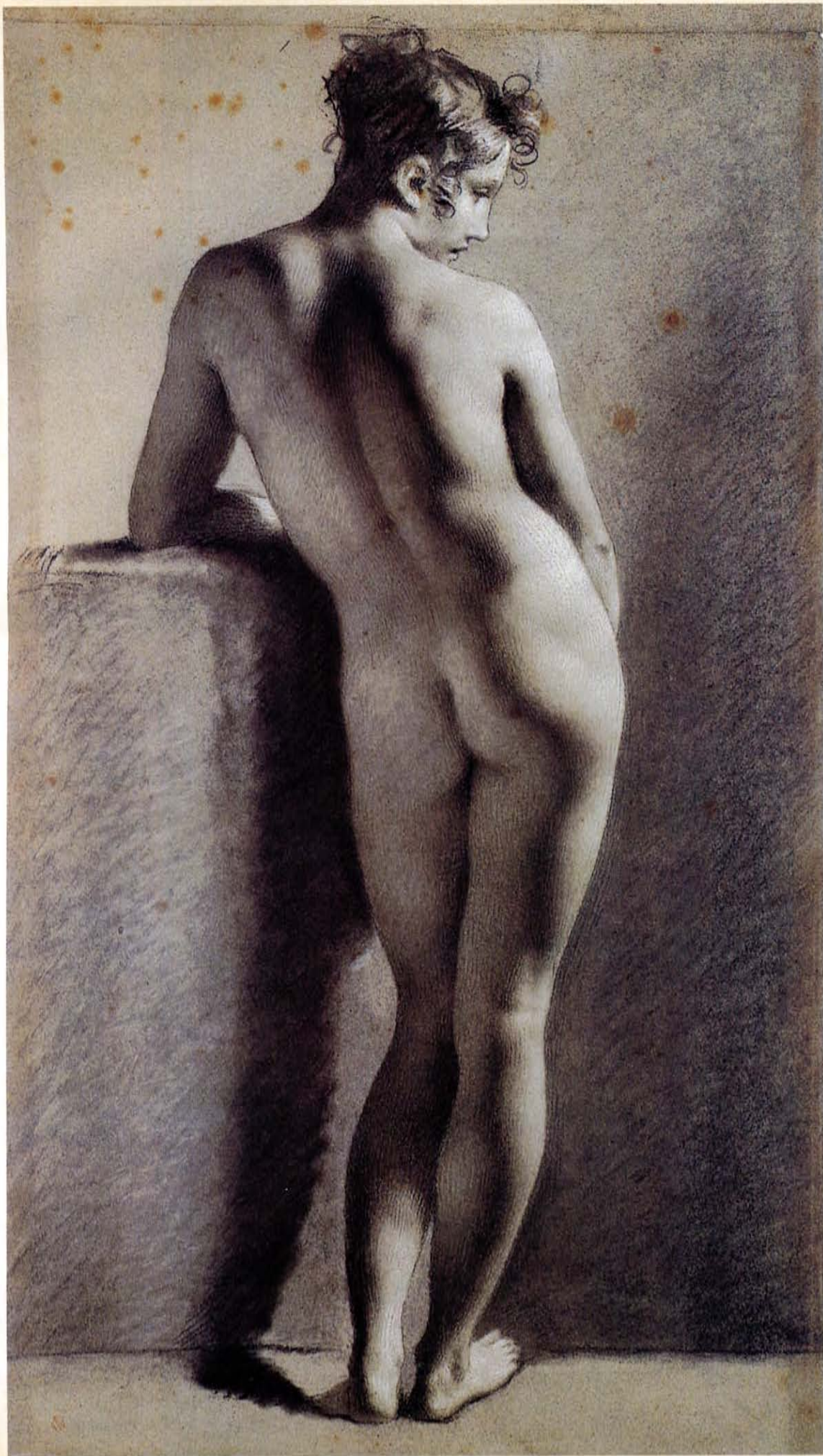


“The Erotic Frigiditaire”: The Académies of Pierre-Paul Prud’hon

Prud’hon drew from the figure throughout his career, and now those “académies” anchor his reputation. How did he draw such stunning figure studies? | **by Ephraim Rubenstein**

Acclaimed during his lifetime for his ambitious allegorical and mythological paintings, Pierre-Paul Prud’hon’s (1758–1823) reputation rests today, for many artists, squarely on the shoulders of his body of stunning figure drawings. Now that the visual rhetoric of the late 18th century has faded away, his most lionized canvases strike us as both saccharine and stilted. His paintings have names such as *Cupid Seducing Innocence Under the Promptings of Pleasure*, *With Repentance in Their Wake*—names that seem to sum up all that is wrong

with them before you even see them. But everything that is cloying in the paintings seems just right in the drawings, which are as beautifully observed and rendered as any in the canon. Unlike the paintings, Prud’hon’s drawings survive as honest responses to the human body, while still participating in the conventions and visual language of their time. Coolly adamant yet naggingly erotic, these deceptively straightforward figures continue to exert a powerful psychological and artistic appeal for contemporary drawers.



Standing Nude

charcoal heightened with white chalk on blue paper, 24 x 13 3/4. Collection Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Boston, Massachusetts.

Notice how Prud'hon drew the hatching down the form, like liquid following gravity down the body. His marks are so wedged to the surface topography of the body that they feel almost like a tight-fitting garment or a second skin.



DRAWING

RIGHT

Standing Female Nude

black and white chalk on blue-gray paper, 23 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ %. Private collection.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Seated Female Nude, Turned to the Right, Arm Raised

black and white chalk on blue paper, 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ %. Private collection.

Academic Training in Drawing

It seems natural that Prud'hon's drawings should survive the vicissitudes of taste, as drawing from the figure formed the basis of every major style in Europe from the late 15th century to the end of the 19th century. While subject matter came and went, and modes of visualizing were favored and then discarded, the *académie*—the figure study done from the live model—remained at the heart of artistic training for groups as diverse as Mannerist, rococo, Neo-Classical, and Romantic artists. The *académie* provided a through-line, a measure of continuity, for extremely disparate practices, and looking at Prud'hon's drawings is like sensing the glue that held European art together for almost 500 years.

Unlike our own time, in which art students may take only one course in drawing and then dive right into painting or sculpture, European art academies were based on a rigorous and lengthy progression of training in draftsmanship. Drawing in general—and from the human figure in particular—was considered to be absolutely essential for all subsequent work. If you were not able to draw the figure in the widest possible range of poses and lighting conditions, you would not be prepared to handle the vast historical and mythological canvases that would be expected of you as a rising young artist.

Students were first assigned the task of tracing engravings, so that their hands would become familiar with the language of crosshatching and begin to move automatically around the form in the proper manner. They would then copy these same prints freehand. When they had mastered the rudiments of proportion and shading from these two-dimensional subjects, they were considered ready to move on to drawing from simplified three-dimensional models, such as plaster casts of parts of the body or fragments of



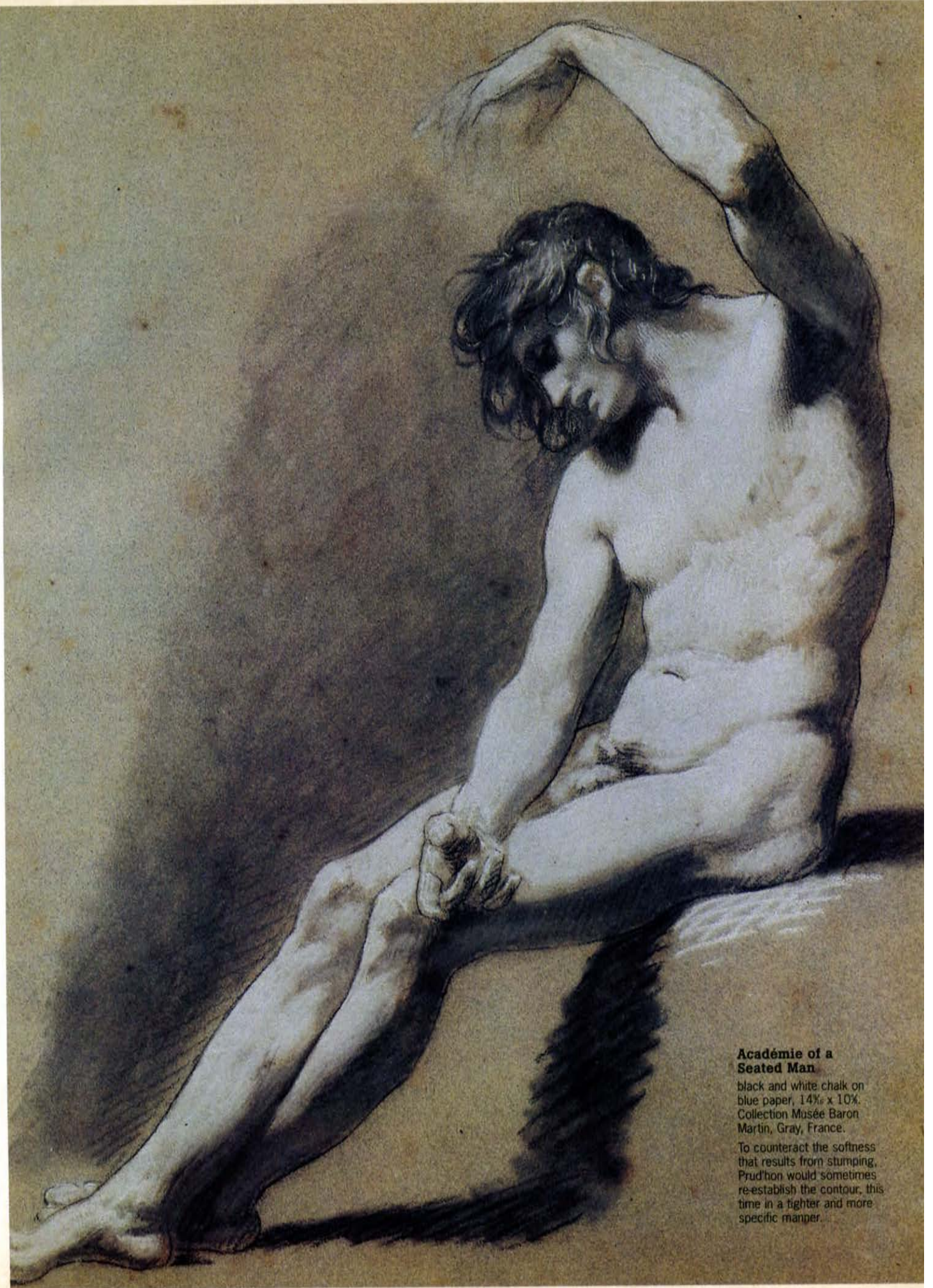
antique sculpture. Once they were adept with body parts, they then drew from entire antique statues, and finally moved onto drawing from the live model. Only then were they allowed to try to paint from nature.

The process took years and weeded out a good number of aspirants, either through lack of talent or patience. Cumbersome as the training may seem to us, it nevertheless assured that by the time an artist began constructing complex pictures from imagination, he or she had mastered the necessary technical and observational skills. This initial training in drawing from the figure never ceased to be important for these artists—they would come back to



Head of Vengeance

black and white chalk with stumping and traces of blue chalk on blue laid paper, 20 x 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Collection The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.



Académie of a Seated Man

black and white chalk on blue paper, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2.
Collection Musée Baron Martin, Gray, France.

To counteract the softness that results from stumping, Prud'hon would sometimes re-establish the contour, this time in a tighter and more specific manner.

Delacroix noted how, even late in life, Prud'hon "habitually spent all his evenings in the studio of his student, M. Trezel, drawing after live models ... as if [Prud'hon] himself were the student."



LEFT

Bust of a Female Figure

black and white chalk on blue paper, faded to ochre, 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{8}$. Collection Musée Baron Martin, Gray, France.

Prud'hon would sometimes go back over the stumped areas with subtle black and white hatches to develop select forms.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Seated Nude Woman

black and white chalk on blue paper, 22 x 15. Collection The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

Prud'hon's stumping of the chalk image sometimes resulted in drawings that resemble grisaille paintings.

ward rendering of the lone figure, replete with model-stand, cushions, ropes, poles, and other studio props, never ceased to hold their fascination for him. Looking at a Prud'hon académie is like being backstage at the theater and feeling the thrill of not only the performance but also of seeing how it all works. In Prud'hon's figure studies, we see the lifelong continuity that existed between his mature work and his early training. This is particularly poignant when compared to such later artists as Degas and Picasso, who prided themselves on making a rupture with their early education.

In Language of the Body:

Drawings by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon

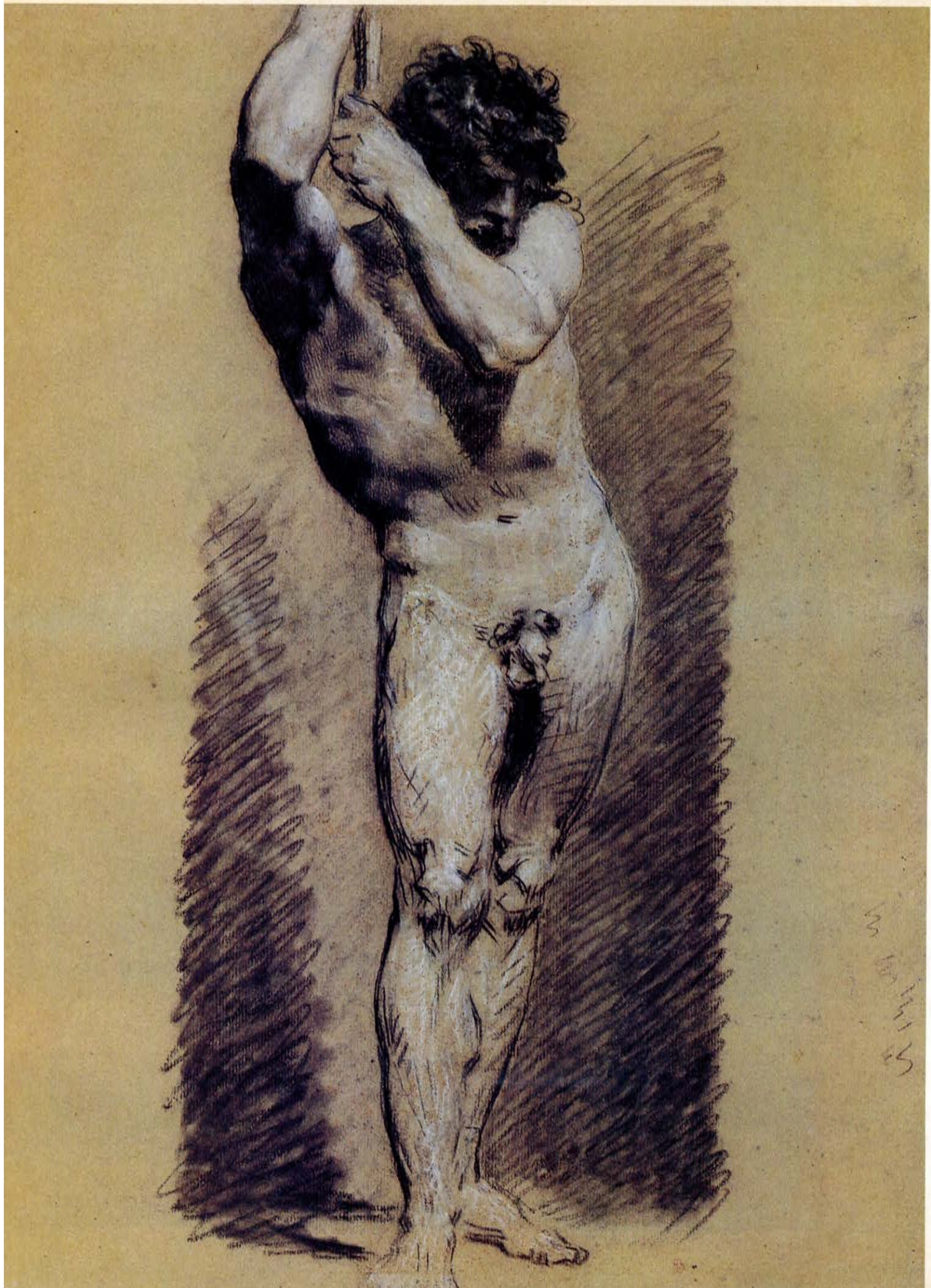
Elderfield notes the essentially private

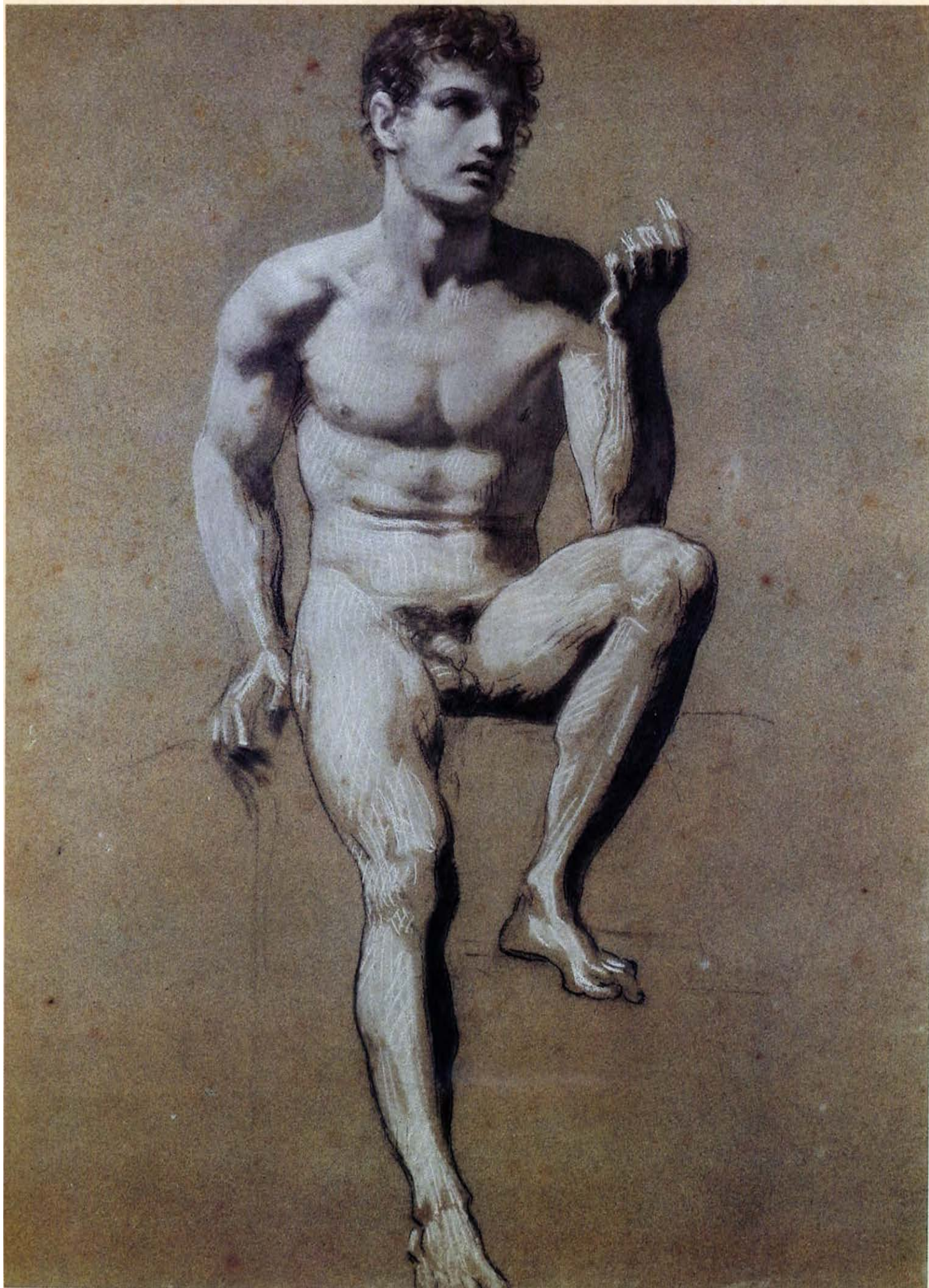
these basic studies again and again for practice and ideas. This context of Academy training in drawing is particularly important in the case of Prud'hon because he, much more than his contemporaries, clung to this essential learning activity his entire career. Delacroix noted how, even late in life, Prud'hon "habitually spent all his evenings in the studio of his student, M. Trezel, drawing after live models ... as if [Prud'hon] himself were the student," as quoted by John Elderfield and Robert Gordon in their book *Language of the Body: Drawings by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon* (Harry N. Abrams, New York, New York).

Prud'hon's finest drawings came directly out of the work he did as a student, only more fully realized. The straightforward

nature of Prud'hon's mature académies. By private, he is not indicating secretive so much as being the result of an activity increasingly withdrawn from the more public and competitive sphere of completing enormous Salon paintings. "Increasingly," he writes, "drawing substituted for painting as the principal activity of his artistic life ... as his own painting activity slowed and faltered, he also devoted increasing time to making académies, which substituted for the painting in the sense of being as finished as paintings. Prud'hon was not so unusual in making académies throughout his entire career, but he was extremely unusual in making more and more académies as his career advanced, especially as a substitute for finished paintings."







OPPOSITE PAGE

Académie of a Man, Seen From the Front

black and white chalk on blue paper, 23½ x 18½. Collection Musée Baron Martin, Gray, France.

RIGHT

Standing Nude

black and white chalk and black crayon, 18¼ x 10. Collection The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Michigan.

Prud'hon's Working Method

Studying the range of drawings—both finished and partially finished—that Prud'hon made over a 40-year period allows us to reconstruct a methodology for how they were started, developed, and completed. This helps in understanding their ineffable quality—the rare combination of delicacy and structural strength that is essentially his. Prud'hon's drawings are densely constructed and built up in distinct layers. These layers or stages include linear thoughts—such as contour designation and hatching—as well as broad tonal passages of stumping, rubbing, and graining. They are built up in strata and go through stages in which the drawing is first established, then effaced, restated, and refined. Mixing lines, tones, and additive and subtractive techniques, Prud'hon presented us with a full range of the expressive possibilities of chalk and paper.

Prud'hon's distinctive choices started right at the outset, beginning with his selection of black and white chalk on blue paper. Although hardly unique to Prud'hon, this cold tonality sets up a completely different emotive key than the more common warmth of red chalk on cream paper. Aside from its color characteristics, the blue paper also gave Prud'hon a solid middle tone from which to begin and locates the drawing directly in the center of the tonal range from the start. The other conspicuous element of Prud'hon's beginnings is that he made full use of both the black and the white chalk right from the outset. When working on toned paper, many artists spend much more time developing the darks initially, only adding the white chalk toward the end in the form of restricted highlights. But Prud'hon got the lights and the darks going at the same time, using the white chalk extensively from the start, and this allowed him to establish his uncanny sense of luminosity early on.



It seems clear from the partially finished drawings that he would begin with a tentative, airy contour to establish the basic proportions, gesture, and positioning of the figure on the paper. He would then attack the major plane breaks with extraordinarily free and vigorous hatching. What is so impressive about these initial marks is that despite their élan, they are so perfectly placed and anatomically informed. He used his marks variously to run down the length of a bone, to pick out a subcutaneous landmark, or to begin to carve out the planes of a major muscle mass. This amount of accuracy, combined with such swiftness of delivery, speaks of knowledge of the body so deeply



BELOW

Académie d'homme

black and white chalk on blue paper, 23% x 17%. Collection Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille, France.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Head of Love, Study for *The Union of Love and Friendship*

black chalk heightened with gray on sepia-colored paper, 15% x 10%. Private collection.

Both of these images show how Prud'hon's earlier drawings, in which he didn't always have an underlying tone under the hatching, look comparatively thin. *Head of Love* shows how a Prud'hon looks without the hatching; *Académie d'Homme* shows how the hatching looks without the stumped tone underneath.

Because the top layer of the form was developed through hatching, the surface of the form flickers with the alternation of lighter and darker strokes. This sets up a vibration—a visual vibrato—that sparkles and radiates light from the surface.

ingrained that he was able to make these notations in a split second, with his hand in constant motion.

At this stage, the drawings were completely linear—made up of a dense network of lines, slashes, and quickly jotted down notations for anatomical landmarks. The mark-making came out of his initial training in tracing and copying engravings. He would then home in on a selected part of the drawing—usually starting from the top—and take a stump and rub down all the marks in that section, transforming them into broad tonal washes. Occasionally, he

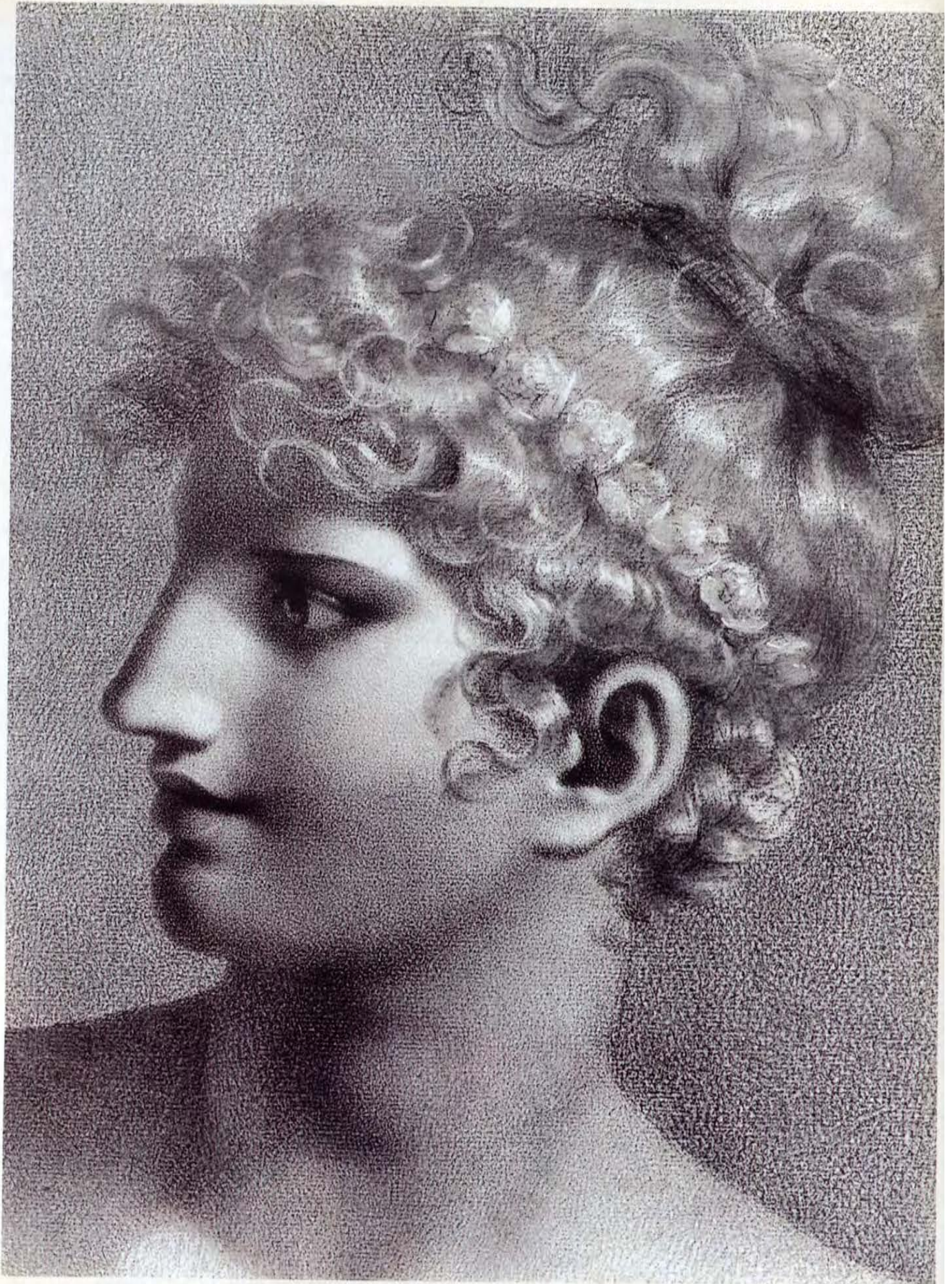
would stomp down the entire drawing, as in his famous studies for *Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime* [not shown]. But the number of partially finished drawings in which there are both linear and rubbed-down areas seems to indicate that he usually developed the drawings in sections.

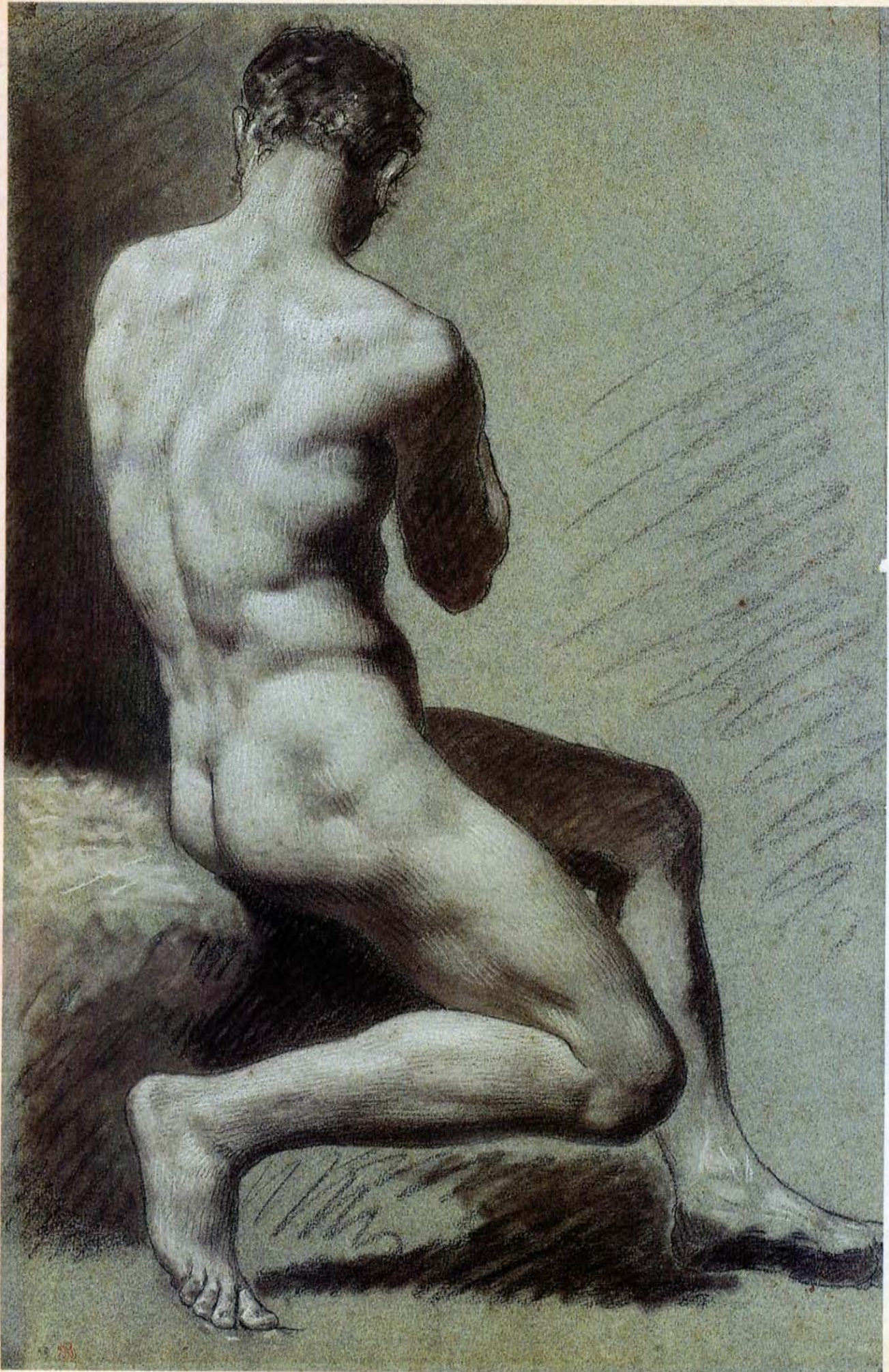
After this early process of stumping, the drawing started to make a radical shift from linear to tonal and began reading more like a soft grisaille painting than a line drawing. This rubbing down of the surface gave the drawing a breadth and a freedom more reminiscent of ink wash than dry chalk. And although this initial stumping served largely to divide the figure into its basic planes of light and dark, the black and white chalks also began blending into those seamless gray halftones, which would survive into the final stages of the drawing.

Because the stumping had made the drawing look overly soft, Prud'hon went back to re-establish the contour, this time in a tighter and more specific manner. This stopped the drawing from getting too mushy, and allowed him to contain the forms so that he could go back into them for further examination. Returning to a more linear mode of attack, he then developed selected forms with subtle black-and-white hatches, which sat on top of the stumped tonal areas. Prud'hon's hatching was as distinct as his handwriting. He used short parallel strokes at regularly spaced intervals that ran directly over the forms they described. These hatches were extremely consistent in their application (another legacy of having studied engravings), and usually ran up and down the figure. They emphasized the length of any given form rather than its width or cross section. His strokes seem to respond to gravity, like water pouring over the surface of the form. His marks are so wedded to the surface topography of the body that they feel almost like a tight-fitting garment or a second skin.

What is of particular interest here is the simultaneous combination of linear and tonal work. The stumped passages underneath give the volumes a rich baseline tone, while the subsequent hatching allowed Prud'hon to develop the forms to their fullest extent. Without this final hatching, Prud'hon's tonal work can sometimes look flaccid, as in some of his earlier allegorical drawings, just as his hatching, without the underlying tone, can look strangely thin. The combination of the two, however, is quite satisfying.

Because the top layer of the form was developed through hatching, the surface of the form flickers with the alternation of lighter and darker strokes. This sets up a vibration—





OPPOSITE PAGE

Académie of a Seated Man, Seen From Behind

black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 17% x 11%. Collection Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, France.

BELOW

Study for Justice and Divine Vengeance Pursuing Crime

black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 11% x 22.

Prud'hon, having studied antique statues, continued to feel their influence long after his student days. Their rhythms and formal beauty stayed with him his whole life and became an essential component of his aesthetic.



a visual vibrato—that sparkles and radiates light from the surface. Prud'hon's finest académies shine. The density of layers give these drawings a richness more akin to the built-up look of finished paintings than to the more improvisational, exploratory look of most drawings. They have a luster, a substantiality of light and shadow, also associated with the glazing and layering of oil painting. This makes perfect sense when we remember that these drawings came to take the place of finished paintings for the aging artist.

Prud'hon and Rubens

At an early age Prud'hon added "Paul" to his name, in emulation of the great Flemish painter and draftsman Peter Paul Rubens. Although Prud'hon's love of the body and his feeling for anatomical structure spoke clearly of this affinity, the similarity ends there. Rubens' Baroque vitality has been reined in. His red-blooded warmth has been chilled to blue, and the golden rays of the sun have given way to the reflected light of the moon. There is a quiet solemnity in Prud'hon, quite at odds with the exuberance of his namesake. Thomas Eakins—no great fan of Rubens—criticized this ebullient quality of Rubens' work in a letter to his father: "[Rubens'] men are twisted to pieces ... his people must all be in the most violent action, must use the strength of Hercules if a

little watch is to be wound up, the wind must be blowing great guns in a chamber or dining room, everything must be making a noise and tumbling about, there must be monsters too, for his men are not monstrous enough for him."

These Baroque characteristics, strangely offensive to Eakins, are nevertheless the very same qualities that Prud'hon eliminated from his own drawings. Compared to Rubens, there is a pervasive stillness and calm in Prud'hon's figure drawings, even in his more dramatic male poses. Prud'hon was less concerned with action and motion and more interested in the play of light over the still form. Whereas Rubens often got involved in the dynamism of parts of the figure, developing them until they practically burst out of the page, Prud'hon never let go of the grand simplifications that run through the whole body. He held the figure together from head to toe with a long, gracious contour and never allowed any one part to overwhelm the reading of the whole. Prud'hon displays a composure enforced by the reinstatement of the classical schema, a schema that Rubens also learned, but ultimately rejected. Prud'hon, having studied antique statues, continued to feel their influence long after his student days. Their rhythms and formal beauty stayed with him his whole life and became an essential component of his aesthetic.



The 'Erotic Frigidaire'

There is a sensual energy lurking beneath the surface in Prud'hon's drawings, however, that continually threatens to overflow its classicizing boundaries. Because many of the poses for académies in Prud'hon's time were adapted from antique sculpture, we feel at first that we are looking at statues. Their inherent stillness and fully rounded forms add to this sensation. But then, Pygmalionlike, they come alive through their radiant light and sensual surfaces. Prud'hon's figures are like creatures from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, in the midpoint of some supernatural transformation. They are part marble, part flesh; carefully observed from life but still speaking of art.

The "erotic Frigidaire," a phrase coined by Thomas Hess to describe the sculptures of Antonio Canova, perfectly describes Prud'hon's ambivalence as well. Like the surrealist "cup of fur," the "erotic Frigidaire" combines opposing traits in a disturbing way. It heats the blood just as it cools it down; it excites while it calms; it invites you to approach but commands you to keep your distance.

Prud'hon's drawings continue to be compelling, not only because of their sheer beauty and impeccable draftsmanship but also because of their inherent contradictions. In the same figure, the torso may be borrowed from a fifth-century Venus while the face has the look of an 18th-century beauty. The wonderful thing about these drawings is that these tensions are never fully resolved. They pull us in opposite directions and leave us not quite understanding what to feel. That the same object can be both particular and ideal, flesh and marble, life and art, is what is so endlessly absorbing. ❖

More on Prud'hon

For more on Prud'hon's drawings, see *Language of the Body: Drawings by Pierre-Paul Prud'hon*, by John Elderfield and Robert Gordon (Harry N. Abrams, New York, New York).

OPPOSITE PAGE

The Source

black and white chalk on blue paper, 21 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{8}$. Collection Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

BELOW

Standing Female Nude, Leaning

black chalk heightened with white on blue paper, 22 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$. Private collection.

