

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

GRESSE, Jean-Alexandre

London 31.x.1741–20.ii.1794

Of Swiss extraction, Jean-Alexandre Gresse (or John Alexander Greese) was baptised 13.xi.1741 in the French Protestant church in Berwick Street to Pierre-Gaspard Gresse, from Rolle, and Jeanne-Magdelaine Bayeux. He learned drawing from Gerard Scotin; he also studied with Major, Cipriani and Zuccarelli. He is said to have been awarded a prize at the Society of Arts in 1755 for one of his pastels (none has survived), and went on to exhibit miniatures and “stained drawings” at the Society of Artists from 1766 to 1768 from Hassel’s Row, Tottenham Court Road (the same address is given by the miniaturist Peter Paillou). He was appointed tutor to the royal princesses in 1777, and was a fashionable teacher and avid collector – although, according to Henry Angelo’s *Reminiscences* (1828, I, p. 174) “though a good-natured and friendly-hearted man, Gresse was very irritable”, and he was exceptionally sensitive about his corpulence. He inherited “a decent fortune” from his father, and owned the tract of land in Soho where Gresse Street stands. In 1771 Gresse married Elizabeth Thornton, the 17-year-old daughter of Osborn Thornton, an upholster and cabinet maker of St Anne’s Westminster (contract, London Metropolitan Archives). In 1779 Francis Wheatley (*q.v.*) had “the folly to engage in an intrigue” with Gresse’s wife, with whom he fled to Ireland. Gresse’s work included topographical watercolours (one is in the Royal Academy collection, while others were engraved for William Watts’s *The seats of the nobility and gentry*, London, 1779–86). His designs for Boydell were also engraved. Gresse’s posthumous sale, Christie’s, 7–12.iv.1794, included master paintings of all schools, drawings, prints, books, casts, instruments etc. from his house at 24 Tottenham Court Road, nearly opposite Tavistock Street.

Bibliography

Alexander 2021; Edwards 1808; Oxford DNB; Ingamells 2004, p. 218; Sée 1911; Walpole 1828

Pastels

J.3598.101 Zenocrates [Xenocrates] and Phryne, crayons (the artist; London, Christie’s, 10.iv.1794, Lot 33)