

Head study of a Man

William Henry Hunt



Description

William Henry Hunt O.W.S. (1790-1864)
Head study of a Man

Pen and brown ink and watercolour on laid paper
9.6 by 8.3 cm., 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.

Provenance:
Cyril Fry (1918-2010)

Literature:
Probably John Witt, William Henry Hunt, Life and Work, with a Catalogue, London 1982, p. 177, no. 378

Exhibited:
Probably, London, The Fry Gallery, Watercolours and Drawings from the Collection of Mr and Mrs Cyril Fry, 1967, no. 38a

Thackeray wrote: 'If you want to see real nature now, real expression, real startling home poetry, look at every-one of Hunt's heads. Hogarth never painted anything better than these figures' (M.H. Spielman, The Royal Society of Painters in Watercolour, A Retrospective, 1804-1904, quoted in Witt op. cit., p. 26). Although Thackeray was referring to Hunt's more finished exhibition portraits, the present small-scale, carefully observed study is full of character and individuality which indicates not only that the sitter was drawn from life, but was known to the artist.

Hunt had a number of friends within the black community and made several studies of these, including a pencil Portrait of a Young Girl at the Courtauld Institute, London; A Boy with a Slate at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and Study of a Young Model, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The abolition movement gripped fashionable London, turning Britain in the early 19th Century from a nation benefitting from slavery, to one that became an international supporter of abolition. Slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833. There were relatively large numbers of black residents throughout Britain, particularly in London, Liverpool, Kent and Edinburgh. During the 1840s and 1850s Britain became a popular destination from figures all over the world for the study of theology and medicine. Furthermore, numerous fugitive slaves arrived from the States and elsewhere. 'In conscious tribute to urban diversity,' (Jan Marsh ed., Black Victorians: Black People in British Art 1800-1900, 2005, p. 14) artists regularly included black figures in their crowd scenes, such as in George Sidney Shepherd's large exhibition watercolour of Old Covent Garden Market in London, painted in 1829 (with Guy Peppiatt Fine Art, 2023). Apparently, visitors from the United States remarked on the integration within Britain's cities. However, intolerance and racism was also evident and this seems to have grown as the century progressed.

Hunt's physical disability, whilst it appears not have affected the success of his career, would have caused issues and derision from some. This may have made Hunt sympathetic to others who might be considered to not be part of mainstream communities, including black people and those from Gypsy communities as well as performers and acrobats. Ann Mary Wood in her Reminiscences discusses Hunt's tender and sympathetic nature and mentions that he enjoyed the company of 'street conjurers, acrobats and ... [black] minstrels were always welcome at the tea table of his humble lodging, and a certain 'Bones' in the latter troop was his especial friend' (Simon Fenwick, 2006).