

JANE POUPELET (1874-1932)

Donkey and Bull

walnut ink, walnut ink wash, and red pencil
Signed : Poupelet
H. 23,5; W. 31 cm

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Gallimard, 2005.

In 1892, Jane Poupelet became the first woman to attend Bordeaux's École des Beaux-Arts; she then became a member of the Bande à Schnegg.[1] Throughout her career, she maintained a rigorous practice of drawing and sketching, frequently choosing female nudes and animals as her subjects. While her compositions are relaxed, her poses are refined. She and another member of the Bande à Schnegg, François Pompon, were instrumental in renewing animal art at the beginning of the 20th century. Most of the animals that she sketched, drew, and sculpted were farm animals, which she observed at length and in detail on her family's farm, the Château de la Gauterie, in the Périgord, where she'd grown up and continued to spend several months a year.

Calm and restrained, *Donkey and Bull* shows the two animals in a stable. The framing is tight and the subjects are cut by the edges of the paper; these are two characteristics of Poupelet's work that appear in other similar drawings held in the musée d'art moderne, such as *Three Cows* (Inv. AM1163D) and *Body of a Bull* (Inv. AM1170D) and at La Piscine-musée d'art et d'industrie André Diligent, such as *Two Cows in a Stable* (Inv. 998-35-1).[2] In the drawing presented here, a powerful bull occupies the foreground, while in the upper right corner, a donkey watches us from her box. Many of Poupelet's drawings feature cows or bulls, and her 1907 *Donkey* is an emblematic figure within her body of sculpture. A proof of *Donkey* is held in the musée d'Orsay (Inv. RF 3401).

The identical angles of the two animals' heads create a dynamic tension. The artist was interested in their precise attitude, that of a "trapper of life," to use Rodin's expression.[3] This drawing emanates a peace and grace that draws us into the intimacy of the stable and suggests a nativity scene.

The lower right corner includes splashes of the reddish-brown tone that she used for the animals; this is another element that appears frequently in Jane Poupelet's drawings, such as *Sleeping Bull* in the musée d'art moderne (Inv. AM1165D). The artist tested her colors on the same sheet that she was drawing on. This colored and nuanced area contributes to the overall balance of the composition, as do the few rapidly sketched lines that evoke the stable. They constitute an "improvised" counterpoint to the masterful observation of the animals.

Her pallet here is composed mostly of natural tones derived from walnut stain, a medium that Jane Poupelet particularly liked. The familiar and intimate depiction of animals that are so close to humans, placed in a simplified and neutral context is reminiscent of cave art, particularly that on the walls of the

Eyzies grottos in the Dordogne, which had a strong influence on Jane Poupelet's drawing.

In 1922, the artist decided to publish an album of her drawings of animals. Bourdelle wholeheartedly supported the project: "Mlle Poupelet, a talented sculptor of the highest order, would like to have an album of her animal sketches published. The drawings are splendid, and I think that you're the ideal person to publish them."[4]

Donkey and Bull is emblematic of the work and thought of Jane Poupelet—while, overall, it implicitly advocates simplicity, she surrounded her work with a mystery that each viewer is called upon to decipher.

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[1] An informal group of sculptors that gathered around Lucien Schnegg (1864-1909) from 1904 on. They followed Rodin's principles—contact with nature and the rigorous interaction of planes. But they distanced themselves from his exuberance to advocate a reinterpretation of antique art according to the ideals of austerity, serenity, and rigor.
[2] Reproduced in Rivière, 2006, p. 80.
[3] Auguste Rodin, *L'Art*, entretiens avec Paul Gsell (*Art*, interviews with Paul Gsell) (1911), Paris, Grasset, "Les cahiers rouges," 1997, p. 27
[4] Bourdelle to Sant Andrea and Marcerou, art editors, January 4, 1922, AJP-Roubaix, in. Rivière, 2006, p.26.