

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS

HUBERT ROBERT

Paris 1733 – id. 1808

French School

LAUNDRESSES AT THE WASH HOUSE

Oil on canvas
H. 0,51 m; W. 1,16 m

DATE: 1770-1775

PROVENANCE:

From a set of four overdoors

Anonymous sale, Paris, galerie Georges Petit, 4 May 1921, lot 24, repr. (with the other paintings of the set under lots 23,25 and 26)

Sale of the T. P. Thorne collection, Paris, galerie Georges Petit, 22-23 May 1922, lot 23, repr. (with the other paintings of the set under 22, 24 and 25), bought by Mr. Kremer.

Sale from the “docteur X” collection, Paris, galerie Charpentier, 28 March 1955, lot 78, repr. plate XVI (with its pendant under 79).

Private Collection

A landscape artist who specialised in painting architecture and ruins, and was also a great draughtsman and garden designer, Hubert Robert was one of the most prolific artists of his period. His strong interest in theatricality and decoration influenced the art of his time. The sensitivity of his art was perfectly expressed in what Diderot defined as the “poetics of ruins”, not without slight melancholy. Through his constant practice of painting outdoors, he paved the way for Pierre Henri de Valenciennes and modern landscape painting.

Famous for his large body of work, Hubert Robert drew and painted throughout his career. In Italy, where he lived from 1754 to 1765, he created mainly red chalk drawings showing architectural caprices inspired by Piranesi’s engravings and Panini’s *capricci*, as well as views of the sites of Rome, Lazio and the Campagna. Robert transposed some of these compositions to watercolour and, less frequently, to oil. Thanks to this way of creating variants Robert was able to be prolific and to offer his clients a unique work that was reminiscent of others. On his return to France, after being admitted to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1766, Robert produced a large number of paintings, mainly views of ruins, gardens, and landscapes, often containing souvenirs of his travels. A member of the Académie Royale, Designer of the King's Gardens in 1779, and then Keeper of the Paintings in the Royal Museum from 1784, Robert benefited throughout his career from the support of eminent personalities such as the Duc de Choiseul, the Comte d'Angiviller and the Marquis de Laborde. With the fall of the Ancien Régime, Robert lost most of his French clients but continued to receive numerous commissions from the imperial princes of Russia.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM

FINE ARTS

Four Overdoors

A painting little known to specialists, *Laundresses at the Wash House* is a perfect example of a variation created in response to several commissions for interior decoration and so embodies an essential aspect of Robert's art. When it appeared on the art market in 1921, the first time of which we are aware, the painting still formed part of a set of four over-doors on the theme of laundresses and water carriers (Figs. 1 to 3). These women are shown busying themselves in turn at a washhouse, around a fountain, under a bridge, and under a wooden footbridge spanning a stream. In each case they are placed in the foreground, with the exception of the painting studied here, which shows a man wrapped in a red cape, his head covered by a large hat and his hand holding a stick. This is a recurring figure in Robert's work, inspired by the studies he sketched in the notebooks he kept throughout his life.¹

The four paintings are conceived as two pairs that create a harmonious opposition. Thus, the fountain and the wash-house are two open-air views, while the bridge and the wooden footbridge are composed with a scene under an arch that Robert appreciated so much in Piranesi's work. While the water carriers are the main protagonists of the views with the fountain and the bridge, the laundresses are the focus of the compositions with the wash-house and the footbridge. Further analysis through comparing the interplay of colours would be of interest, but the other paintings are known only from black and white reproductions in auction catalogues. Nevertheless, the overdoors illustrate Robert's sense of construction, the visual and lighting effects he liked to create, and the speed with which he translated his ideas with his brush.

Reformulating Ideas

Given the archives and sources currently available, it has not been possible to identify the initial owner of this group highlighting the themes of water and daily labour. We know that Robert chose this subject for the four large views of the Salle des États in the archbishop's palace in Rouen, painted between 1774 and 1775.² It is also the theme of the large painting made around 1770-1775 for the billiard room in the château of La Chapelle-Godefroy, owned by Jean Nicolas de Boullongne (Fig. 4).³ In fact, Robert seems to have divided this vast composition into four sections to create the set of overdoors studied here. Part of the architecture of the wash-house, with a vault supporting a terrace decorated with a pergola is visible. In the large painting, the combination of the stone bridge and the wooden footbridge, which Robert had depicted separately in two paintings, reappears. Robert invented the composition with the fountain for overall iconographic cohesion. Of all the motifs, only the three laundresses under the vault of the washhouse have been reproduced faithfully. As usual, Robert has preferred here to reformulate his compositions. He began by changing the format, moving from an almost square shape to a wide rectangle. He then isolated the motifs in the four new compositions and modified the architecture, adding or subtracting details. Robert may have based this reformulation on a modello that has yet to be identified, or he may have worked directly from Boullongne's large painting. This last hypothesis is worth considering, especially as Robert liked to receive his clients in his studio to arouse a desire to own a variation on a composition

¹ For example the study of six figures, black chalk on laid paper, H. 450 mm ; L. 355 mm, Lille, Palais des beaux-arts, inv. PI 1466. When he died, Robert still owned 50 notebooks and sketchbooks.

² See the reproductions in exh. cat. *Hubert Robert (1733-1808), un peintre visionnaire*, Paris, musée du Louvre, 2016, cat. 91.

³ *Ruined Bridge*, c. 1770-1775, oil on canvas, H. 2,55 m; W. 2,90 m, Troyes, musée Saint-Loup, inv. 835.17; See the full study by Guillaume Faroult in *ibid.*, cat. 70.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM FINE ARTS

in progress. Finally, we know of a modern copy of the painting, which was sold in the USA in 1993.⁴

Sarah Catala



Fig. 1
Les Lavandières à la fontaine, oil on canvas,
H. 0,51 m; W. 1,15 m,
current location unknown



Fig. 2
Les Lavandières sous le pont de pierre, oil on
canvas, H. 0,51 m;
W. 1,15 m, current
location unknown



Fig. 3
Les Lavandières sous la passerelle de bois, oil on
canvas, H. 0,51 m; W.
1,15 m, current location
unknown

⁴ Sold in New York, Christie's, 14 January 1993, lot 54 (as "attributed to Hubert Robert").

JEAN-FRANÇOIS HEIM
FINE ARTS



Fig. 4
Ruined Bridge, c. 1770-1775, oil on canvas, H. 2,55 m; W. 2,90 m, Troyes, musée Saint-Loup, inv. 835.17.