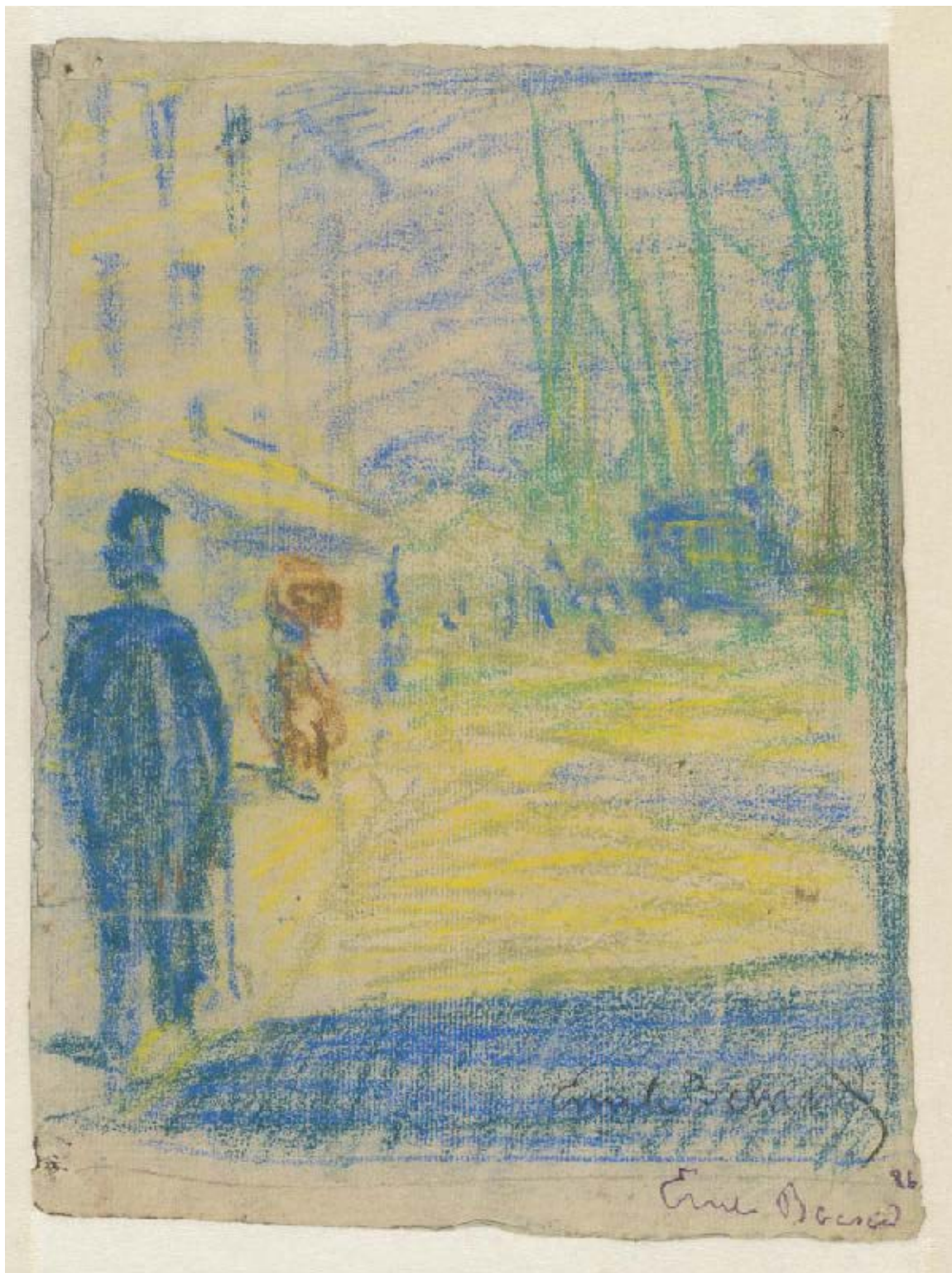




Fragment of a Venus  
Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941), 1886



Figures in a Street  
Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941), 1886



Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Fragment of a Venus (recto), Figures in a Street (verso)

Emile Bernard

Emile Bernard (1868–1941) drew on both sides of this sheet. On one side he captured a colourful street scene, while on the other side is one-quarter of a study of a sculpture. The original sheet was torn in four, and the whereabouts of the other three parts of the drawing are unknown. Bernard made this black chalk study of a sculpture during his time at the *atelier libre* of Fernand Cormon (1845–1924) in Paris. This studio provided a space for aspiring artists to learn how to draw and paint from plaster replicas of classical sculptures, as well as from life models. Bernard was admitted in October 1884, at the age of sixteen, and trained there until February 1886. <sup>01</sup>

The leg depicted in Bernard's drawing belongs to a plaster cast of a torso of Venus that was among the practice objects found in Cormon's atelier. <sup>02</sup> It can be identified by the battered raised leg, which was reinforced with a large clump of unworked material (fig. 1) . <sup>03</sup> Bernard drew the standing leg of the plaster model, with the reinforcement visible to the right of the leg.

When Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) joined Cormon's atelier in March 1886, he also drew this plaster model. <sup>04</sup> He created several drawings showcasing the sculpture from different angles. <sup>05</sup> In some of his sketches he omitted the reinforcement of the supporting leg, but he included it more often than not. This can be observed in *Venus* (fig. 2) and *Venus in a Top Hat* (fig. 3) . The plaster cast can also be detected behind the male torso in the right background in one of the photographs taken of the atelier and Cormon's pupils (fig. 4) . Van Gogh's *Fragment of a Venus* (fig. 5) is the drawing that most closely resembles Bernard's study.



Fernand Cormon's *atelier libre*, with a plaster cast in the right background, c. 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Tralbaut Archive)

Unlike Van Gogh, only a few of Bernard's sketches from his time in the atelier have survived. <sup>06</sup> In the album titled *L'enfance d'un peintre*, in which Bernard compiled many of his sketches from 1882–89 later in life, only a single academic drawing can be found. <sup>07</sup> It is possible that Bernard's dissatisfaction with Cormon's teaching methods, which he disclosed in later articles, may explain the scarcity of surviving sketches. <sup>08</sup> For Bernard, the true value of the *atelier libre* lay in the friendships he forged there, particularly with Louis Anquetin (1861–1932) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901). Known for their free-spirited nature, these artists introduced Bernard to the world of independent modern art by taking him to impressionist exhibitions and lively entertainment venues in Montmartre. <sup>09</sup>

## A compelling contrast

Bernard's exposure to this modern approach to art, which he could not learn at the atelier, was truly transformative. Following the example of Anquetin and Toulouse-Lautrec, he began to experiment with impressionist brushwork and complementary colour contrasts.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, he developed a freer drawing style in his chalk and charcoal studies. As a result, a distinct contrast emerged between the works he produced in the atelier and those he created outside it. In fact, the front and back of this particular sheet serve as a compelling illustration of Bernard's departure from the academic tradition and his pursuit of modern art. He tore the study sheet, on which he had drawn the volumes of a torso of Venus following academic rules, into four smaller parts, as mentioned above. On the back of one of these quarters, he swiftly made a drawing characterized by vibrant colour, spontaneity and a sense of modernism.<sup>11</sup>

Bernard established the composition with just a few lines of light brown chalk and then deftly coloured the street, the building on the left and the sky in yellow and blue tones. No black is used in this drawing, nor is there any rigorous rendering of volume. Instead, it presents a colourful snapshot evocation of daily life in Paris. In the left foreground, a man wearing a top hat is depicted as a dark blue silhouette, creating the impression that he is lit from behind. Bernard frequently experimented with rendering figures as silhouettes, as is evident in several drawings found in *L'enfance d'un peintre* (fig. 6) , as well as the painting *Fisherman and Boat*. It is possible that he drew inspiration for this from the shadow theatre shows at Le Chat Noir, the popular cabaret he doubtless visited with Toulouse-Lautrec and Anquetin.<sup>12</sup> Further back, beyond the man, Bernard depicted a woman wearing a hat, and the green strokes in the background suggest a row of trees. Directly in front of them, Bernard used thick blue chalk to represent a structure, possibly a carriage. He employed yellow to suggest windows in this blue area, although they are not clearly visible.



Emile Bernard, Sketch of two figures in a landscape, from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre* (p. 30), c. 1885, charcoal on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen – Der Kunstverein in Bremen

## Strict boundaries

A drawing so spontaneously conceived and emphatically focused on colour could not have been shown at Cormon's atelier. Fellow trainee François Gauzi (1862–1933) wrote the following about this distinction: 'At Cormon's atelier, the influence of the impressionists remained discreet; the pupils who were subject to it were content to draw, saving their research for the studies carried out at home, unbeknown to the boss.'<sup>13</sup> Finally, after a year and a half at the *atelier libre*, Bernard decided to break this unwritten rule by applying red and green paint to a brown sail that served as a background for the models. Archibald Standish Hartrick (1864–1950), a fellow student there, described in his memoirs what transpired when Cormon entered the atelier: 'Cormon came around one morning, as usual, to find Bernard painting the old brown sail that served for a background to the model, in alternate streaks of vermilion and vert veronese. On asking the youth what he was doing, Bernard replied, "that he saw it that way." Thereupon Cormon announced that if that was the case he had better go and see things that way somewhere else.'<sup>14</sup>

After being dismissed by Cormon, Bernard persisted in his endeavour to draw and paint the world as he saw it. Despite being a very cursory sketch, *Street Scene* serves as evidence of Bernard's evolution into a modern artist. He signed the drawing and gave it to his friend Vincent van Gogh, likely intending to share his later artistic experiments with him.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, the fragment of the study of the torso of Venus on the back served as a memento of the atelier where they met, shortly thereafter embarking on their collaborative journey to innovate and renew art together.<sup>16</sup>

Joost van der Hoeven  
November 2023

## Citation

Joost van der Hoeven, 'Emile Bernard, *Fragment of a Venus (recto), Figures in a Street (verso)*, c. 1886', catalogue entry in *Contemporaries of Van Gogh 1: Works Collected by Theo and Vincent*, Joost van der Hoeven (ed.), Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2023.

[↗ doi.org/10.58802/FFGF3882](https://doi.org/10.58802/FFGF3882)

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**Object details**

Fragment of a Venus

**Artist**

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Date**

1886

**Medium**

black chalk on wove paper

**Dimensions**

27.2 cm x 20.2 cm

**Inscriptions**

88 E Bernard EAH Straatscène MTBII

B-3362

**Inventory Number**

d0610V1962r

**Credits**

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



**Object details**

Figures in a Street

**Artist**

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Date**

1886

**Medium**

coloured chalk on wove paper

**Dimensions**

27.2 cm x 20.2 cm

**Inscriptions**

Emile Bernard

Emile Bernard 86

**Inventory Number**

d0610V1962v

**Credits**

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



### Provenance

#### Fragment of a Venus

Probably given by the artist, Paris to Vincent van Gogh, Paris, between late 1886 and 19 February 1888; left by Vincent van Gogh at the apartment of his brother Theo van Gogh, Paris; after his death on 25 January 1891, inherited by his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and their son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Paris; administered until her death on 2 September 1925 by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum/Amsterdam/Laren; transferred by Vincent Willem van Gogh, Laren, to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 10 July 1962; agreement concluded between the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.



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### Exhibitions

Fragment of a Venus

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 31 March-11 May 1953



### Exhibitions

Figures in a Street

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 31 March-11 May 1953



#### Literature

##### Fragment of a Venus

- Evert van Uitert and M. Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 2.15, p. 368
- Elizabeth Nicoline Heenk, *Vincent van Gogh's Drawings: An Analysis of their Production and Uses* (diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 1995), pp. 158-59, 363-64
- Marije Vellekoop and Sjraar van Heugten (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawings*, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Surrey 1996-2007, vol. 3: *Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888* (2001), no. 215m, p. 170

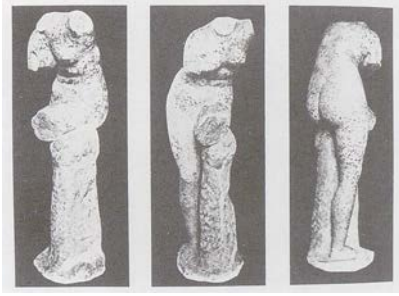


#### Literature

##### Figures in a Street

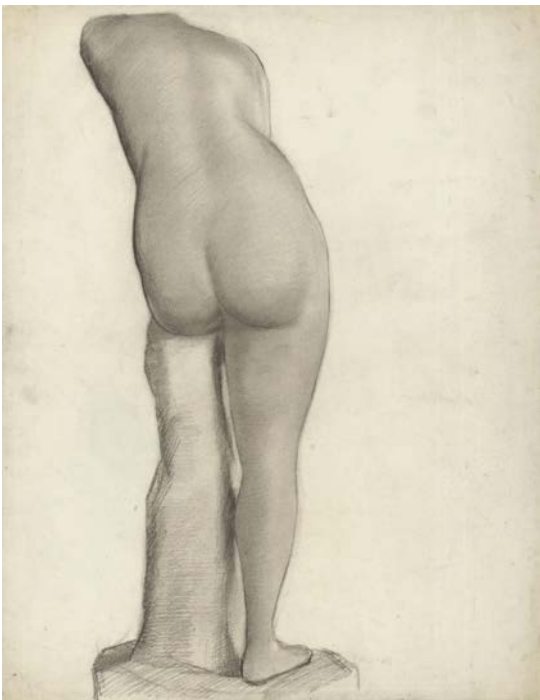
- Evert van Uitert and M. Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 2.15, p. 368
- Elizabeth Nicoline Heenk, *Vincent van Gogh's Drawings: An Analysis of their Production and Uses* (diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 1995), pp. 158-59, 363-64
- Marije Vellekoop and Sjraar van Heugten (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawings*, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Surrey 1996-2007, vol. 3: *Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888* (2001), no. 215m, p. 170

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

*Venus*, 1st-2nd century BCE, whereabouts unknown (previously Arenberg collection, Brussels), photo from Brinkerhoff 1978



**Fig. 2**

Vincent van Gogh, *Venus*, 1886, charcoal (?) and black chalk on wove paper, 50.9 × 39.7 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



**Fig. 3**

Vincent van Gogh, *Venus in a Top Hat*, 1886, black chalk with a brown tinge on laid paper, 38.3 × 19.8 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



**Fig. 4**

Fernand Cormon's *atelier libre*, with a plaster cast in the right background, c. 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Tralbaut Archive)





**Fig. 5**

Vincent van Gogh, *Fragment of a Venus*, 1886, black and blue chalk, black chalk with a brown tinge, and wash on laid paper, 26.6 × 22.1 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



**Fig. 6**

Emile Bernard, *Sketch of two figures in a landscape*, from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre* (p. 30), c. 1885, charcoal on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen

## Footnotes

- 01 October 1884 is derived from a letter from Madeleine Bernard to Emile Bernard, 25 September 1884: 'You will join Cormon's atelier' ('Tu vas entrer chez Cormon'). Fonds van Bogaert, Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels, quoted in Neil McWilliam (ed.), *Émile Bernard: les lettres d'un artiste (1884-1941)*, Dijon 2012, no. 1, n. 6. February 1886 is derived from *L'aventure de ma vie*, in which Bernard writes that after being sent away from the atelier he spent two months at home before beginning his *voyage à pied*, his long walk through Brittany, on 6 April.
- 02 There was a total of three Venus sculptures. See Marije Vellekoop and Sjraar van Heugten (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawings*, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Surrey 1996-2007, vol. 3: *Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888* (2001), p. 140.
- 03 This sculpture was in the Arenberg collection in Brussels in the nineteenth century; its whereabouts have been unknown since then. See Vellekoop and Van Heugten 2001, p. 140, n. 10.
- 04 Van Gogh trained in Cormon's atelier from March to June, see Louis van Tilborgh et al., *Vincent van Gogh Paintings*, 2 vols., Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999-2011, vol. 2: *Antwerp and Paris, 1885-1888* (2011), p. 218.
- 05 Many of these drawings are in the Van Gogh Museum (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), including *Venus* (d0159V1962v), *Idol and Sketches of Venus* (d0160V1962) and *Venus* (d0399V1962).
- 06 Moreover, this sheet of laid paper is a rarity in Bernard's oeuvre, as he almost always drew on wove paper. With thanks to Dorothee Hansen, Curator of 14th-19th Century Paintings and Deputy Director, Kunsthalle Bremen.
- 07 This album is kept in the Kunsthalle Bremen.
- 08 For example, see Emile Bernard, 'Les ateliers', *Mercure de France* (February 1895), in Anne Rivière (ed.), *Émile Bernard, propos sur l'art*, 2 vols., Paris 1994, vol. 2, pp. 41-47.
- 09 See Emile Bernard, 'Des relations d'Émile Bernard avec Toulouse-Lautrec', *Art-Documents* (March 1952), in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, pp. 315-18.
- 10 Emile Bernard, 'Louis Anquetin, artiste peintre', *Mercure de France* (1 November 1932), in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 261: 'My new friends made a point of taking me to rue Lafitte, and I became acquainted with the works of the impressionists. [...] That was how it began for me; and that was how I dashed Cormon's dreams, as he had believed I was the pupil he wanted, because of my youth..' ('Mes nouveaux amis n'avaient pas manqué de me conduire rue Lafitte, et j'avais fait connaissance avec les œuvres impressionnistes. [...] Tels furent mes débuts; et c'est ainsi que je renversai les rêves de Cormon, qui avait cru trouver en moi, à cause de ma jeunesse, l'élève desiré:')
- 11 The dimensions of the sheet before it was quartered roughly correspond to a type of laid paper that Van Gogh used exclusively at Cormon's. This is an unwatermarked paper measuring approximately 61 × 45 cm. See Vellekoop and Van Heugten 2001, p. 170.
- 12 Phillip Dennis Cate, 'Autour du Chat Noir', in Phillip Dennis Cate et al., *Autour du Chat Noir: arts et plaisirs à Montmartre, 1880-1910*, Paris 2012, p. 29.

- 13 Francois Gauzi, *Lautrec et son temps*, Paris 1954, p. 22, quoted in Frédéric Destremau, 'L'atelier Cormon (1882-1887)', *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire de l'art français* (1996), p. 179: 'À l'atelier Cormon l'influence des impressionnistes restait discrète; les élèves qui la subissaient se contentaient de dessiner, réservant leurs recherches pour des études exécutés chez eux, à l'insu du patron.'
- 14 A. S. Hartrick, *A Painter's Pilgrimage through Fifty Years*, Cambridge 1939, p. 42.
- 15 It is not known who added the second signature in purple ink.
- 16 Van Gogh may have received the drawing en passant during the time the two saw each other regularly in Paris, between the autumn of 1886 and February 1888; perhaps Van Gogh came into possession of the drawing when, just before his departure for Arles, he exchanged a large quantity of Japanese prints with Bernard for some of his works. See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 15 July 1888 [↗ \[640\]](#): 'Then a month later, before I left, I no longer had the money and I'd also given a good many Japanese prints to Bernard, when I made the exchanges with him' ('Or un mois plus tard avant mon départ je n'avais plus l'argent et j'avais encore donné pas mal de japonaiseries à Bernard alors que j'ai fait les échanges avec lui').