

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

JEAN-PIERRE HOUËL

Rouen 1735 – 1813 Paris
French School

VIEW OF THE CASCATELLE AND THE 'VILLA OF MAECENAS', TIVOLI

Oil on canvas
H. 0,46 m; W. 0,38 m
Inscription on the stretcher: *houel*

DATE: 1772

PROVENANCE:
Private collection, France

RELATED WORK:
Jean-Pierre Houël, *Vue des Cascatelles de Tivoli*, Salon of 1775, no. 209 (current location unknown).

During the four years spent in Rome and Naples, Houël discovered a new way of seeing and experiencing nature. One of the best landscapists of his time, Houël amazes us with his rendering of atmosphere and his particular interest in backlit scenes.

After training initially with Jean-Baptiste Descamps who taught him drawing, Jean-Pierre Houël¹ worked for the Rouen architect, Thibault le Vieux. It was probably in this workshop that he became especially sensitive to architecture, one of his favourite motifs, a few years later. He continued his formation in Paris for about ten years from 1755 with the printmaker Jacques Philippe le Bas. He then concentrated mostly on printmaking, which was always a favoured means of expression for him. Houël interpreted the drawings of others, especially François Boucher; he engraved his own compositions and also provided drawings to printmakers. From then, Houël concentrated more on landscape treated in a way that at first owed much to Boucher, before evolving towards broader and more airy compositions evocative of Joseph Vernet.

Inspired by Dutch 17th Century Art

Houël painted his first works in 1764 in the studio of the landscape and battle painter from Italy, Francesco Casanova who was living in Paris. Houël then attracted the attention of members of influential Parisian society and attended the salon of Madame Geoffrin where the philosophers Diderot, D'Alembert and Marmontel rubbed shoulders with painters as prestigious as Boucher, Vien, Van Loo and Vincent. He taught the financier Barthélémy-Augustin Blondel printmaking and thus had easy access to one of the most important paintings galleries of Paris, especially rich in Dutch 17th century works, which influenced his conception of landscape. The Duke de Choiseul commissioned six overdoors from him for the Château of Chanteloup, four of which

¹ Maurice Vloberg, *Jean Houël, Peintre et graveur 1735-1813*, Paris, 1930. Madeleine Pinault Sørensen, exh. cat. *Houël. Voyage en Sicile 1776-1779*, Paris, Musée du Louvre, 26 March - 25 June 1990, Paris, 1990.

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are now at the Musée de Beaux-Arts of Tours.² Showing views of the Seine and this powerful minister's various properties in the Touraine, these pictures are among his most famous works in oil. With their panoramic vision, without any "repoussoir" elements in the foreground, these paintings include long successive planes leading the eye into the distance. Each view has been captured with an accurate feeling for the atmosphere and without too much care for picturesque effects. This highly innovative naturalism at the time is doubtless the influence of Dutch 17th century painters.



Jean-Pierre Houël, *View of the château of Feuillet at Souvigny*, 1769, oil on canvas, H. 0,86 m; W. 1,62 m, signed and dated lower right: *Houël f 1769*, Tours, Musée des Beaux-Arts

A New Vision of Nature

The patronage of the Duke de Choiseul and the support of Cochin allowed him to be given a place at the French Academy in Rome without competing for the Grand Prize. He thus lived in Italy from 1769 to 1772,³ discovering Naples and Sicily and making drawings that show his sensitivity to new landscapes. His manner of painting loosened and became more luminous. He became prominent as a landscape painter, a speciality that he no longer denied. Like Charles-Louis Clérisseau and other contemporaries, Houël then favoured the gouache used by Italian veduta artists.

Excursion to Tivoli

Houël became friendly with other *pensionnaires* at the French Academy in Rome, such as François-André Vincent (1746-1816)⁴ and the architect Pierre-Adrien Pâris (1745-1819) who mentions him several times in his *Journal manuscrit*.⁵ He describes several excursions with Houël and refers to an outing together to Tivoli in spring 1772.⁶ Our painting could have been

² *View of the Château of Feuillet at Souvigny*, 1769, oil on canvas, H. 0,86 m; W. 1,62 m, signed and dated lower right: *Houël f 1769*; *View of Paradis, near Chanteloup*, 1769, oil on canvas, H. 0,85 m; W. 1,62 m, signed and dated lower right: *Houël f 1769*; *View of the Loire between Amboise and Lussault*, 1769, oil on canvas, H. 0,84 m; W. 1,62 m, signed and dated lower right: *Houël f 1769*; *View of the Seine at the Gardens of the Arsenal*, 1769, oil on canvas, H. 1,02 m; W. 1,48 m, signed and dated lower right: *Houël f 1769*. All four are at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours.

³ Madeleine Pinault Sørensen, "Le voyage en Italie de Houël (1769-1772)", *Hommage au dessin. Mélanges offerts à Roseline Bacou*, Rimini, 1996, p. 501-519.

⁴ François-André Vincent drew a caricature of Houël (pen and brown ink on paper, H. 192 mm; W. 93 mm, Stockholm, Nationalmuseum) and a painted portrait of Houël, now at the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Rouen.

⁵ *Journal manuscrit* by Pierre-Adrien Pâris, Besançon, Bibliothèque Municipale, ms 6.

⁶ Madeleine Pinault Sørensen, "Le voyage en Italie de Houël (1769-1772)", *Hommage au dessin. Mélanges offerts à Roseline Bacou*, Rimini, 1996, p. 506.

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made *in situ* during this excursion. But it is likely that Houël used his favourite means of expression, in other words watercolour and gouache, to record this view from life and that he created our painting in his studio. In relation to Tivoli, a *View of the Villa of Maecenas*⁷ by Houël is known, in gouache, showing the large vaulted room opening towards the luminous and colourful Roman Campagna. In addition, a drawing showing *Neptune's Grotto at Tivoli*⁸ is attributed to him.

Four Years in France

After his return to Paris in 1772, Houël painted landscapes that show his fondness for Italy. In 1774, he became an *agrégé* at the Académie Royale, as a result of which he could participate in the Salons. He exhibited many views of Italian sites as well as some from the Ile-de-France at the Salon of 1775.⁹ Our painting may be a preparatory study for one of them, the *View of the Cascatelle at Tivoli*.¹⁰

The following year he left for Sicily with a precise project that would become the major project of his career: to write and illustrate a publication about the island. The four volumes of his encyclopaedic opus, *Voyage pittoresque des Isles de Sicile, de Malte et de Lipari* were published between 1782 and 1787.



Jean-Pierre Houël, *Landscape, Effect of Evening Falling*, c. 1769-1772, oil on canvas, H. 0,43 m; W. 0,63 m, Dijon, Musée national Magnin.

Another Backlit Landscape

Our painting can be compared to a beautiful oil on canvas attributed to Houël by Jean-Pierre Cuzin¹¹ in 1996: *Landscape, Effect of Evening Falling*. Houël's oil paintings are rare as he used this technique infrequently. Cuzin relies on a stylistic comparison with the gouaches made by the artist during his time in Sicily (1776-1779). He identified it as an Italian site and dated the work to Houël's Roman period between 1769 and 1772. The same interest in rendering atmospheric effects and his particular interest in backlighting with delicate but strong contrasts

⁷ Gouache, H. 375 mm; W. 508 mm, Paris, Hôtel Drouot, 10 April 1991, no. 13.

⁸ Grey wash over black chalk, white highlights on blue paper, sold London, Sotheby's, 9 July 1981, no. 46.

⁹ Numbers 193 to 220 of the section "peintures" of the Salon of 1775. However, it's not certain whether these are gouaches or oils on canvas.

¹⁰ Salon 1775, no. 209, current location unknown.

¹¹ Jean-Pierre Cuzin, "Une proposition pour Jean-Pierre Houël: le 'Paysage, effet de soir tombant' du musée Magnin de Dijon", *Hommage au dessin. Mélanges offerts à Roseline Bacou*, Rimini, 1996, p. 528-533 (fig. 1).

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between light and dark are visible here. A keen observer of luminous effects, in both cases, the artist has captured a section of the spectacle of nature, without adding any anecdotal effects.

The Cascatelle of Tivoli

The subject of our painting, the Cascatelle of Tivoli, was very popular in the 18th century and often painted by Hubert Robert, Fragonard and Joseph Vernet, the inventor of the composed landscape. At that time, the buildings with the arcades shown here were identified with the ruins of the residence of Caius Cilnius Maecenas (c. 70 B.C. – 8 B.C.). They are in fact the ruins of the sanctuary of Hercules Victorius (2nd century B.C.).

We can admire the freshness of our painting and the subtle treatment of light coming from behind the hill, leaving delicate reflections in the arcades. His innovative search for naturalism and the sensitivity of his eye led Houël to this remarkable rendering of the atmosphere created at a much earlier date than the oil studies of Valenciennes.