

JOACHIM FERDINAND RICHARDT

Brede, 1819 - 1895, Oakland, California

The Life Class at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Charlottenburg Palace



Signed and dated, 1841

Pencil, pen and ink wash on paper, 30.5 x 36 cm

Provenance:

Art historian Gustav Lorentzen private collection;

Sale, Winkel & Magnussen 152, Copenhagen, 1963, n. 1334;

Denmark, private collection

Joachim Ferdinand Richardt |

The Life Class

This work on paper by the Danish artist Joachim Ferdinand Richardt (1819 – 1895), known as Ferdinand, provides a fascinating snapshot into the life of the young students at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen during the early 1840s. Originally thought to be dated to 1846, it is more likely that the work was carried out in 1841, while Richardt was still a student at the Academy. Through portraits and self-portraits produced by these young artists contemporaneous to *The Life class* it has been possible to put forward compelling arguments for a number of the main protagonists.

Between 1840 and 1841 there were thirty-six artists recorded as attending the life class at the Royal Academy in Charlottenburg Palace, from this list there are some recognisable profiles that stand out within our drawing. The first to note is Ludvig August Smith (1820 – 1906), whose presumed self-portrait as a young man, now resides in the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm (Fig.1). Here the young artist depicts himself with a certain self-confidence, cutting a highly respectable figure with his long flowing hair, high collar and black cravat. This mirrors the most detailed and highly finished figure within Richardt's drawing (front row, second from the right), again depicted with his idiosyncratic long hair and piercing eyes.

To his right sits a moustached student, diligently focussed on the model outside of the scene. Dr Jesper Svenningsen, has kindly proposed the identity of this figure as the painter Andreas Herman Hunæus, whose self-portrait also now resides in Copenhagen, dated to between 1843-1847 (Fig.2). Using this work as a reference one can see the artist is clearly recognisable in our drawing, with his distinctive handlebar moustache and wavy hair.

Directly above him, on the second row sits a young student working with a board, for Dr Svenningsen this figure resembles Carlo Dalgas (1821 – 1851), who would go on to become a famous animal painter within Denmark. Here Richardt emphasises the figure's high forehead, identifiable chinstrap and soft pensive eyes, which compares closely to P.C. Skovgaard's *Portrait of Carlo Dalgas*, from 1845, now in the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen (Fig.3). Interestingly, it is the most caricatured depiction by Richardt within the work, and for this reason, given the seemingly comedic portrayal, it brings forth the possibility that Richardt is in fact lampooning himself. Ferdinand sported a chinstrap during this early period and throughout his life, as well as a similar hair style, as can be seen in his portrait of c.1850 by his older brother, Johan Carl Richardt (1816 – 1887) (Fig.4). Here one can see the closeness between Ferdinand's pensive mouselike figure in our work and Johan Carl's representation of his brother, with the high forehead, slicked side parting and facial hair.



Fig.1 L.A. Smith, *Self Portrait (?)*, dated 1841, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm



Fig.2 Andreas Herman Hunæus, *Self portrait*, 1843-47, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen



Fig.3 P.C. Skovgaard, *Portrait of Carlo Dalgas*, signed and dated 1845, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen



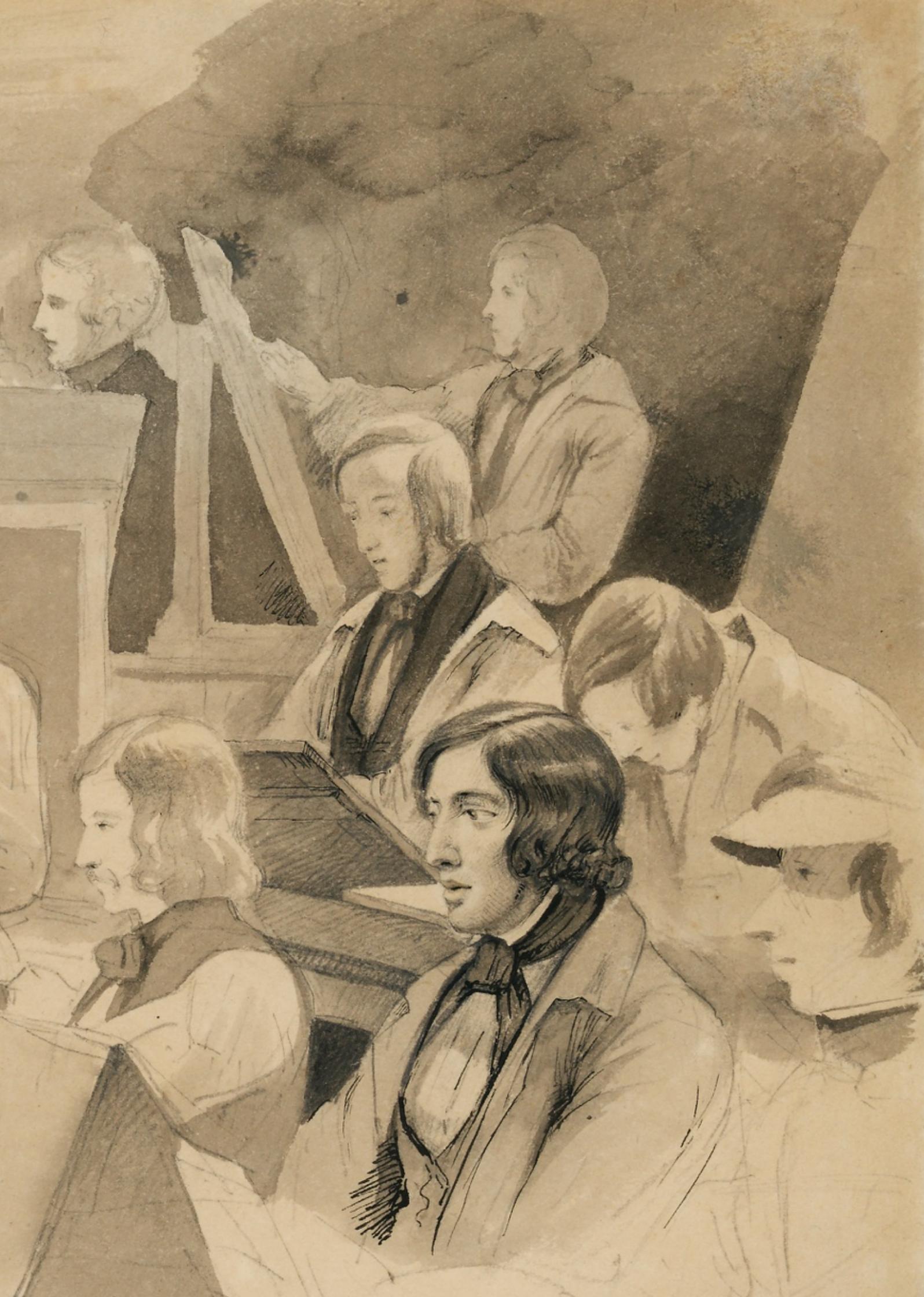
Fig.4 Johan Carl Richardt, *Portrait of the artist's brother, the painter Ferdinand Richardt*, c.1850, private collection



Fig.5 Johan Lundbye, *The Painter Thorald Læssøe*, c.1837, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Above these figures, framed against the dark shadows of the room, are two artists working diligently beside their easels. One, on the left, is only visible from the neck up with his face in profile. This naturally makes identification more problematic, however given the distinctive twist of the hair in front of the figure's left ear, there is a compelling argument that this depicts Thorald Læssøe (1816 – 1878). This is reinforced further when we consider it alongside Johan Thomas Lundbye's *Portrait of Maleren Thorald Læssøe* (Fig.5), signed and dated 1837, now in Copenhagen. Here this stylised twist of hair above the left ear is very evident and corresponds precisely with the figure Richarddt depicts four years later. Thorald Læssøe is not recorded on the list of 1840/41 life class attendants, however we know that he was still studying at the Academy at this point, having initially enrolled in 1834, and was known for his irregular and varied attendance.

Keeping this proposed attribution in mind opens up possibilities to identify the figure beside him, who is depicted in the act of drawing, with an outstretched arm. Læssøe was a close friend of the prodigy Johan Thomas Lundbye (1818 – 1848), an extremely talented young artist who sadly died at the age of 29 in the First Schleswig War. Like Læssøe, Johan Lundbye came to the Academy at a young age, only 14, and finished his studies there in 1842. Again, given that Richarddt depicts the figure in profile makes a definitive identification difficult, however if we compare three self-portraits by Lundbye, from 1839 and 1841 (see Figs.6-8), produced either side of Richarddt's work, there is an unavoidable likeness within the physiognomy, with the prominent nose, side burns, strong eye brows and dishevelled long hair over his ears. Like Læssøe, Lundbye is not recorded in the list of attendees to the life class, however it does not seem too far-fetched that these two close friends would have been depicted together by Richarddt at the back of the class.



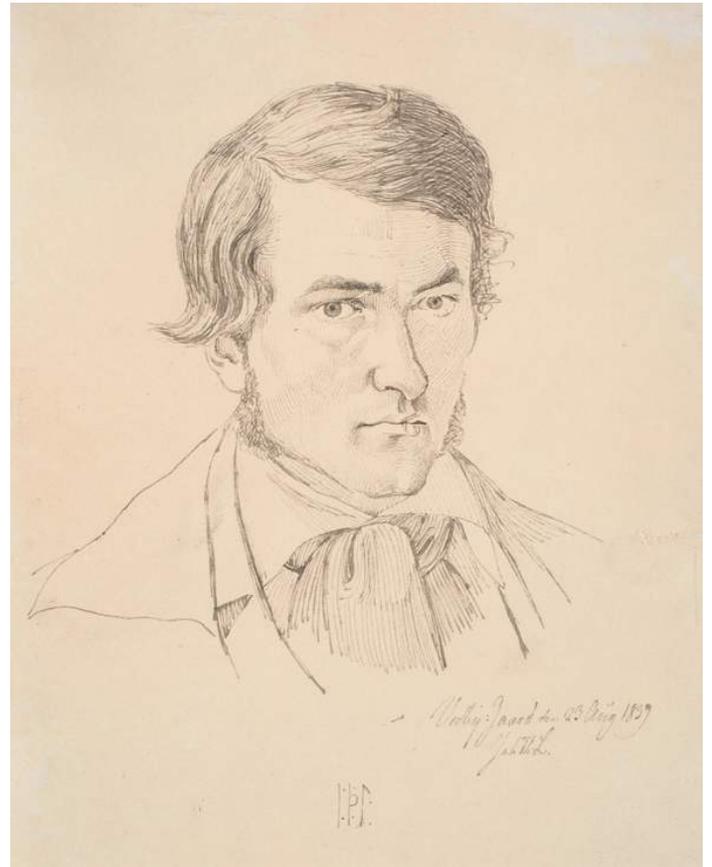


Fig.6 Johan Thomas Lundbye, *Self portrait*, 1839, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

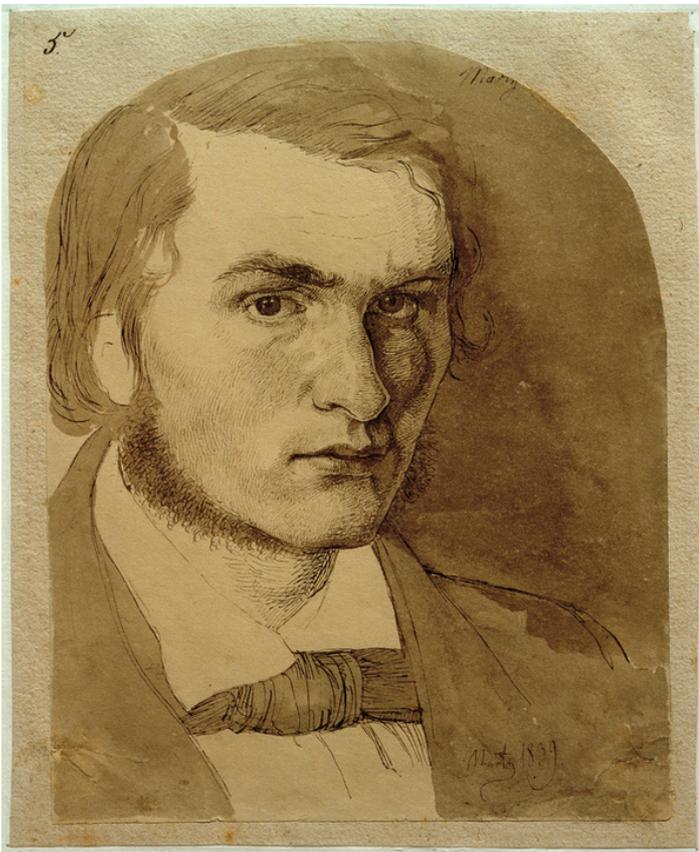


Fig.7 Johan Thomas Lundbye, *Self portrait*, signed and dated 1839, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen

Fig.8 Johan Thomas Lundbye, *Self-portrait*, 1841, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen





Fig.9 P.C. Skovgaard, *Self-portrait*, c.1840, Skovgaard Museum

One figure who was prominent in this circle of young talented artists, despite his quiet demeanour, was P.C. Skovgaard (1817 – 1875). His identification within Richardt's scene is less obvious than perhaps the other artists we have discussed. However if we take his *Self-portrait* from c.1840 as a reference (Fig.9), which now resides in the Skovgaard Museum, we see a young man with long straight hair, smartly dressed with his high collar and cravat. This seems to correspond closely with the student in the centre of Richardt's scene, with his board on his knees working away underneath the gas lamp.

Some of these attributions are more definitive than others, and certainly need further investigation, however there is no denying the importance of this work as a record of a pivotal point in these young artists' careers, many of whom would go on to become key figures in Danish art history, and today are represented in museums around the world. The high level of finish to this drawing, with the ink washes contrasting the shadow and highlights of the lamp light, as well as the details of the dark pen, show that this was more than a sketch for Richardt and hopefully offers the possibility to aid further research into this fascinating artist. Richardt would go on to travel to the United States in 1855, sponsored by the Danish crown. It was here he encountered the American landscape, painting majestic works of Niagara Falls, which he sold both in Denmark and America. He would eventually emigrate to San Francisco, where a number of his works survive in the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco.