



John Flaxman, *Study of a standing female figure*, 1790–95.  
Graphite, 12.8 × 9.2 cm. (Private collection).

## WERNER BUSCH

### *John Flaxman's draughtsmanship*

WHEN DAVID COMES to Berlin, he normally makes visits to dealers between Vienna, Munich and Berlin and has new drawings in his pocket to show me, then asking the question I fear: 'What do you think about it? Is it German? Around 1830?' And then I stand in the rain. So I think it is better to pay tribute to him with the help of a drawing he himself has already identified. David gave me this drawing several years ago (Fig. 1). The pencil sketch is minuscule, and has evidently been cut from a larger sheet. Small though it is, it is possible to recognize the graphic principles adopted by Flaxman. There are two studies: on the left a standing nude female figure, in a markedly twisting posture. The head is turned to the left in profile; the upper torso faces forwards; the lower, from the hips down, swivels to the right. The basis for the pose must be the action of fixing the clasp of a robe, at the right shoulder, both hands being engaged in this task, the head turning towards the action. On the right-hand side a hooded, robed figure appears to be suggested from behind. It is so lightly indicated, that we can leave it out of consideration. The pencil used is relatively soft, requiring little pressure to leave any trace on the paper. It is easy to tell that the artist is right-handed. The right-hand contours of the figure – the viewer's left – are easily drawn, since the right hand describes left-turning curves more freely and smoothly. For curves turning right the hand has to be pulled backwards. A slight uncertainty is noticeable in the delineation of the head, the left shoulder, and the angle of the arm turned to the left. Even when the lines are essayed two or three times, in order to find the contour, they nevertheless aim for the one final outline, and are not concerned with internal sketching. Moreover, they are not directed towards the reproduction of anatomical details. The intended result is an ornamental aesthetic, and the line is concerned with surface, not with space. The volume of the body is not shown, but at most evoked in rough outline. Bodily forms are not sensually sought out; the shapes create no atmosphere, since the fluidly determined contours of the shape dominate. The line is stylised and abstracted.

All of this manifests a grasp of the Neoclassical graphic manner, as it developed in a pronounced form around 1790 in Rome, burgeoning within a short time into a pan-European idiom. It originated with the reproduction of ancient vase painting, which was based on contours and completely



lacked volume. While the colour illustrations in the publication of William Hamilton's first collection of vases moderated the tendency towards abstraction, the second, with engravings by Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, appeared entirely in black and white, except for a few luxury copies. (The lack of colour was attributed, *inter alia*, to troubles arising from the French revolution.)

Even though the second work on vases was not published until the end of 1793, or beginning of 1794, Tischbein's outline sketches were already in circulation from 1790. At the end of 1792 Tischbein informed Anna-Amalia, Duchess of Weimar, that he could now deliver 100 single sheets, in frames. Flaxman adopted the Tischbein style for his illustrations of Dante and Homer, which appeared in reproduction by Piroli in 1793. Our sketch may have originated in connection with these illustrations, in which frontal and *en face* presentations dominate; they block spatial expansion and any reference to realistic action. Contorted poses, as in our sketch, also tend towards surface ornamentation. Form finally dominates over content. It reflects and evokes an historical appreciation of the graphic manner, whether antique or pre-Raphaelite, and thereby reveals itself to be a form of historicism. But David knows all this ...

(My thanks to Charles H. Wallace for translating my text)