



Hubert Robert  
French, 1733 - 1808

## *The Ponte Salario*

c. 1775

oil on canvas

overall: 91.3 x 121 cm (35 15/16 x 47 5/8 in.)

framed: 116.2 x 146.1 x 9.2 cm (45 3/4 x 57 1/2 x 3 5/8 in.)

Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.50

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### ENTRY

The Ponte Salario takes its name from the Via Salaria, the old route linking Rome and the salt-producing areas of the Sabine country. Spanning the river Aniene near its confluence with the Tiber, at a location just north of the capital where once stood the ancient settlement of Antemnae, it is one of the oldest of Roman bridges. Its history and numerous transformations are well chronicled. It was constructed in the fourth century B.C. Legend has it that it was on or near the Ponte Salario c. 360 that the Roman consul Manlius Imperiosus Titus slew a soldier from Gaul and removed a gold chain, or *torque*, from his body, hence his cognomen Torquatus. The bridge endured through the Roman Republic and Empire, but in 546, during the reign of the Byzantine emperor Justinian, it was destroyed by the army of the Ostrogoth king Totila, only to be rebuilt c. 565 by the general Narses, who ultimately defeated the invaders.

The crenellated tower serving as a tollhouse in Robert's time, which looms so large in the National Gallery of Art's painting, was a medieval addition to the bridge and was no doubt meant to serve a military purpose. [1] The Ponte Salario remained more or less unchanged until 1798, when Neapolitan forces damaged it in an attempt to impede the advance of the French Republican army. In 1849 the French

general Oudinot ordered it blown up as soldiers under his command were attempting to overthrow the Roman republic. In 1867, during the rout of Giuseppe Garibaldi's forces by the Franco-pontifical troops under General de Failly, the bridge was all but demolished; only the piers on either side of the river remained standing. [2] By 1874 it had been reconstructed, and in 1930 it was widened. [3] Today it is unrecognizable as the subject of the National Gallery's painting.

In the history of the *veduta*, bridges were seen as “emblematic of the passage of life.” [4] This philosophical resonance greatly appealed to Hubert Robert, and he exploited the motif throughout his career. In 1767 he sent one of his most brilliant evocations of the Roman Campagna to the Salon, a work in which one bridge is seen through the ruined arch of another [fig. 1]. The artist was especially fond of juxtaposing the vestiges of Roman and medieval architecture in a single composition; he did this in a work of 1776, *The Bridge* [fig. 2]. [5] The Ponte Salario as he had known it during his Italian sojourn was a monument in which such elements were naturally combined.

In the National Gallery's painting, Robert suggests the corrosive effects of time on manmade structures. A wooden railing replaces a lost section of the bridge's ramp, and on the abutment at right, the timbered substructure of the bridge can be seen through a large, gaping hole in the crumbling masonry. As the real subject of the painting is the bridge, various types of Italianate figures in the scene are no more than colorful props. Peasants enter the tollhouse tunnel; a woman gestures to her cat from the balcony; a herdsman prods his cattle across the bridge; women wash and hang their laundry on the bank of the river. A tollman or constable holding a stick stands in the shadows of the embankment, and a woman crouches behind him. Seen through the great arch against the backdrop of the Sabine hills, a boatman transports several figures across the water. Other details enhance the picturesque quality of the composition: carpets and bedding hang from the balcony and the bridge's parapet; a papal escutcheon surmounts the tollhouse door; and weeds, grasses, and vines grow along the river's edge, the wooden railing, and the pergola surmounting the tower. The oppositions of solids and voids, closed and open spaces, and ponderous and aerial effects help dramatize the landscape. Finally, the sophisticated geometry of the composition, with its multiple arches, is made even more complex by the play of warm light and cool shadows.

Hubert Robert produced two versions of *The Ponte Salario*, of which the National Gallery's painting is probably the earlier. The second, larger picture [fig. 3] was executed in 1783 and was last recorded in the 1920 sale of Sigismond Bardac. [6]

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This is in all likelihood the picture described as representing *An Ancient Bridge Three Miles from Rome on the Tiber*, which the artist exhibited in 1783 as no. 60 in the Salon of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. The dimensions given in the exhibition handbook are somewhat larger than those of the ex-Bardac painting—“5 pieds 9 pouces de large, sur 4 pieds 6 pouces de haut” (175 cm wide by 137 cm high)—but measurements of paintings in Salon catalogues were sometimes those of the frames. The scene is captured from a slightly more distant viewpoint, and the figures on the bridge and in the tollhouse are more numerous and varied. The foreground is cluttered with additional figures—more washerwomen and fishermen in boats—while other fisherfolk on the river’s edge are shown pulling in their nets. Despite the ex-Bardac painting’s larger size, its overall effect is less monumental than that of the National Gallery’s picture.

Robert’s two views of the Ponte Salarario could be considered as *capricci*, for he has taken considerable license with both the architecture and the topography. Unlike Claude Lorrain (French, 1604/1605 - 1682), whose role in the creation of the *veduta* tradition was paramount, Robert does not use the bridge as a mere poetic accessory in a wider landscape. For him it is the absolute focus of his composition. He was surely inspired by the example of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Venetian, 1720 - 1778), whose splendid etching of the bridge [fig. 4] was executed in the mid-1750s as part of his *Vedute di Roma*. [7] Piranesi had placed himself nearer the gradient that leads to the bridge, thereby emphasizing the bulk of the architectural monument, which in his print has an almost sinister appearance. He also depicts more of the embankment on the opposite side of the river and a tomblike structure rising in the distance. Johannes Langner has examined the bridge motif in Piranesi’s art, and his analysis could be applied equally well to Robert’s conception:

[T]he bridge is no longer an object among many, but the exclusive object viewed in such a manner as to occupy the visual field in all of its scope. Rising to a menacing height above our heads, it thrusts itself towards the other bank in a vertiginous foreshortening. Its immediate presence confers on it a dramatic character. From this vantage point, the arch becomes the primordial element. It alone makes us sense the enormous mass and weight of the structure, it alone captures the eye by the elementary character of its form and by the boldness of its dimensions. [8]

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The National Gallery's *The Ponte Salario* was featured in the catalogue of the estate sale of the maréchale duchesse de Raguse, née Anne Marie Hortense Perregaux, widow of one of Napoleon's marshals, Auguste Frédéric Louis Viesse de Marmont (1774–1852). Born in Paris in 1779, she was the daughter of the Swiss-born banker Jean Frédéric Perregaux, a native of Neuchâtel, and his French wife Adélaïde de Praël de Surville (1758–1794). The preface to the catalogue, written by the "expert" Mennechet, states that the paintings of the late eighteenth-century French school in the sale had been acquired by the decedent's father from the artists themselves. Perregaux had owned major works by Louis-Léopold Boilly (French, 1761 - 1845), Jean Louis Demarne (?1752–1829), François Gérard (1770–1837), Marguerite Gérard (1761–1837), Jean-Baptiste Greuze (French, 1725 - 1805), Jean Baptiste Le Prince (1734–1781), Nicolas Antoine Taunay (1755–1830), Claude-Joseph Vernet (French, 1714 - 1789), and Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (French, 1755 - 1842), [9] and among the stars of his collection were four Roberts: a pair entitled *La Fontaine* and *Le Manoir*, a landscape depicting *Dancers in a Park*, [10] and the National Gallery's *The Ponte Salario*. (The latter was included in the postmortem inventory of Perregaux's collection, which was drawn up on February 25, 1808, by the *commissaire-priseur* Jean Baptiste Théodore Sensier.) [11] Perregaux, the first regent of the Banque de France, left Hortense a considerable fortune and part ownership of his bank, which was taken over by his associate, Jacques Laffitte. [12] Her collection was sold in 1857, two years after her death, and in the catalogue Hubert Robert's *The Ponte Salario* is described as follows:

The bridge. View of a large single-arched bridge occupying the entire painting, and upon which rises a ruined fortress which has been transformed into a rustic dwelling. Above the crenellations are posts bearing grapevines. On the bridge, the stone parapet of which is half-destroyed and replaced by joists, can be seen a cow passing by, and below, women wash and hang their laundry. This work is of the most admirable execution and of the finest effect. [13]

No preparatory studies for the composition are known. An anonymous copy of the Gallery's painting was featured in a London auction in 1990. [14] A very fine copy in gouache is in a private American collection [fig. 5].

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Collection data may have been updated since the publication of the print volume. Additional light adaptations have been made for the presentation of this text online.

Joseph Baillio

January 1, 2009

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Hubert Robert, *A Bridge under which Can Be Seen the Sabine Country Forty Leagues from Rome*, 1767, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of William B. Dietrich in loving memory of his brother, H. Richard Dietrich, Jr., 2010. [www.philamuseum.org](http://www.philamuseum.org)



**fig. 2** Hubert Robert, *The Bridge*, 1776, oil on canvas, Musée Fabre. Scala / White Images / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 3** Hubert Robert, *The Ponte Salario*, 1783, oil on canvas, private collection. The Wildenstein Institute



**fig. 4** Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *Veduta del Ponte Salario*, 1756/1757, etching, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of David Keppel, 1943.10.47



**fig. 5** After Hubert Robert, *The Ponte Salario*, possibly late eighteenth century, watercolor and gouache on paper, private collection. Image courtesy of Sotheby's

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**NOTES**

[1] Similar towers were built on other bridges in and around Rome, among them the Ponte Mammolo, the Ponte Molle, the Ponte Milvio, and the Ponte Nomentano.

- [2] A photograph of the nearly demolished bridge was taken at the time by John Henry Parker (illus. in Bruno Brizzi, *Rome cento anni fa nelle fotografie della raccolta Parker* [Rome, 1975], 213).
- [3] For illustrations of various views of the Ponte Salario, both engraved and drawn, see *I Ponti di Roma dalle collezioni del Gabinetto nazionale delle stampe* (Rome, 1975), nos. 117, 124, 130, 155, 177, 207, 219, 220. Another fantastical depiction of the bridge attributed to the Swiss-born architect and draftsman Jean François Thomas (1758–1813), called Thomas de Thomon, is one of a pair of drawings recently with the Galerie Didier Aaron in Paris. See also Dietmar Lüdke, *Hubert Robert 1733–1808: und die Brücken von Paris* (Karlsruhe, 1991), 252; Sarah Faunce, “Rome and Its Environs: Painters, Travelers, and Sites,” in Philip Conisbee et al., *In the Light of Italy: Corot and Early Open-Air Painting* (Washington, DC, 1996), 57, fig. 2.
- [4] Colin Eisler, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection: European Schools Excluding Italian* (Oxford, 1977), 338. See also John Sweetman, *The Artist and the Bridge 1700–1920* (Aldershot [Hants] and Brookfield, Vt., 1999), 1–21.
- [5] A similar picture was last recorded in a Paris sale (Drouot Montaigne, June 25, 1991, lot 63, repro.).
- [6] Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, May 10–11, 1920, no. 32, repro.
- [7] Robert may also have known Giuseppe Vasi’s engraving of the Ponte Salario (see Luisa Scalabroni, *Giuseppe Vasi (1710–1782)* [Rome, 1981], 73, no. 165, pl. 83).
- [8] “[L]e pont n’est plus un objet entre autres, mais l’objet exclusif, envisagé de manière à occuper à lui seul le champ visuel dans toute son étendue. S’élevant à une hauteur menaçante au-dessus de nos têtes, il s’élançait vers l’autre rive dans un raccourci vertigineux. Sa présence immédiate lui confère un caractère dramatique. Avec cet angle de vision, l’arche devient l’élément primordial. C’est elle qui nous fait sentir la masse et le poids énormes de l’ouvrage, c’est elle qui captive le regard par le caractère élémentaire de sa forme et par la hardiesse de ses dimensions.” Johannes Langner, “La vue par-dessous le pont: fonctions d’un motif piranésien dans l’art français de la seconde moitié du XVIIIe siècle,” in *Piranèse et les français* (Rome, 1976), 294–295. On this print, see also John Sweetman, *The Artist and the Bridge 1700–1920* (Aldershot [Hants] and Brookfield, Vt., 1999), 30–31, no. 14.
- [9] Vigée Le Brun’s portrait of Madame Perregaux is in the Wallace Collection, London. See J. Hedley, “Vigée Le Brun’s Newly Conserved Portrait of Mme Perregaux in The Wallace Collection,” *Burlington Magazine* 146 (Apr. 2004): 224–233.
- [10] Bielefeld, Germany, August Oetker collection. For a discussion and color

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illustration, see the entry by Hermann Arnhold in *Sammlerlust: Europäische Kunst aus fünf Jahrhunderten* (Munich, 2003), no. 62.

- [11] In the inventory of Perregaux's estate (Archives nationales de France, Paris: Étude X, liasse 882), the National Gallery's painting was one of several decorating the salon of Perregaux's townhouse at 9, rue du Mont Blanc and was valued at 120 francs. ("Item, un autre [paysage] par Robert représentant un pont cadre de bois doré Prisé cent vingt francs, ci.....120.")
- [12] For the lives of Perregaux and his daughter, consult Paul de Pury, "Jean-Frédéric Perregaux," *Musée Neuchâtelois* n.s. 6 (1919): 7–12; Jean Lhomer, *Le banquier Perregaux et sa fille, la duchesse de Raguse* (Paris, 1926); Romuald Szramkiewicz, *Les Régents et censeurs de la Banque de France nommés sous le Consulat et l'Empire* (Geneva, 1974), 311–318; Geoffrey de Bellaigue, "Jean Frédéric Perregaux, the Englishman's Best Friend," *Antologia di Belle Arti* 29–30 (1986): 80–90. A portion of the collection was bequeathed to the banker's son, Alphonse Claude Charles Bernardin Perregaux (1785–1841), who married the daughter of another of Napoleon's marshals, Étienne-Jacques-Joseph-Alexandre Macdonald, duc de Tarente. The younger Perregaux's estate sale took place in Paris at the Galerie Le Brun on December 8–9, 1841, and was composed primarily of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings.
- [13] "Le pont. Vue d'un grand pont d'une seule arche qui occupe tout le tableau, et sur lequel s'élève un château-fort en ruines, changé en habitation rustique; au-dessus des créneaux sont plantés des poteaux qui portent une vigne. Sur le pont, dont le parapet de pierre est à moitié détruit et remplacé par des solives, on voit passer une vache, et dessous, des blanchisseuses lavent ou étendent leur linge. Ce morceau est de l'exécution la plus admirable et du plus bel effet." Paris, Hôtel des Commissaires-Priseurs, *Catalogue des tableaux des écoles française, hollandaise et flamande formant la collection de Mme la Maréchale Duchesse de Raguse*, December 14–15, 1857, no. 42.
- [14] Christie's, South Kensington, February 7, 1990, no. 42, repro.

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## PROVENANCE

Jean Frédéric Perregaux [1744-1808], Paris and Viry-Châtillon;<sup>[1]</sup> by inheritance to his daughter, the maréchale duchesse de Raguse [1779-1855, née Anne Marie Hortense Perregaux], Paris and Viry-Châtillon;<sup>[2]</sup> (her estate sale, Hôtel des Commissaires-Priseurs, Paris, 14-15 December 1857, no. 42); Madame Louis Stern, Paris, by 1911; (sale, Galerie George Petit, Paris, 22 April 1929, no. 19); (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., New York); sold 23 December 1946 to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation,



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New York;[3] gift 1952 to NGA.

[1] According to the preface of the catalogue of his daughter's estate sale in 1857, the late 18th century French school paintings in the sale had been acquired by Perregaux from the artists themselves. A Swiss-born banker who had married a French woman and was the first regent of the Banque de France, the collector owned major works by Boilly, Greuze, Vernet, and Vigée Le Brun, among others. The NGA painting was included in the postmortem inventory of Perregaux's collection, drawn up on 25 February 1808 by the *commissaire-priseur* Jean Baptiste Théodore Sensier; it was one of several decorating the salon of Perregaux's townhouse at 9, rue du Mont Blanc and was valued at 120 francs: "Item, un autre [paysage] par Robert représentant un pont cadre de bois doré Prisé cent vingt francs, ci.....120" (Archives nationales de France, Paris: Étude X, liasse 882).

[2] She was the widow of one of Napoleon's marshals, Auguste Frédéric Louis Viesse de Marmont (1774-1852). Her father left her a considerable fortune, part ownership of his bank, and part of his art collection. The 17th century Dutch paintings in the collection were bequeathed to her brother, Alphonse Claude Charles Bernardin Perregaux (1785-1841).

For the lives of Perregaux and his daughter, see Paul de Pury, "Jean-Frédéric Perregaux," *Musée Neuchâtelois* n.s. 6 (1919): 7-12; Jean Lhomer, *Le banquier Perregaux et sa fille, la duchesse de Raguse*, Paris, 1926; Romuald Szramkiewicz, *Les Régents et censeurs de la Banque de France nommés sous le Consulat et l'Empire*, Geneva, 1974: 311-318; Geoffrey De Bellaigue, "Jean Frédéric Perregaux, the Englishman's Best Friend," *Antologia di Belle Arti* 29-30 (1986): 80-90.

[3] See The Kress Collection Digital Archive, <https://kress.nga.gov/Detail/objects/2262>.

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## EXHIBITION HISTORY

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1931 Eighteenth-Century French Art, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, no. 31.

1934 Exhibition of French Painting from the Fifteenth Century to the Present Day, The California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1934, no. 53, repro.

1935 Paintings and Drawings by Hubert Robert, Wildenstein & Co., New York, 1935, no. 32.

1991

Lüdke, Dietmar. Hubert Robert 1733-1808: und die Brücken von Paris (Exh. cat. Staatliche Kunsthalle.) Karlsruhe, 1991: 94, under no. 51, repro.

2005 The Splendor of Ruins in French Landscape Painting 1630-1800, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio; The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2005, no. 30, repro.

2016 Hubert Robert 1733-1808, Musée du Louvre, Paris, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2016, no. 62, repro..

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