

Max Pietschmann, *Study of a Black Model*

1865 - Dresden -1952

oil on canvas

41 ½ x 31 ½ inches (105.5 by 80 cm)

signed and dated lower left, incised into the wet paint: '*M. Pietschmann Novbr.85*'

provenance: Acquired from the estate of the artist in 2019

note: It is not often that a remarkable new painting by a little-known artist is rediscovered and provides a profound rethinking of an entire school of art. Max Pietschmann (fig. 1), the son of a royal official in Dresden, studied at that city's Art Academy from 1883 to 1889. His teachers, the German Leon Pohle and the Belgian-born Ferdinand Pauwels, were imbued with the traditional, realistic, academic style prevalent at the time. Following this period at the Academy, the young artist worked in Italy and also at the Académie Julian in Paris. He then returned home to Dresden and soon his paintings were widely exhibited, including at both the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris.¹ Already, in 1894, Pietschmann was singled out in a London art journal as one of Dresden's painters "of high reputation."² Although he did some mythological subjects influenced to a degree by Klinger and Böcklin, landscapes, and portraits (figs. 2a-h), as well as poster designs (figs. 3a-b) and prints, Pietschmann became best known for his nudes usually in outdoor settings (figs. 4a-d). Under the pseudonym "Francois Laubnitz," he also produced religious and sentimental themes that, transferred into chromolithographs (fig. 5), attained great popularity in the early 20th century. As he was already aged 49 in 1914, he was not mobilized for World War I. After the War, Pietschmann associated for a time with the Dresdener Sezession Gruppe. He had first exhibited at the distinguished Dresden gallery of Ernst Arnold beginning in 1896, and a portrait by him was shown there as late as 1933,³ but after that the artist slowly retreated from public view. He remained in Dresden through World War II and into the Communist era of East Germany, dying at age 87 in 1952. Sadly, Pietschmann never had a one-man show during his lifetime and only recently, as his family revealed the contents of his long-hidden estate, including the present oil study, has his work been once again exhibited and appreciated.⁴

Pietschmann's professor at the Dresden Academy, Leon Pohle, who had been teaching there since 1877, was a well-known portrait painter. He also did lively naturalistic studies (figs. 6a-b), and in at least one case, depicted an exotic individual (fig. 6c), Pohle sought to replace the outdated Romantic-Nazarene aesthetic that had previously flourished at the school with a new, more free approach. This included study from the live model in a vivid, direct manner. As the specific date on this painting makes evident, it was in late 1885 that the students in Professor Pohle's life-painting class were presented with an unexpected model – a young black man girded with a red and gold sash. The resulting oil studies by three of the students survive and allow us to judge the impact made by this individual's dramatic presence. In addition to this painting by Pietschmann, the others are by Robert Sterl (fig. 7a)⁵ and Osmar Schindler (fig. 7b), who both went on to have

distinguished careers. Each young artist (figs. 7c-e) produced a striking study that represents the exact same arms-crossed pose and contrasts the whites of the model's eyes to his muscular, dark body, as well as capturing the gleam of the glistening cloth. Pietschmann's portrait seems to be the most powerful and best executed of the three studies. In his other student works of the 1880s, he was already employing a rather rough textured style that carried on for a time into the 20th century (figs. 8a-c), and he also was to prove himself a master in the depiction of flesh in his various female nudes of this same period (figs. 9a-c). But it is safe to say that he, as well as his fellow students, seldom rose again to such spectacular heights, capturing here the distinctive presence of a very alive, relaxed but intense individual so unlikely and unexpected in the staid Dresden Academy of the time.

Studies of black models were known in Northern European art since the time of Rubens and van Dyck (figs. 10a-c) in the 17th century, and the appearance of a black man in the art of Dresden and the Germanic lands was not a completely unique occurrence and had some antecedents. For example, among the treasures in Dresden's famed Green Vault were many brilliant sculptures of the early 18th century representing black or Moorish figures (figs. 11a-d).⁶ Later in the same century, the German court painter Antoine Pesne, who also worked for a time in Dresden, often incorporated black servants into his paintings for German nobles (figs. 12a-b).⁷ Then in the early 19th century the Austrian court painter Albert Schindler created in 1836 a sensitive portrait of a fellow court employee who was a black man (fig. 13).⁸ Of course, any artist who travelled to Paris in this period would also have seen one of the most dramatic and romantic representations of a black man in the famous painting *The Raft of the Medusa* (fig. 14a) by Théodore Géricault, who in preparation for his grand canvas, which created a controversy by making the black figure the pinnacle of the composition, also painted and drew independent studies of black models (figs. 14b-d).⁹ But having a black model, probably from Africa, in the Academy's studio still seems a revolutionary step on the part of Professor Pohle. Just the year before this 1885 posing session, Germany had officially established its colonies on the west coast of Africa, and there was a sizable influx of Africans into Germany. That very year the German painter Lovis Corinth painted a portrait of a black seaman, which he entitled *Un Othello* (fig. 15).¹⁰ A few years later in 1894, the Berlin animal painter Paul Friederich Meyerheim produced scenes of a menagerie that show Africans employed in the guise of savages (figs 16a-b).¹¹ But the model appearing in Pietschmann's and the other students' paintings is not shown as a caricature, a servant, or in a demeaning role, but rather as a heroic, almost defiant individual. Indeed, his presence apparently established something of a tradition as the successor to the present, as yet, unidentified model was another black man named Tommy Todtmann, who, born in 1877, began work as a model at the Dresden Academy in 1921. He was subsequently terminated during the Nazi period, despite the objections of another Pohle student and Academy Professor, Richard Müller. The exact identity of the earlier model here depicted in 1885 is currently being researched in the Art Academy archives.¹² During the early 20th century also in Dresden, black models were employed by the Expressionist artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (fig. 17).¹³

As the distinguished cultural historian Hugh Honour has written, "*Études* or studies of blacks were drawn and painted throughout the 19th century. They differ from portraits in that virtually nothing is, or was supposed necessary to be, known of the men and women depicted...Studies were painted of people – not only blacks – of social categories or ethnic types who rarely sat for formal portraits. Conceived primarily as a means of acquiring skill or knowledge, they were executed as a part of artistic education."¹⁴ However, the exercise in Professor Pohle's classroom gave birth to an exceptional work that rises far above a mere "academic study", and joins the company of such celebrated compositions as John Philip Simpson's *The Captive Slave*, (The Art Institute of Chicago), and Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Bashi-Bazouk* (Metropolitan museum of Art), to become one of the most powerful depictions of a black man to be found in 19th Century European Art.

¹ Shown in Chicago (no. 506) was the painting *Polyphemus Fishing*; and shown in Paris (no. 121 of the German section) was *Soir d'été*.

² "The Fine Arts at Dresden," *The Artist*, September 1894, p. 343.

³ See Ruth Negendank, *Die Galerie Ernst Arnold (1893-1951)*, diss. Katholischen Universität, Nürnberg, 1996, pp. 370, 442, and 546.

⁴ For the most thorough account of the artist's life and career see Heike Biedermann, "Max Pietschmann (1865-1952)," *Dresdener Kunstblätter*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2000, pp.2-8. The recent exhibitions were held at the Weinbergkirche in Dresden-Pillnitz in 1996 and the Galerie Neue Meister, Dresden in 1999-2000.

⁵ See Kristina Popova, et. al, *Robert Sterl: Werkverzeichnis der Gemälde und Ölskizzen*, Dresden, 2011, no. 32; and *Der Dresdener Impressionist Robert Sterl*, Museum Peter August Bockstiegel, 2019, p. 49.

⁶ See David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., eds., *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Cambridge, MA, 2011, vol. 3, part 3, pp. 67-73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 127-8, ill. 117; and *Antoine Pesne*, Berlin, 1958, p. 207, no. 508a, ill. 68..

⁸ See Gloria Groom, "Portrait of a Gardener and Horn Player in the Household of the Emperor Francis I," *Museum Studies, Art Institute of Chicago*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2006, pp. 58-59 and 95.

⁹ See Albert Alhadeff, *The Raft of the Medusa: Géricault, Art, and Race*, Munich and New York, 2002, esp. pp. 168-69, 171, and 180-81.

¹⁰ Bindman and Gates, vol. IV, part 2, 2012, p. 213, ill. 157.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-149, ill. 105-106.

¹² See Appendix A.

¹³ See Sarah M. Bryan, *African Imagery and Blacks in German Expressionist Art*, PhD dissertation, Kent State University, 2012, p. 53, fig. 34; and *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 2003, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ Hugh Honour, "Introduction," in Bindman and Gates, vol. IV, part 1, 2012, p. 278.