Foundation travelling to the Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Kunsthalle Bremen, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Musée du Petit Palais, Paris and Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, 1978-9, no. 183 (titled *Junge Frau in der Küche* [Young woman in a kitchen])

Félix Vallotton was just nineteen years old when he executed this virtuoso chalk drawing. Originally from Lausanne, he moved to Paris in 1882 to take up studies at the Académie Julian. This fine early drawing, executed soon after his move to France, testifies to the exceptional skills he had developed only two years into his artistic training. In a self-portrait executed in the same technique and at around the same time as the present sheet he depicts himself as a melancholy young man with a sceptical expression gazing into a mirror. Biographical details show that Vallotton set himself exceptionally high standards, refusing to compromise in any way at both personal and artistic levels.

As a young artist now settled in Paris Vallotton was to return regularly to Lake Geneva to spend his summers with his parents in Lausanne. This leaves no doubt that he executed the present drawing in Lausanne in the summer of 1884. The sheet depicts the artist's mother, Emma Vallotton-Roseng, in the kitchen of the family home at 2 rue Haldimand in the historic heart of Lausanne. Her posture and the fact that she is wearing an apron suggest that she is probably peeling potatoes. To her right at the window is a stone sink and at her feet a large metal canister.

Comparison with drawings and paintings executed by Vallotton in the same period and known to depict his mother confirms the identity of the figure in the present sheet. The most important of these works is the painting titled *The Artist's Mother in a Red Armchair*. It was probably also executed in the summer of 1884 [fig. 1]. However unlike the painting, the present drawing cannot be regarded as a portrait. Vallotton's intention is not to produce a character study of a specific individual. The figure represented is simply one element of many in the depiction of a precisely captured interior. Rather, the figure has something of the quality of a staffage element. And it is precisely this that makes the drawing so interesting from an art-historical viewpoint. In it, Vallotton anticipates a subject that in later years was to represent his central focus of interest as a painter – the *intérieur à figures*, the

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bourgeois interior with figures. In the 1890s, this subject was also to be the major theme of his celebrated woodcuts.

The present drawing also points to Vallotton's undoubted source of inspiration as a young artist – the domestic interiors of Dutch seventeenth-century masters like Jan Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch and Emmanuel de Witte. It is well established that he held Rembrandt's work in even greater regard. Between 1889 and 1891 Vallotton made etchings after three paintings by Rembrandt. One of these was his famous *Christ at Emmaus* now in the collection of the Louvre. In 1894 he published a lengthy newspaper article on Rembrandt after an extended trip to Holland. The article is an encomium on the master's work and ends with the assertion that *it surpasses everything, it is outside everything, it is beyond everything* – other great artists of the seventeenth century are described as *empty, common or fashionable*. Vallotton's admiration for Rembrandt is clearly apparent in the present drawing. The mastery with which Rembrandt employed strokes of varying density and breadth in his drawings and etchings to capture the effects of light and shade must have impressed the young Vallotton as much as the painterly effects that Rembrandt was capable of extracting from pencil or ink strokes.

Vallotton's drawing is not just the product of his own highly focussed study of the Old Masters he so greatly admired. An involuntary comparison springs to mind, both thematic and stylistic, with the work of an important artist of his own times: the drawing has more than a little in common with the early, almost contemporary drawings of another fervent admirer of Rembrandt – no less a figure than Vincent van Gogh (1853-91) [fig. 2].

Rudolf Koella

The drawing is requested for loan for the exhibition *Félix Vallotton: Arbeiten auf Papier*, Kunstmuseum Solothurn and Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 12 May - 25 November 2012.



Fig. 1: Félix Vallotton, *The artist's mother in a red armchair*. 1884. Oil on paper, 40 x 32 cm.

Private collection (Ducrey 2005, II, no. 10)



Fig. 2: Vincent van Gogh, *Woman Sewing*.
1881. Opaque watercolour, wash,
black chalk on laid paper.
618 x 470 mm.

Kröller-Müller-Museum, Otterlo [KM 122.653]