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A Portrait of Jacques-Antoine Dassier in the Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva

William Eisler

In December 2001, I published an article in this journal on the history of a pastel portrait of the famous Genevan medallist Jean Dassier (1676–1763)¹. The picture has always been considered to be by the hand of Jean-Étienne Liotard (1702–1789), and this attribution was confirmed in a personal communication by Marcel Roethlisberger, co-author, with Renée Loche, of the forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the painter's works.

To mark the imminent publication of part II of my work on the Dassier family of medallists² I wish to present a portrait of another member of this dynasty: Jean's celebrated son, Jacques-Antoine (Geneva 1715–Copenhagen 1759). In this volume, the latter's works are fully catalogued and discussed for the first time. To my knowledge no painted likeness of this important figure in the history of the medal has hitherto been identified.



Fig. 1: Robert Gardelle (attributed), Jacques-Antoine Dassier, ca. 1739–1740, oil on cardboard, 22.4 x 16.8 cm.

The painting in question (fig. 1) is a half-length rendering of a young man wearing a brown coat and turned three-quarters to the left.

The picture entered the Musée d'art et d'histoire's collections in 1909 as a portrait of an unknown sitter by the Genevan master Robert Gardelle (1682–1766). The attribution was questioned by Danielle Buysens in her catalogue of

1 W. EISLER, The Portrait of Jean Dassier in the Cabinet des dessins, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, GNS 51, 2001, pp. 67–69.

2 W. EISLER, The Dassiers of Geneva: 18th-century European medallists, vol. II: Dassier and sons: an artistic enterprise in Geneva, Switzerland and Europe, published by the Association des Amis du Cabinet des médailles, Lausanne, in association with the Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva (Lausanne 2005). Volume I, Jean Dassier, medal engraver: Geneva, Paris and London, 1700–1733, appeared in 2002.

the museum's paintings of the Genevan school³. The awkwardness denoted by the latter in her commentary is particularly evident in the left arm and shoulder.

A comparison with an engraved portrait of Jacques-Antoine Dassier by Johann Rudolf Schellenberg (1740–1806), employed as the frontispiece to the medallist's biography published in volume IV of Johann Kaspar Füssli's lives of Swiss artists (1774), permits us to securely identify the painting in Geneva as the model for this plate (fig. 2). The engraving is based in turn upon Schellenberg's preparatory drawing after our painting, preserved in the Graphische Sammlung of Zurich's Zentralbibliothek (fig. 3). The master from Winterthur transformed the half-length model into a medallion, surmounted by a putto holding a festoon from which a number of medals are suspended⁴.



Fig. 2: J.R. Schellenberg, Jacques-Antoine Dassier, 1771, engraving in J.K. Füssli, *Geschichte der besten Künstler in der Schweiz*, vol. IV, p. 140.



Fig. 3: J.R. Schellenberg, Jacques-Antoine Dassier, 1771, watercolor and red pencil, 13.3 x 8.9 cm.

³ D. BUYSSENS, *Peintures et pastels de l'ancienne école genevoise: XVIIe–début XIXe siècle* (Geneva 1988), cat. 137.

⁴ The engraving is cited in Schellenberg's account book (April 1772). See B. THANNER, *Schweizerische Buchillustration im Zeitalter der Aufklärung am Beispiel von Johann Rudolf Schellenberg*, Diss. (Munich 1987), cat. 197, V 367.

⁵ See EISLER 2005 (n. 2), Chapter IV.

Further proof for our identification of the painting was obtained from a careful examination of the back of the panel. In the upper-left corner is the inscription «p. Mons. Das.» This shorthand note, hitherto unnoticed by scholars, may have been written as a means of identifying the picture in the painter's atelier prior to delivery to its owner.

The sitter appears to be close to 25 years old, hence it is likely that the portrait was executed after the artist's voyage to Italy (1737–1739) and before his departure for London in 1740, where he would take up a position at the Royal Mint⁵.

In our previous article we observed that Liotard's pastel of Jean Dassier had been sent to Füssli in Zurich in October 1771 by Jacques-Antoine's surviving brothers, Jean II and Antoine, to be copied, engraved and printed together with

the lives of their father and late sibling which they had drafted. The texts were translated into German and published by the historian without any significant modifications. The painted likeness of Jacques-Antoine, not cited in the historical documents pertaining to Jean's portrait, was undoubtedly transported to Zurich at the same time.



Fig. 4: Robert Gardelle, Jean Dassier, ca. 1723, oil on copper, 12.6 x 10.0 cm.

The portrait of Jacques-Antoine may be associated with a small oil painting on copper of Jean Dassier by Gardelle (fig. 4) which we have dated to ca. 1723⁶. The authorship of this work has never been questioned. It is logical to assume that the elder Dassier called upon the services of the same atelier for the likeness of his son.

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Fig. 1: Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, inv. 1909-28. Photo © MAH, Maurice Aeschimann.

Fig. 2: Bibliothèque d'art et d'archéologie, Geneva. Photo © MAH.

Fig. 3: Graphische Sammlung, Zentralbibliothek, Zurich. Photo © Zentralbibliothek Zurich.

Fig. 4: Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva, inv. 1976-331. Photo © MAH, Bettina Jacot-Descombes.

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6 BUYSENS (n. 3), cat. 136; see EISLER 2005 (n. 2), Chapter IV. The painting was donated to the library of the Geneva Academy in 1838 by J.-L. Du Pan, as noted in the minutes of the session of the Library's directors, 9 June of that year (Registre de la Direction de la Bibliothèque, pp. 124–125, cited in K. Tissot and O.B. Racalbuto's manuscript catalogue prepared for the seminar «Portraits de la Bibliothèque publique et universitaire, étude d'une collection», directed by D. Buysens and M. Natale, University of Geneva, academic year 1999–2000, pp. 26–27. It was transferred to the MAH before 1900. BUYSENS (n. 3, p. 73).