Plow Horses
Wouter Verschur, Sr. (Dutch, 1812-74)
Oil on panel

Four horses are being prepared to head out of the stable to begin a day of plowing and hauling. The strong musculature of these full-bodied work horses reflects their use in heavy labor. A worker pumps water into the tough while two horses watch as a farm dog enjoys a drink. A saddle is being hung on still another horse. A child carries a basket and a mug while another dog looks at a chicken. Morning light pours into the barn to reveal this barn yard vignette.

From the start of his career, Verschuur's paintings were recognized as demonstrations of his great talent to depict horses in their everyday environment. During his lifetime, he became known as the leading Dutch painter of horses. While the horse was a popular subject of painters throughout the 19th century, the latter half of the century saw the rise of a number of talented horse painters especially in continental Europe.

Verschuur specialized in what is broadly termed “horse genre”, paintings in which a narrative element was introduced into paintings of horses later in the 19th century. He focused on images of the daily life of the animals not only in stables but in farmyards and in fields. As the Industrial Revolution shifted attention from rural life to the city, animal painters were tempted to increase emotional content and enhance the picturesque characteristics of their images. Here, the hard working horses interacting with the people, dogs and chickens, appeal to the sympathy of the viewers.

Verschuur started his career as a student of the Dutch cattle painter Pieter Gerardus van Os who guided him in the study and copying of the oeuvre of the celebrated 17th century horse painter Philips Wouwerman. At 19 years old, he established his reputation an award of a Gold Medal by the Amsterdam art society Felix Meritis, a award he received again for a second time in the following year. In 1855 he sold one of his paintings to Napoleon III during the Exposition Universelle in Paris. From 1858 until 1868 he lived and worked in Haarlem, where he tutored the Hague School painter Anton Mauve.

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