

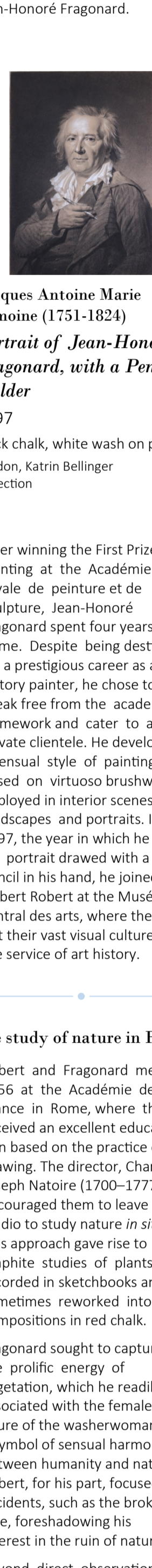
Hubert Robert & Fragonard

A Feeling for nature

Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806) and Hubert Robert (1733–1808), major figures in French art in the second half of the eighteenth century, shared a deep interest in nature, which they explored through drawing, painting and, in Robert's case, garden design. In Rome, they explored ancient ruins and palace gardens overgrown with vegetation. Within a few years, each had forged a unique expression of the botanical world: Fragonard revealed its abundance and creative force, while Robert exposed its decay and destructive power.

After returning to France, their paths diverged and each entered into dialogue with the masters of landscape painting such as Jacob van Ruisdael (1628–1682), Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), and Joseph Vernet (1714–1789). Fragonard, resistant to the constraints of the royal administration, found in private clients a fertile ground for experimenting with an art form in which the pictorial gesture embodied the power of nature. Robert adopted a more versatile approach to landscape painting: recognised as an “architectural painter” and appointed “designer of the king's gardens,” he created correspondences between his paintings and his clients' gardens.

Thanks to the rich collections of the Musée de Valence, supplemented by loans from French and international public and private collections, the exhibition aims to shed light on Robert and Fragonard's complementary and sensitive relationship with the botanical world throughout their careers. This “feeling for nature,” at the crossroads of observation, imagination and an awareness of time, informed their representations of the landscape. It recalls the fertility of inspiration drawn from nature, making this exhibition a mirror for reflecting on our connection to living things.



Jean-Baptiste Isabey

(1767-1855)

Portrait of Hubert Robert with a Portfolio

1798

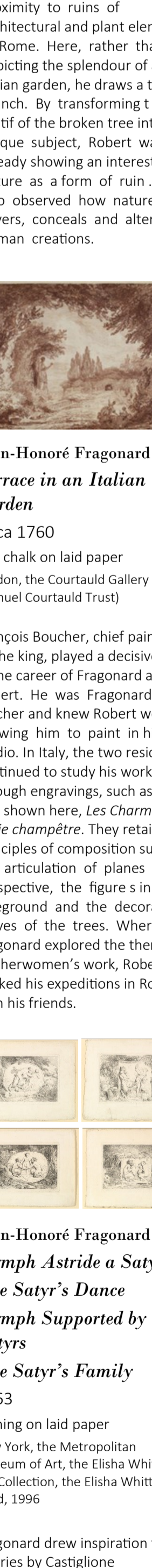
Black chalk heightened with white on paper

London, Katrin Bellingier Collection

Hubert Robert, a protégé of the future Duke of Choiseul, trained in Rome, where he lived from 1754 to 1765. Upon returning to France, he established himself as a prolific painter, exhibiting regularly at the Salon.

His paintings renewed the genre of the *capriccio*, which combines ruins and masterpieces in imaginary places enhanced by a strong landscape dimension.

Sought after by a clientele from the financial and aristocratic elite, he also designed gardens. The portrait shows him at the age of sixty-five, holding a portfolio, at the time when he had resumed his duties as curator at the Muséum central des arts in the Louvre, alongside Jean-Honoré Fragonard.



Jacques Antoine Marie Lemoine

(1751-1824)

Portrait of Jean-Honoré Fragonard, with a Pencil Holder

1797

Black chalk, white wash on paper

London, Katrin Bellingier Collection

After winning the First Prize for Painting at the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture, Jean-Honoré Fragonard spent four years in Rome. Despite being destined for a prestigious career as a history painter, he chose to break free from the academic framework and cater to a private clientele. He developed a sensual style of painting based on virtuoso brushwork, deployed in interior scenes, landscapes and portraits. In 1797, the year in which he had his portrait drawn with a pencil in his hand, he joined Hubert Robert at the Muséum central des arts, where they put their vast visual culture at the service of art history.

The study of nature in Rome

Robert and Fragonard met in 1756 at the Académie de France in Rome, where they received an excellent education based on the practice of drawing. The director, Charles-Joseph Natoire (1700–1777), encouraged them to leave the studio to study nature *in situ*.

This approach gave rise to graphite studies of plants, recorded in sketchbooks and sometimes reworked into compositions in red chalk.

Fragonard sought to capture the prolific energy of vegetation, which he readily associated with the female figure of the washerwoman, a symbol of sensual harmony between humanity and nature. Robert, for his part, focused on accidents, such as the broken tree, foreshadowing his interest in the ruin of nature.

Beyond direct observation of reality, both artists drew inspiration from the landscapes of masters such as Salvator Rosa (1615–1673), Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (1609–1664) and François Boucher (1703–1770). Robert and Fragonard experimented with translating nature into black and white through etching, alongside travellers on the Grand Tour who had come to Italy, and Rome in particular, to further their cultural education.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Studies of Trees

Circa 1761-1765

Graphite on laid paper

Besançon, municipal library, Pierre-Adrien Pâris collection

At the beginning of their careers, the artists assiduously practised drawing from life, building up a repertoire of motifs during their walks to inspire their compositions. The five pages presented here come from sketchbooks from which they were extracted at the end of the eighteenth century. Fragonard focused on the study of trees, the perspectives of paths and the shapes of branches. This careful work reflects a renewed interest in the observation of nature in a context marked by the rise of botany in the eighteenth century.

Hubert Robert

The Fallen Tree

Circa 1760-1763

Red chalk on laid paper

Valence, Musée de Valence – art et archéologie

Robert's early studies reveal a fascination with the everyday proximity to ruins of architectural and plant elements in Rome. Here, rather than depicting the splendour of an Italian garden, he draws a tree branch. By transforming the motif of the broken tree into a unique subject, Robert was already showing an interest in nature as a form of ruin. He also observed how nature covers, conceals and alters human creations.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Terrace in an Italian Garden

Circa 1760

Red chalk on laid paper

London, the Courtauld Gallery (Samuel Courtauld Trust)

François Boucher, chief painter to the king, played a decisive role in the career of Fragonard and Robert. He was Fragonard's teacher and knew Robert well, allowing him to paint in his studio. In Italy, the two residents continued to study his work through engravings, such as the one shown here, *Les Charmes de la vie champêtre*. They retained principles of composition such as the articulation of planes in perspective, the figures in the foreground and the decorative curves of the trees. Whereas Fragonard explored the theme of washerwomen's work, Robert evoked his expeditions in Rome with his friends.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Nymph Astride a Satyr

The Satyr's Dance

Nymph Supported by Two Satyrs

The Satyr's Family

1763

Etching on laid paper

New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Elisha Whittelsey Collection, the Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1996

Fragonard drew inspiration from a series by Castiglione (opposite), a highly regarded engraver at the time, to create his own. In an openly sensual vein, he mischievously subverted the craze for Antiquity. On imaginary bas-reliefs, set amongst exuberant vegetation, he depicts games between mythological characters. Around the nymph supported by two satyrs, the presence of guinea pigs accentuates the sexual dimension of the scene, since these animals were associated with procreation in the eighteenth century. This detail reveals the artist's playful attention to naturalist knowledge, as disseminated by Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon.

Hubert Robert

The Artist's Calling Card

1764

Etching on paper

Nacfaire de Saint-Paulet Collection

In Rome, in the company of fellow Grand Tour travellers, Robert practised etching for the first and last time. Very few copies of the visiting card he engraved in 1764 have survived to this day. Intended to accompany the artist's social exchanges in Italy, this card also reveals the care he took in promoting his name. By adopting the Latinised form “ROBERTI” and inscribing it on a half-buried ruin, he affirmed his identity and presented himself as a painter of ruins attentive to nature.