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Agasse, Jacques-Laurent, *Le lieu de récréation*, 1830, huile sur toile, 53,5 x 44,5 cm (Objektmass), Kunst Museum Winterthur / Reinhart am Stadtgarten, 1973

#### Documentation level



#### Name

Agasse, Jacques-Laurent

#### Dates of birth and death

\* 24.3.1767 Genève, † 27.12.1849 Londres

#### Municipality of origin (CH)

Genève

#### Nationality

CH

#### Brief biography

Peintre de genre, animalier et portraitiste; dessinateur. Actif à Genève à ses débuts, puis en Angleterre

#### Fields of activity

gravure, peinture à l'huile, peinture, dessin

#### Lexicon article

The son of Philippe Agasse and Catherine Audeoud, Jacques-Laurent Agasse belonged to a well-to-do family of merchants of Huguenot origin, who were already established in Geneva in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, and later in Aberdeen, Scotland. His grandfather, Etienne Agasse, was made a citizen of Geneva in 1742. Agasse's childhood was spent between Geneva and the family's property in Crevin at the foot of Mount Salève. He displayed an interest in drawing at a very early age, and the discovery of an illustrated volume of Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, whose engravings inspired him to create woodcuts in the manner of [Jean Huber](#), was to establish his passion for this technique and prompt him to depict the forms and behaviour of animals. From 1782 to 1786, he attended Calabri's drawing school, where he trained

under Jacques Cassin and [Georges Vanière](#). Agasse also became friends with [Firmin Massot](#) and [Wolfgang-Adam Töpffer](#) during this period.

In 1786, Agasse left for Paris to continue his training in the studio of Jacques-Louis David. In parallel, he attended courses in anatomy, dissection and osteology at the Muséum d'histoire naturelle (Museum of Natural History). The French Revolution put an end to his stay in Paris. Back in Genève, he made the acquaintance of a wealthy young Englishman, George Pitt, the future Lord Rivers, a passionate breeder of horses and greyhounds at his country seats of Stratfield Saye in Hampshire and Hare Park, near Newmarket. Pitt hired Agasse to accompany him to England, but the artist was forced to return to Geneva, as his family had been ruined by the Revolution. From now on, Agasse had to make a living from his art. From 1794 to 1796, political events in Geneva obliged him to leave the city and take refuge in Lausanne. In 1795, he completed *La forge de Lausanne* (The Lausanne Forge), exhibited in Geneva in 1798. Back in Geneva, he was assistant to the Drawing Committee of the Société des Arts (Society of Arts) in 1798, and took part in his third *Salon* in September of that year. He undertook a series of landscapes with [Massot](#) and [Töpffer](#), with whom he collaborated on works such as *Le marché aux chevaux à Gaillard* (The Horse Market in Gaillard): Töpffer would paint the landscape, Massot the figures and Agasse the animals. He made friends with the engraver Nicolas Schenker, Firmin Massot's brother-in-law, who was to engrave six plates after his works. From 1798 to 1799, Agasse was once more in Paris, where his uncle, Henri-Albert Gosse, attempted to sell some of his paintings.

In October 1800, thanks to the support of Lord Rivers, Agasse decided to settle in London as a painter of rich landowners' horses and dogs. He lived with his friends, the Chalon family, who were of Genevan origin. Their sons, [James](#) and [Edward](#), were also painters and members of the Royal Academy, where, as of 1801, Agasse would regularly exhibit his work until 1845. He also participated in other exhibitions in London: at the British Institution between 1807 and 1811, at the Old Society of Painters in Watercolours in 1816 and 1820, at the Society of British Artists from 1824, and at the Sketching Society in 1831 and 1832.

Having received a commission from E. H. Delne-Radcliffe, the Prince of Wales's steward, to paint his mare, Gaylass, Agasse undertook a series of "portraits" of celebrated horses, including the famous *Cheval arabe gris Wellesley avec son propriétaire et un groom dans une écurie* (The Wellesley Grey Arabian with his Owner and a Groom in a Stable) painted in August 1809, engraved by Charles Turner and published by Agasse himself on 19 August 1810. Agasse's

collaboration with Turner dated from 1802, when the latter produced two engravings – *La préparation au départ* (Preparing for Departure) and *L'arrivée au but* (Arriving at the Finishing Line) – of scenes depicting Oxford students and gentlemen on horseback during the Hunters' Stakes at Port Meadow, Oxford, on 4 August 1802. From 1803, Agasse assiduously visited Polito's menagerie at Exeter Exchange in The Strand. He was attracted by the wild animals, which he painted life-size. In 1821, Agasse's scientific naturalism and interest in "curious" animals ensured that he received a commission from the Royal College of Surgeons for a series of paintings illustrating a theory of cross-breeding proposed by Lord Morton. In 1827–28, thanks to the support of Edward Cross, Polito's son-in-law, with whom he became friends, Agasse was commissioned to paint some animals from the royal menagerie for George IV: *La girafe* (The Giraffe, 1827) and *Les gnous à queue blanche* (The White-Tailed Wildebeests, 1828).

In 1805, Agasse was the guest of Lord Rivers, his most loyal patron, at Stratfield Saye. There he painted some of his most beautiful compositions, including *Le haras de lord Rivers à Stratfield Saye* (Lord Rivers's Stud Farm at Stratfield Saye, 1806–07). He also worked at Hare Park and his patron's other properties at Richmore Lodge, near Shaftesbury in Dorset, and Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire. In 1805, Agasse executed the portraits of Lord Rivers' two greyhounds, *Rolla and Portia*.

From 1810, for more than twenty years, Agasse kept lodgings in the house of George Booth in a district inhabited by many artists, including the animal painter James Ward. The members of Ward's family, especially the children, were to serve as models for numerous genre scenes, such as *La matinée de neige* (The Snowy Morning, 1819), *La charrette fleurie* (The Flower Cart, 1822), *Le contraste* (The Contrast, 1829), and *Le lieu de récréation* (The Place of Recreation, 1830). In 1816, during a sojourn with the English collector Edward Divett, Töpffer visited Agasse, recording in letters to his wife the latter's successes and hardships, asserting that "he [...] has no other fault than not being in harmony with the corruption of the century; he would need to be more flexible and less rigid in order to adapt to the circumstances" (Bystock, 21 June 1816, letter filed at the Public and University Library, Geneva).

In 1818, Agasse painted some astonishingly sensitive views of the Thames, such as *Le débarquement au pont de Westminster* (Disembarking at Westminster Bridge) and *La Tamise vue du pont de Westminster vers Lambeth* (View of the Thames from Westminster Bridge looking towards Lambeth). From the 1820s, he devoted some of his time to studying the portrait, choosing his models from his immediate entourage, and frequently among members of the Huguenot community who had arrived from Switzerland. From 1833, he exhibited his work only very rarely and seems to have withdrawn from artistic life. However, in 1837 he executed a strange work that stands out from his usual repertoire: *La Fontaine personnifiée* (The Fountain Personified), of which he was to produce three other versions – a rare and curious allegorical piece that is comparable with certain works by [Johann Heinrich Füssli](#) or William Blake. In 1842, Agasse exhibited at the Royal Academy after an absence of more than ten years. His last work presented at

this institution, in 1845, was *L'important secret* (The Important Secret, 1833). Agasse died in London, where he was buried in St. John's Wood Chapel. Christie's held a posthumous sale of his works on 10 July 1850.

Agasse's artistic production was considerable: more than 500 works date from his English period alone, recorded in his autograph catalogue as of November 1800, soon after his arrival in London, until his death. To that figure should be added the paintings, studies and drawings produced previously in Geneva and Paris, which, alas, are undocumented.

In his early career, Agasse was essentially a painter of animals, portraying horses, dogs or goats against a neutral background in a small format. At David's studio in Paris, where, however, he was not tempted by history painting, he acquired a solid technique as a draughtsman, with a precise line and a balanced, unified composition. Between 1794 and 1799, after his first sojourn in England, where he discovered the works of George Morland, notably *The Inside of a Stable* exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1791 – and through them the traditions of intimate Dutch portraiture – he executed paintings composed in the manner of minor Dutch masters, especially those of Philips Wouwerman.

As soon as Agasse moved to England in 1800, he discovered a new visual world, and in contact with the art of that country proceeded to renew not only his manner and his palette, but also profoundly to alter his vision and sources of inspiration. His vocation as a painter of animals now expressed itself with greater precision: he captured the right feature, the decisive contour, the ever-changing play of light. The English milieu and the painters of the British Sporting and Animal Painters Society served as inspiration for Agasse's paintings of horses and dogs. From now on, he abandoned the small formats executed before his departure for England, and began to work on a larger scale. His compositions became more extensive, spacious and well-balanced. Observing English painting enabled Agasse to acquire a new fluency; he mastered light and space, lightened his chromatic range and developed a subtle interplay between volumes and planes, which from now on were to lend his compositions a perfect sense of balance.

Agasse combines perfect draughtsmanship with precise anatomical observation and scientific analysis. He is better than any other artist at rendering the behaviour, elegance and character of the animals that serve as his models; his scrupulous powers of observation resulted in veritable "portraits" in a style of his own. The painter of animals Agasse also proved himself to be an excellent genre painter, although his narrative scenes – tinged with literary references and evoking the picturesque and everyday family life of the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in no way reflect the moralising, bland sentimentality of Victorian painting. He adopts a completely objective approach, focusing above all on their pictorial rather than anecdotal or melodramatic aspects.

Agasse undoubtedly owes his depiction of pastoral scenes, animal studies against the backdrop of a landscape, and the layout of numerous compositions to the influence of George Stubbs, but the clarity of his visual idiom and his concisely elegant mode of expression bear witness to the perfect

originality of his style. Agasse is incontestably one of the most original artists to have emerged from the Geneva School of painting. He remained misunderstood by his contemporaries and ignored by the critics of his time, who considered him a minor master in the tradition of animal painters. However, his precise, often brilliant compositions bear witness to his leading role in the Romantic Realist movement of the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Works: Geneva, Musée d'art et d'histoire; London, Tate Gallery; New Haven, Yale Center for British Art; Winterthur, Oskar Reinhart Foundation.

Renée Loche, 1998, updated 2015  
Traduction: Toby Alleyne-Gee

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