

Robert, Hubert

French, 1733 - 1808

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Paris in 1733, Hubert Robert was a landscape draftsman and painter whose early training was sponsored by members of the Choiseul family, the employers of his parents who were retainers in their household. In 1754 he traveled to Rome in the entourage of France's new ambassador to the papal court, Étienne François, comte de Stainville, the future duc de Choiseul (1719–1785), a political ally of the marquise de Pompadour (1721–1764). As a special favor, he resided at the Académie de France, where he studied with the school's master of perspective, the *vedutista* Giovanni Paolo Panini (Roman, 1691 - 1765) and sought the advice of the printmaker and draftsman Giovanni Battista Piranesi (Venetian, 1720 - 1778). From them he learned to experiment with the complexities of ancient Roman and modern Italian architecture, and in response to their work he learned to arbitrarily combine and contextualize ruins, transposing them into compositions that he filled with erudite references to the distant past and animated with picturesque staffage. He was befriended by his compatriot Jean Honoré Fragonard (French, 1732 - 1806), with whom he drew and painted landscapes in and around Rome. Robert remained in Italy for a decade, returning to Paris in 1765. He would ultimately draw much of his imagery from the studies he made during his Italian sojourn. He was almost immediately admitted to full membership in the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture.

Topography per se and the direct observation of nature held little interest for Robert; he specialized in *capricci*, idealized landscape and architectural fantasies. An artist of amazing versatility and technical virtuosity, he painted subject matter ranging from the frivolous to the sublime. He could paint on virtually any scale, from colossal decorations to pictures the size of large miniatures. He developed a rapid *alla prima* technique in which detail was sacrificed for an overall effect. During the final decades of the ancien régime, the indefatigable Robert was widely recognized not only as one of France's preeminent landscape and view painters but also as an accomplished and highly resourceful garden designer. His clientele included royalty, the aristocracy, and the wealthiest segments of the middle class, as well as foreign dignitaries. Imprisoned during the French Revolution, he survived the Reign of Terror.

Under the Directoire, Hubert Robert was reinstated in his official position as a curator of the Louvre, serving first as a member of the Conservatoire and, until late 1802, as part of the governing council of the Musée Central des Arts. He helped organize temporary exhibitions in the museum before its official opening in 1801. The artist's energy never lagged. He exhibited regularly at the Salon until 1798. Hubert Robert died in his studio at Auteuil of an attack of apoplexy on April 15, 1808, at the age of seventy-five. An exhaustive catalogue of his paintings, drawings, and prints would have to account for several thousand works.

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Joseph Baillio

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