

LE CLAIRE

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KUNST



JOHANN HEINRICH WILHELM TISCHBEIN, KNOWN AS 'GOETHE-TISCHBEIN'
1751 Haina - Eutin 1829

A Leopard and a Leopardess with Two Cubs at the Entrance to a Cave

Black chalk, pen and brown ink, watercolour, heightened with opaque white, on paper, circa 1810-20.
Original mount.
320 x 407 mm

PROVENANCE: The artist's studio – Private Library of the Grand Dukes of Oldenburg (until 2003) – Christie's New York, auction sale, *Drawings by J. H. W. Tischbein*, 22 January 2003, lot 131¹ – Private collection, Switzerland.

A true specialist of animals and most excellent draughtsman – such was Goethe's portrayal of J. H. W. Tischbein, his friend and self-appointed cicerone in Naples, when Tischbein drew his attention to a 'horse's head in ore' on their visit to the Palazzo Colombrano on 7 March 1787.²

Tischbein's skill in the realistic portrayal of animals was remarkable and his output of animal images extensive. Many of these images were almost certainly captured from life on his visits to the private menagerie of Landgrave Karl of Hesse-Kassel – a menagerie where leopards were kept.³ Tischbein's influential elder brother Johann Heinrich was director of the Gemäldegalerie in Kassel and would doubtless have procured access to the menagerie for his brother. Likewise, Tischbein probably had an opportunity to see Johann Melchior Roos's large-format painting titled *The Menagerie of Landgrave Carl* on his visit to Kassel. Executed in 1722-8 and measuring 340 by 665 cm, the work depicts many of the animals kept by the Landgrave, among them a leopardess with two cubs and a leopard resting⁴ [Figs. 1 a and 1 b]. Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Younger was also active as an etcher and engraver. One of his etchings, executed in 1783, depicts a *Leopard, drawn from Nature, with its Cubs born Anno Domini 1774, in the Cassel Menagerie* [Fig. 2].

J. H. W. Tischbein's estate records show that he owned a large group of his brother's prints, among them an impression of the etching depicting the *leopards and their cubs*. In 1799, after his return from Italy, Tischbein stayed temporarily with his brother in Kassel. A watercolor, depicting a leopard in a very realistic way, dates from this period. [Fig. 3] Tischbein probably painted it from nature in the Cassel menagerie. Tischbein's interest in the anatomy of animals was so intense that he spent time dissecting their cadavers and recording his dissections. He also assembled a collection of taxidermy mounts for study purposes.⁵ Thus there is ample evidence to suggest that multiple factors inspired him to produce his own portrayal of a family of leopards.

¹ The collection amounted to some 700 sheets (including albums) and was offered by Christie's in 96 lots. The auction house arranged for a specially designed collector's mark reading *J. H. W. Tischbein* (Lugt 5025) to be stamped on each work. The Klassik Stiftung Weimar acquired 222 of the drawings for its collection.

² Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Tagebuch der Italiemischen Reise*, Naples, Wednesday, 7 March 1787.

³ For a discussion of the menagerie, which was founded in the 1680s, see Petra Werner, *Die Menagerie des Landgrafen Karl, Ein Beitrag zur Einheit von Natur und Kunst im Barockzeitalter*, Diss., Kassel 2013.

⁴ See Evelyn Lehmann, *Das große Kasseler Tierbild: das barocke "Thierstück" von Johann Melchior Roos, die Kasseler Menagerien und einiges mehr über Mensch und Tier*, Petersberg 2008.

⁵ Friedrich von Alten, *Aus Tischbeins Leben und Briefwechsel*, Leipzig 1872, p. 146.

A black chalk drawing formerly with the Munich art trade is closely related to the present watercolour [Fig. 4]. It depicts a leopard in a similarly recumbent position. The animal's coat is covered with an almost identical pattern of similarly shaped spots and the expression in its eyes is almost the same.⁶ It is nevertheless improbable that the study was made from life – the size of the animal seems diminutive and its expression has a distinctly anthropomorphized quality. Either it is a preparatory study for the recumbent leopard in the watercolour, or – more likely – it is a *ricordo* of a motif which the artist considered particularly successful and kept for later use. That a variant of the present composition in identical format exists would seem to support this hypothesis. The variant is now held in the Kupferstichkabinett (Department of Prints and Drawings) of the Hamburger Kunsthalle [Fig. 5].⁷ The naturalistically handled background – a massive rock wall with strands of hanging vegetation at the mouth of a cave where the leopards have found shelter – reoccurs in the painting *A Melancholy Cave*, one of seventeen oils forming the Oldenburg *Idylls Cycle*.⁸

Tischbein's anthropomorphic handling of the animals in the present watercolour is particularly striking. The scene thus acquires a narrative element which might be described as follows: the male leopard curls up comfortably to sleep but is kept awake by the sound of the cubs romping about. His exasperated expression seems to be saying 'why can't these brats allow me some peace and quiet?' The leopardess notices that her partner's temper is fraying. Fearing an outburst of rage, she raises a paw protectively over the cubs. Is she admonishing him to understand that she's just as tired but their 'children must be allowed to play because they're still so little'?

Tischbein's virtuoso depiction of animals and their characteristics, coupled with his masterly portrayal of analogies between human and animal behaviour brought him considerable fame. He drew inspiration from the Neapolitan scholar Giambattista della Porta's *De Humana Physiognomia* (1586), and was strongly influenced by his contact to the Enlightenment philosopher and physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater, whom he met in Zurich in 1781. Tischbein clearly believed his destiny was to develop such theories further. In line with a theory of evolution from low to higher forms he believed that exact knowledge of animals would lead him to conclusions about human behaviour and character. He established, for example, parallels between carnivores and 'earnest thinkers' and between herbivores and 'sweet-tempered human creatures'. He detected anthropomorphic features in animals and plants. He sought aspects of animal physiognomy in humans. A popular anecdote relates that he once compared the landscapist Jakob Philipp Hackert to a fox, whereupon Hackert compared Tischbein to an ostrich and ended the friendship. The practice of physiognomics was a popular and influential phenomenon at the time. The dissemination of portraits and silhouettes encouraged interest in interpreting and reading the human profile.⁹

⁶ Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein, *Zeichnungen Aquarelle*, exhib. cat., Galerie Biedermann, Munich 1976, no. 36, full-page repr.

⁷ Peter Prange, *Deutsche Zeichnungen 1450-1800*, in the series Hubertus Gäßner and Andreas Stolzenburg (eds.), *Die Sammlungen der Hamburger Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett, I* (text and plate vols.), Cologne, Weimar and Vienna 2007, p. 354, no. 1028, repr. (plate vol.) p. 390.

⁸ J. H. W. Tischbein's *Idylls Cycle*, a series of 17 small-format oil paintings, was commissioned by Peter Friedrich Ludwig Duke of Oldenburg in 1819 and completed in 1820.- *Idylls Cycle*, no. 2, Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Oldenburg [inv. LMO15430/2].

⁹ Hermann Mildener, 'Johann Heinrich Wilhelm Tischbein (1751-1829), II. Menschliche und tierische Physiognomien', in: exhib. cat., *Wahlverwandtschaften. Eine englische Privatsammlung zur Kunst der Goethezeit*, edited by Giulia Bartrum, Daniel Godfrey, Hermann Mildener, and Hinrich Sieveking, Schiller Museum, Weimar, 27.8.-3.11.2013, Klassik Stiftung Weimar, London 2013, pp. 58-62.

The suite of etchings titled *Têtes de différents animaux dessinés d'après nature pour donner une idée plus exacte de leurs caractères* published in Naples in 1796 is a celebrated example of how J. H. W. Tischbein systematically put his ideas into practice. The etchings depict portrait heads of animals, each with a different character. At about the same time he also began work on a series of human physiognomies with comparable characteristics. However when Naples fell into French hands in 1799 and Tischbein was forced to return to Germany, the series was still incomplete and unready for publication.

Following Goethe's example, Tischbein also entertained literary aspirations and developed an interest in projects that combined texts and images. The first edition of Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs* [Reynard the Fox] appeared in 1794 as a 12-part poem in hexameters. Tischbein produced a number of illustrations for Goethe's adaptation of the fable and sent a selection to him but the idea came to nothing. Some time later, in circa 1810, Tischbein composed his own sequel to the *Reineke Fuchs* fable which he titled *Gänsegeschichte* [A Tale of Geese]. The tale follows the poetic structure of Goethe's *Reineke Fuchs*. In Tischbein's tale the crafty foxes prove too clever for their own good and are defeated by their own tricks. The tale was edited and adapted from Tischbein's ideas and drawings by a relatively unknown writer named Henriette Hermes.

Another of Tischbein's literary projects was the richly illustrated semi-autobiographical novel *A Donkey's Tale* which narrates the life story of a donkey oppressed by mankind's stupidity. He had already begun work on the novel in Naples but the manuscript was not completed until 1812 in Eutin. Here again, he enlisted the help of Henriette Hermes. But like so many of his projects combining texts and images the completed manuscript remained unpublished.



Fig 1a: Johann Melchior Roos, *Leopardess with two Cubs* (detail from *The Menagerie of Landgrave Carl*, 1722-8. Oil on canvas, 340 x 665 cm).

Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe



Fig. 1b: Johann Melchior Roos, *Leopard* (detail from *The Menagerie of Landgrave Carl*, 1722-8. Oil on canvas, 340 x 665 cm). Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Schloss Wilhelmshöhe

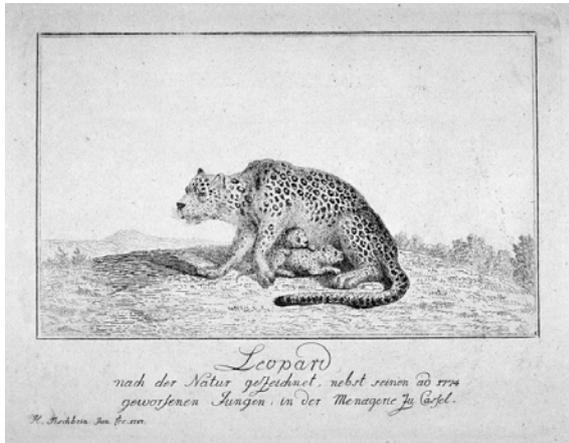


Fig. 2: Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Younger (1742 - 1808)
A Leopard, drawn from Nature ... 1783.
Etching, 15.3 x 19 cm (image)



Fig. 3: *Leopard*, um 1800
Pen and brown ink, watercolor and gouache on paper.
177 x 309 mm (image)
Museumslandschaft Hessen Kassel, Graphische Sammlung
[Inv. GS4853]



Fig. 4: *Study of a Leopard*.
Black chalk on paper,
335 x 210 mm.
Galerie Biedermann, Munich (1976)

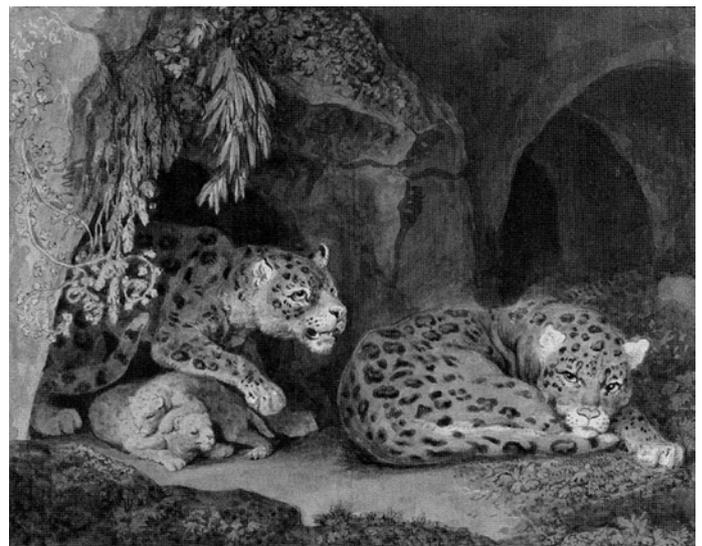


Fig. 5: *A Pair of Leopards with their Cubs at the Mouth of a Cave*, 1810-20.
Pen and brown ink, black chalk, watercolour, opaque white heightening, 324 x 408 mm.
Hamburger Kunsthalle, Kupferstichkabinett [inv.: 35895]