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Jean-Antoine Houdon
Greyhound (Lévrier)

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JEAN-ANTOINE HOUDON (Versailles 1741- 1828 Paris)

GREYHOUND (LÉVRIER), early 19th Century

On a later base inscribed" 'J A HOUDON'

Terracotta

12 in. (30.3 cm) high; 11 in. (28 cm) wide

13 in. (33.5 cm) high; 14 ½ in. (37 cm) wide, overall

Provenance

Fauchier-Delvigne Collection.

Literature

G. Giacometti, *Un lévrier: terre cuite Originale de J. A. Houdon*, Paris 1904.

A. Dayot, 'Review of: Giacometti 1904', in *Supplément illustré de l'Art et les Artistes* 4, no. 20 (1907), p. XXVII.

G. Giacometti, *Le statuaire Jean-Antoine Houdon et son époque*, vol. III, Paris 1913, pp. 70-72.

L. Réau, 'Les expositions du Centenaire de Houdon', in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, 1928, p. 342.

G. Giacometti, *La vie et l'oeuvre de Houdon*, Paris, 1929, vol. II, pp. 215-216.

L. Réau, *Houdon: sa vie et son oeuvre*, Paris, 1964, vol. II, p. 58, no. 194.

H. C. Frick, Research Files on Jean Antoine Houdon, Works of Art, 'Greyhound', undated.

Exhibition History

Exposition du Centenaire de Houdon, Paris, Galeries Buvelot, 1928, no. 77.

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Jean-Antoine Houdon was the greatest of all French neoclassical sculptors, renowned for his exquisite portrait busts and statues that captured the essence of his subjects with remarkable realism and emotional depth. At the time of the sculptor's birth in 1741, Houdon's father was a member of the Comte de Lamotte's household. In 1749, when Houdon was eight years old, the Comte's residence was leased to the French Crown to serve as an *Ecole des élèves protégés*, a school for the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture's most talented pupils. As Houdon's father retained his post in the house, the young Houdon was surrounded by budding artists of both painting and sculpture, which was a catalyst in Houdon's interest in art. By 1756, he became a student at the Académie and demonstrated his growing talent, securing the third prize for sculpture. Five years later, in 1761, Houdon achieved a remarkable feat by winning the first prize for a bas-relief depicting King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. This accomplishment paved the way for his acceptance into the *Ecole des élèves protégés*, where he continued his artistic education until 1764. It was in this year that his exceptional talents earned him the prestigious Prix de Rome, providing him with the opportunity to embark on a journey to the Eternal City to study at the French Academy.

Following the guidelines of his fellowship, Houdon immersed himself in the exploration and replication of classical models during his time in Rome. This dedication led to the creation of notable works such as *The Vestal* (existing in multiple versions) and a *Centaur* (now lost). Beyond classical themes, Houdon also delved into religious and genre subjects, as evidenced by pieces like *Peasant Girl of Frascati* (plaster, Schlossmuseum, Gotha), his anatomical study *Man* (plaster, Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris), *Saint Bruno* (Santa Maria degli Angeli, Rome), the monumental plaster *Head of Saint John the Baptist* (unfortunately destroyed in 1894), and the *Priest of the Lupercalia* (plaster, Schlossmuseum, Gotha). These early works already showcased significant artistic prowess, demonstrating a profound grasp of classicism coupled with meticulous observations of human anatomy and emotion.

Upon returning to Paris in 1768, Houdon had come to the fore as one of the most promising sculptors of the age. Reflecting his elevated status as a recognised member (*membre agréé*) of the Académie in 1769, he took up residence in one of the workshops in the Faubourg du Roule in March 1772. Regularly exhibiting at the Salon, Houdon cultivated the patronage of the highest echelons of society, as demonstrated by his portraits of the Marquis of Miromesnil, shown in his magisterial robe and wig; of the acclaimed musician Christoph Willibald Gluck; of the great writers Molière, Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau; and of fashionable dames such as Madame de la Houze, the Comtesse du Cayla, along with Madame Adélaïde and Madame Victoire, the two daughters of King Louis XV.

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In 1777, Houdon achieved full recognition as an Academician and forged a connection with the Masonic Lodge of the Nine Sisters, a prominent gathering place for artists and intellectuals. This affiliation brought him into contact with Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. Their acquaintance deepened, leading to Houdon accompanying Franklin to America in 1785, it was during this sojourn that Houdon created his iconic portrait of Franklin. In the New World, Houdon also became acquainted with Thomas Jefferson, another Founding Father, and the author of the Declaration of Independence. Notably, it was this encounter that led to the creation of Houdon's monument to George Washington, now in the Capitol.

The sculptor returned to Paris the following year, in 1786, where his career continued to flourish. The turmoil of the Revolution, which broke out in 1789, temporarily disrupted the workings of the Académie, but, undeterred, Houdon sought new patrons during this turbulent period, including the financier Jacques Necker and the astronomer and politician Jean-Sylvain Bailly – two exponents of the more moderate and initially successful Revolutionary faction – both of whom he sculpted in 1790.

Despite the unrest, Houdon's career endured. In 1792, he was appointed adjunct professor at the reorganised Académie and was provided lodgings in the Cour du Louvre. However, with the advent of the Reign of Terror in 1793, the academies were disbanded, and Houdon was instructed to vacate his new quarters, a demand he refused to comply with. The ever-resourceful artist then offered the new Jacobin government versions of his busts of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Franklin, which were warmly received by the Lycée Republicain. Following the fall of Robespierre and his Jacobin faction in July 1794, the Girondins formed a new government, known as the Directoire, which with its new constitution, brought a period of relative stability. However, in November 1799, the young general Napoléon Bonaparte seized power, declaring himself First Consul of France. Throughout the years of Napoleonic rule, Houdon continued to showcase his work at the Salon and received prestigious commissions. Whilst maintaining the core of his artistic style, he adapted to some extent to meet the demands of Imperial idealisation and aggrandisement. This is nowhere clearer than in his documented portraits of Bonaparte.

Though the present terracotta greyhound may not be instantly recognised within Houdon's oeuvre, a close study of it in the wider context of Houdon's body of work, has led to the conclusion that the sculptor did in fact sculpt various types of animals. A small terracotta model of a spaniel-type dog can be seen to the left of Boilly's painting of Houdon's workshop (Fig. 1). Furthermore, Houdon was known to have exhibited 'Several Animals in Marble' in the Salon of 1777.¹ Additionally, the sale of

¹ Arnason 1975, Appendix I, p. 123: 'No. 252. 'Plusiers Animaux, en marbre'.

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works directly from the sculptor's studio both during his lifetime (8 October 1795) and after his death (15-17 December 1828), included various animals beyond dogs, such as birds and deer.²

In 1904 Georges Giacometti conducted a meticulous study of the present greyhound sculpture, resulting in an almost hundred-page publication in which he confidently attributed the work to Houdon.³ Giacometti's detailed analysis of the sculptor's technique, combined with an examination of the terracotta's exceptional quality and artistic characteristics, provided compelling evidence supporting the exclusive attribution of this sculpture to Houdon. Giacometti's scholarly work served to solidify the recognition of Houdon as the sole creator of the greyhound, reinforcing the art historical understanding of Houdon's mastery in the realm of sculpture. Giacometti presented a compelling argument, emphasising the presence of a greyhound in Boilly's painting of Houdon's studio as a key piece of evidence. The painting provides an intimate portrayal of the sculptor's life, prominently featuring his wife and three daughters, along with an obedient greyhound situated in the lower right corner. Giacometti astutely observed that the dog likely belonged to Houdon and his family rather than Laplace, as it is depicted without a collar.⁴ According to Giacometti, if the dog belonged to Laplace and had accompanied him to Houdon's studio, it would have been portrayed wearing a collar—a detail that Boilly would not have overlooked. Giacometti concluded that the greyhound sculpture in question is, in fact, a reduced model of Houdon's own dog.

Indeed, Houdon's renown for capturing accurate physiognomy in his portraits of contemporaries, friends, and family members adds weight to the notion that the present work, an exceptionally detailed model of a greyhound, may indeed be closely acquainted with the sculptor. Houdon's mastery in rendering the distinct characteristics of his subjects suggests that the greyhound sculpture could be a meticulous representation of a dog with which Houdon had a personal connection. Considering Houdon's propensity for creating lifelike and emotionally resonant portraits, it becomes plausible that the greyhound holds significance beyond a mere artistic exercise. The detailed craftsmanship of the sculpture may reflect not only Houdon's skill in portraying physical attributes but also his ability to convey a sense of familiarity and personal connection with the subject, potentially making it a poignant representation of a cherished companion.

² Arnason 1975, Appendices 4 & 5, pp. 130-132.

³ Giacometti 1904.

⁴ Giacometti 1904, p. 29.

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Since Giacometti's publication, the work has been positively identified as a sculpture by Houdon, most notably by Helen Clay Frick (1888-1984), daughter of the industrialist and art collector Henry Clay Frick (1849-1919). Helen Clay Frick developed a personal and enduring interest in Houdon. Motivated by her passion for the artist, she dedicated over fifty years to researching Houdon's works, with the ambitious goal of compiling a catalogue raisonné. Unfortunately, this comprehensive catalogue was never completed. Despite the unfinished catalogue raisonné, Helen Clay Frick included the present work in her extensive research on Houdon. Her commitment to documenting and understanding Houdon's oeuvre is evident through the inclusion of charming early twentieth-century photographs of the sculpture in her research material.⁵

The present work, with its elongated, slender neck and well-defined musculature, serves as a testament to Houdon's characteristic attention to detail. In capturing the essence of nature, Houdon displays an impeccable ability to seamlessly merge physical reality with the spirit of the subject.

⁵ A Photograph of the present *Greyhound* can be found at the Frick Art Reference Library, New York, Helen Clay Frick Research Files on Jean Antoine Houdon, box 3, folder 17.
https://archives.frick.org/repositories/3/archival_objects/4777

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Fig. 1 Louis-Léopold Boilly, *The Atelier of Jean-Antoine Houdon*, ca. 1804, oil on canvas, 88 x 115 cm. Paris, Musée des Arts Decoratifs

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