

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST



PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

1824 Lyon - Paris 1898

Head of a Man in Profile, Study for 'La Famille du pêcheur'

Charcoal and stumping, squared for transfer. Circa 1875.

Signed lower right: *P. Puvis de Ch.*; inscribed upper right with the name and address of the model: *de Cioja / r. St Victor 45.*

320 x 240 mm.

PROVENANCE: Private collection, France

When Pierre-Cécile-Puvis de Chavannes died in Paris in 1898 at seventy-four, he was an artistic institution. Going to see 'the Puvis' at the Salon was part of the annual ritual. His mural decorations for l'Église de Sainte-Geneviève, in the Pantheon, the Hôtel de Ville, and the Sorbonne in Paris, for Amiens, Marseilles, Poitiers, Lyon, Rouen, and Boston, had made him the best-known painter in the world. Acclaimed by conservatives and radicals alike, Puvis's art was neither traditionally academic nor as obviously new as that of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists. He admitted to few influences and left no important direct descendents. Yet his silent allegories, with their simple messages carried by an increasingly flat, classic naturalism, and low-keyed, close valued color, all exactly composed, anticipated and reinforced similar purifications of formal means by younger men such as Seurat, Gauguin, and Denis. Today, after long neglect, these formal simplifications are considered to be Puvis's claim to relevance, his own personal anticipation of the twentieth century. (John H. Neff)¹

The importance of Puvis's influence on the development of modern art was made clear in an exhibition titled *From Puvis de Chavannes to Matisse and Picasso. Toward Modern Art* staged at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 2002. The exhibition's curator, Serge Lemoine, Director of the Musée d'Orsay, convincingly argued – contrary to general belief – that the works of Manet and the Impressionists were not the only formative influences on the development of modernism. He demonstrated that the art of Puvis de Chavannes also provided important impulses. In over 500 carefully selected catalogue illustrations he documented the influence of Puvis's work on Seurat, Gauguin and Cézanne as well as younger artists such as Munch and Hodler, Picasso and Matisse, who were to remain loyal to their role model throughout their lives.

The present drawing is a study for the head of the young fisherman depicted at the centre of the painting *La Famille du pêcheur* [Fig. 1] ² Puvis first presented this large-format composition at the Paris Salon in 1875. Two years later the work was offered for sale in an exhibition at the Paris gallery of the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. Unsold at the exhibition, it remained in Puvis's studio until his death. In 1900, the painting, now famous, was exhibited at the Paris World's Fair along with three other works by Puvis. In January 1901, it was purchased by the Königliche Gemäldegalerie in Dresden.

The art historian Karl Woermann, writing in the 1908 edition of the catalogue of pictures in the royal gallery, offers the following interpretation of the painting: *The image of simple but classically dressed fisherfolk on the seashore embodies a representation of the 'three ages of man'. At the centre, the naked, sturdy figure of a youthful fisherman shown in profile to the left, who attaches his nets to a gaunt tree. His comely wife sits below, her naked body turned to the right*

¹ John H. Neff, 'Puvis de Chavannes: Three Easel Paintings', in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago 1969, vol. 4, p. 66.

² Reproduced in colour in the catalogue, *Die Gemäldegalerie zu Dresden, Teil II, Neuere Meister*, Berlin and Dresden 1921.

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST

and swathed at the hip with red drapery. With a swaddling band she restrains an infant playing with shells at her feet. At the right, old age, a weary man of advanced years who rests under a covering of blue, his legs outstretched in the wreckage of a wooden boat. In the left background a hut, on the right a stretch of calm blue sea.³

The painting ranked as one of the most important French nineteenth-century paintings in the collection of the Gemäldegalerie until it was destroyed by fire during the Allied bombing attack on Dresden on the night of 13 February 1945. Sharing its fate were 195 other works. They were stored in a lorry parked on the banks of the Elbe. The paintings had been brought from a depot in the east threatened by the advance of the Russian army. The driver had disregarded instructions to bring the paintings directly and without intermediate stop to a new place of safety, and to take a route that specifically avoided Dresden. Among the works destroyed were Courbet's *Casseurs de pierre*, Böcklin's *Frühlingsregen*, Rayski's *Wildschweine* and paintings by Feuerbach, Hodler, Liebermann, Marées, Schwind and Thoma.⁴

Puvis de Chavannes made preparatory drawings for all his major compositions. Léonce Bénédite, a conservator at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris and organizer of a number of exhibitions of Puvis's drawings, is cited as noting: *It took him [Puvis] seven to eight months, sometimes as long as a year, to prepare a major decorative project, therefore twice the time he took to complete the painting itself.*⁵ Although Puvis had no classic artistic training, his working methods barely differed from those of his academically trained colleagues. *In fact, his true school was what he somewhat ironically dubbed 'the academy', which he and his colleagues, the genre painter Alexandre Bida and the portraitist Gustave Ricard, had set up. From 1852 to 1855 the three artists would regularly meet in the evenings to make drawings after living models in a studio on Place Pigalle.*⁶

The present drawing was also made from life. Puvis has even added the Italian name of the model, *de Cioja*, and the man's address, *r. St. Victor 45*, in the upper right corner of the sheet.⁷ The young man is seen slightly from below and sketched in profile. His head is leant back and his gaze directed upward with a look of rapt attention. His strong chin, full lips, straight nose, thick eyebrows and prominent cheekbones express primal strength and at the same time transmit a sense of sublime austerity. A characteristic feature of Puvis's work as a draughtsman is his ability, even in a portrait drawing from life, to convey an image of classical, timeless ideality. It is evident from the squaring and presence of additional diagonals that this was the sheet he used to transfer the head study to the surface of the painting. *La Famille du pêcheur* was completed in 1875.

Puvis also produced a highly finished preparatory study for the figure of the 'mother'. This nude study is now housed in Cleveland Museum of Art [Fig. 2]. Here, too, he had a model at his disposal whose pose was arranged down to the smallest detail in preparation for the planned figure in the painting. Even the tight grip of the hand that holds the swaddling band restraining the infant is finely worked out. From this point, the woman's posture remained unchanged in all subsequent studies while only the hairstyle and the arrangement of the drapery around her body were modified.

³ Karl Woermann, *Katalog der Königlichen Gemäldegalerie zu Dresden*, Dresden 1908, p. 823, no. 2523

⁴ Hans Ebert, *Kriegsverluste der Dresdener Gemäldegalerie, vernichtete und vermisste Werke*, Dresden 1963, p. 48, no. 2523, repr.

⁵ Cited after Louise d'Argencourt, 'Puvis bei der Arbeit. Die Zeichnung in all ihren Zuständen', in *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, Galerie Michael Werner, Märkisch Wilmersdorf and Cologne, 2019, p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ The family name 'Cioja' originates from Italy and is found in Lombardy. What is left of the rue Saint-Victor is today situated in Paris's fifth arrondissement. The street once led to the medieval Abbey of Saint-Victor, or Royal Abbey, which was destroyed in the French Revolution.

The Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon possesses a preparatory drawing for the figure of the old man resting in the wreckage of the boat. It focuses on the detail of his head and the expressive, soulful gesture of the hands that he holds crossed over his chest [Fig. 5].

The red chalk and wash drawing over black chalk now in the Musée Saint-Nazaire in Bourbon-Lancy [Fig. 3]⁸ was almost certainly made somewhat later than the individual studies. It was probably executed in the same format as the planned painting to facilitate the transfer of the figures into the painting. Strictly speaking, it is not a cartoon. It is on canvas and is not in full colour, nor is it squared or pounced. It focuses on the group of figures and largely dispenses with peripheral detail. Although the compositional arrangement is largely consistent with the finished Salon painting there are differences between the two: in the painting the infant held with the swaddling band no longer stands but is half-seated, and the old man's bare, outstretched legs, which perhaps protruded too conspicuously into the foreground, have been covered with a cloth and are now considerably less prominent.

Before beginning work on the painting Puvis evidently wished to ensure he was satisfied with the overall composition by making a drawing to evaluate and document the changes [Fig. 4]. A carefully elaborated study held in the collection of the Fogg Museum in Harvard shows the infant half-seated, the outstretched legs of the old man are covered and there are minor corrections to the drapery and the arrangement of the wooden planks of the boat. This study largely corresponds to the completed painting of 1875.

In 1887, twelve years after the completion of the Salon painting, Puvis painted a second version of *La Famille du pêcheur*, this time in reduced format. The original version had remained in his studio [Fig. 7]. The smaller version was acquired in March 1888 by Édouard Aynard (d.1913), a well-known banker, politician, museum benefactor and collector. It was gifted to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1915 by an American private collector.

The smaller version of *La Famille du pêcheur* differs considerably from the original version of 1875. Its composition is less complex. The woman's body is now almost entirely covered by a white robe and all but one of the branches of the tree have been cut. Contrasts have been softened and banks of cloud now fill the clear blue sky creating atmospheric effect. The folds of drapery are less strongly accentuated and colour is used to emphasize the impression of flatness. A pea green tone replaces the original red of the drapery swathing the woman's body. The features of the figures appear flatter. This is particularly evident when comparing the head of the young fisherman in the 1887 painting with the present head study. That the present drawing was used for the larger and more important Salon painting is indisputable.

Both the theme and the poses of the figures continued to preoccupy Puvis well beyond 1875. This is also documented by a red chalk drawing probably executed in the early 1880s. It returns to the motif of the woman and the infant, placing them alone in front of a fisherman's hut. The sheet is now held in the Art Institute of Chicago [Fig. 6]. Here, the woman occupies the centre of the composition and there is less emphasis on the drapery around her.

⁸ *Puvis de Chavannes*, exhib. cat., Grand Palais, Paris and Galerie Nationale du Canada, Ottawa, Paris 1976-77, no. 109, full-page illustration.

LE CLAIRE

SEIT 1982

KUNST

John H. Neff eloquently summarizes the background to Puvis de Chavannes's painting 'La Famille du pêcheur': *A Patriot, Parisian by choice, and admirer of Ernest Renan's naturalistic interpretations of religious history, Puvis was one of many intelligent men of good background who were uneasy about rapid industrialization, and expressed a nostalgic interest in rural communities where Christianity survived in the face of progress. Although Puvis also painted modern subjects, his compositions are essentially evocations of an ideal past, of pre-Roman Gaul and of Christian France. The Madonna-like pose in 'Fisherman's Family' even the swaddling band, are not accidental. [The pose of the mother and the swaddling band motif are inspired by Raphael's depictions of the Madonna.⁹] It is an obvious example of placing common folks in simple settings to stand for religious and moral qualities, here the family and hard work. But with Puvis, the subject never falls into genre. For years this composition was known as an allegory of the three ages of man, as an interpretation no doubt encouraged by the classic figures and absence of specific historic detail. Fisherman's family is Puvis's second treatment of this theme, which recurs in mural backgrounds as well as in one of his best-known paintings, 'Le Pauvre pêcheur', Salon of 1881.¹⁰*

We would like to thank Bertrand Puvis de Chavannes of the Comité Pierre Puvis de Chavannes for confirming the authenticity of the present drawing.

We also would like to thank Claudia Maria Müller, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden, and David Klemm, Hamburger Kunsthalle, for useful information.

⁹ The pose of the female nude recalls the figure of the Madonna in Raphael's painting *The Canigiani Holy Family* (c.1507, oil on panel, 131 x 107 cm, Alte Pinakothek Munich, inv. 476). The motif of the infant held with a swaddling band is modelled on the infant in Raphael's painting *The Holy Family with a Palm Tree* (c.1506, oil on canvas, circular, diameter 101.5 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, inv. NGL 062.46).

¹⁰ John H. Neff, op. cit., p. 76 f.



Fig. 1: *La Famille du pêcheur*, 1875.
 Öl on canvas, 260 x 218 cm.
 Formerly Gemäldegalerie Dresden, destroyed in 1945.



Fig. 2: Study for *La Famille du pêcheur*, c.1875.
 Black and white chalk on brown paper, 466 x 328 mm.
 Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland OH [inv. 2008.390]



Fig. 3: Cartoon for *La Famille du pêcheur*, c.1875.
 Red chalk and wash, black chalk on canvas, 244 x 217 cm.
 Musée Saint-Nazaire, Bourbon-Lancy

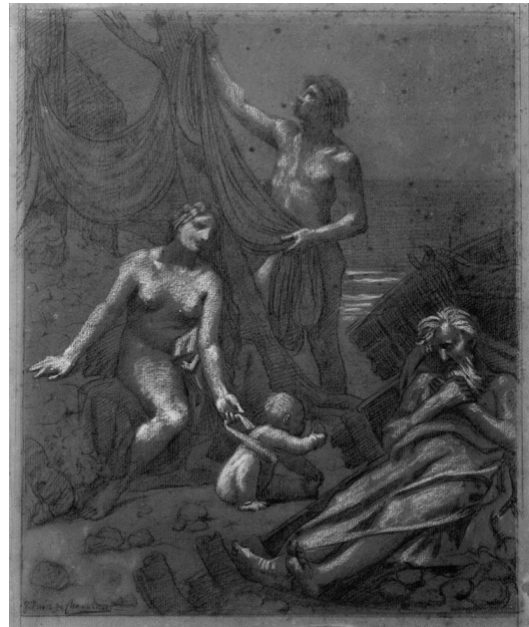


Fig. 4: Study for *La Famille du pêcheur*, c.1875.
 Red and white chalk on brown paper, 419 x 360 mm.
 Harvard Art Museums, Fogg Museum OH [inv. 1943.894]



Fig. 5: Study for *La Famille du pêcheur*.
Black chalk on blue paper, 221 x 205 mm.
Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon [inv. B607-125]



Fig. 4: Study for *La Famille du pêcheur*, c.1883.
Red chalk on Japanese paper, 208 x 249 mm.
Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Robert Allerton
[inv. 1924.928]



Fig. 5: *La Famille du pêcheur*, 1887.
Small version of the 1875 painting. Oil on canvas, 82.6 x 71.0 cm.
Art Institute of Chicago, Martin A. Ryerson Collection
[inv. 1915.227]