

HUBERT ROBERT

1733 - Paris - 1808

*Escalier dans le parc d'une villa romaine*

Red chalk on paper; c.1764-5.  
277 x 370 mm

PROVENANCE: Jean Cailleux, Paris – Private collection, France

Robert was one of the leading French landscape painters of the eighteenth century. He was also a prolific draughtsman. Best known for his views of Rome, he played a major role in elevating landscape as a viable artistic genre. He was deeply impressed by the grandeur of the monuments of antiquity and the architecture of contemporary Rome. In July 1765, he returned to Paris after a sojourn of eleven years in Italy, taking with him an important body of sketches and drawings that supplied him with motifs long after his return to France.

Robert developed a fascination with architectural subjects. In the 1770s he also worked as a landscape architect. He was noted for his highly imaginative, picturesque garden designs in the English and Chinese style. This naturalistic approach differed from the formal style of French landscape design. It was strongly influenced by his knowledge of Italian gardens, such as the gardens of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, and the Villa Pamphili and the Villa Medici in Rome.<sup>1</sup>

His drawings depict two types of architectural view – accurately rendered subjects and exaggerated or recomposed images. The present drawing, executed in Robert's preferred medium, red chalk, can be ascribed to the second group. It represents a double flight of stone steps in the park of an Italian villa. Two straight flights of steps surmount a semicircular vault. Behind the vault, a second flight of steps with two gesturing figures underlines the monumental aspect of the construction. A rather similar vault is depicted in a later drawing held at the Musée de Valence<sup>2</sup> (fig. 1). The perspective drawing and architectural imagery of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-78) were clearly influential.

Robert was one of the first artists to derive inspiration from this motif which was to become one of his preferred subjects.<sup>3</sup> In the present composition he masterfully juxtaposes areas of untouched paper with passages of dense hatching and tonal gradation to evoke the brilliance of Italian light. The freedom and rapidity of the draughtsmanship coupled with the clear debt to Piranesi suggest a date of execution around 1764-5, towards the end of his stay in Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Davis in his entry on Hubert Robert, *Landscape with steps*, 1770s, red chalk, in *Master Drawings in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, exhib. cat., Los Angeles 1997, no. 39, p.92.

<sup>1</sup> Marguerite Beau, *La collection des dessins d'Hubert Robert au musée de Valence*, Lyon, 1968, no. 74.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Pantazi in his entry on Hubert Robert, *Garden of an Italian Villa* (depicting the steps at the Villa Negroni, Rome), oil on canvas, Ottawa, National Gallery of Canada, in *Drawn to Art, French Artists and Art Lovers in 18th-century Rome*, exhib. cat., National Gallery of Canada and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Caen, 2012, no. 26, p.82.

# LE CLAIRE

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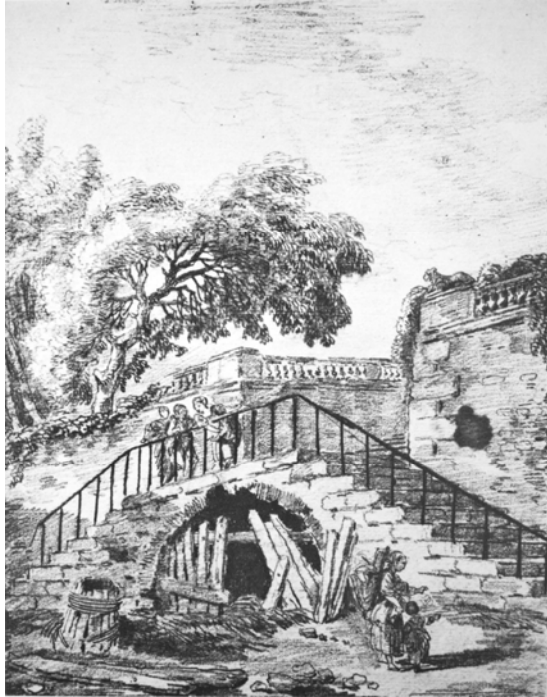


Fig. 1: *Escalier dans le parc d'une villa romaine*, red chalk, 370 x 295 mm.  
Musée de Valence [inv. D. 68]