

Nature as matrix : between pleasure and knowledge

The anthropomorphic landscape, present since the Renaissance in literature, painting and garden design, reflects a way of seeing nature through forms evocative of the human body. This carnal, even erotic dimension is expressed through sexualised forms: protuberances of trees, concavities of caves, mossy textures and flowing fluids. Nature is presented as a place that combines pleasure and fertility.

In Fragonard's work, this vision was as much in tune with libertine culture as it was with the maternal world. Nature was not only the backdrop for scenes inherited from the *fête galante*, but the very matrix of a universe dominated by abundance.

Robert, aware of the feminine symbolism of the grotto, developed a fascination for rocks, which he featured in his paintings and garden designs, such as the *Baths of Apollo Grove at Versailles* (1776). Their approach reflects their knowledge of the work of naturalists and the chemist Antoine Lavoisier (1743-1794), a pioneer in the field of geology.

Keen to emphasise the monumental dimension of nature, both artists adopted increasingly large formats in order to immerse the viewer in landscapes that transcend the limits of reality. In interior spaces, Robert created places flooded with nature: his paintings were reflected in large mirrors and echoed the gardens visible through the windows, thereby abolishing the boundary between inside and outside.



Hubert Robert

View of a Cave

Circa 1760

Red chalk on laid paper

Valence, Musée de Valence – art et archéologie

The mineral kingdom occupies an essential place in Robert's works and gardens. Rocks constitute an object of study and observation of shapes, crevices and textures. He drew this cave during a trip to Italy, from the inside looking towards its luminous opening. This choice allowed him to create strong contrasts of light and to use the theme of the arch, a recurring motif in his work. With vigorous strokes, Robert emphasises the idea that nature contains within it the very principles of architecture, as if built forms found their origin in the mineral world.



Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Capriccio Inspired by the Garden of Villa Negroni in Rome

Circa 1760-1761

Red chalk and graphite on laid paper

Ariane and Lionel Sauvage Collection

This frontal view, symmetrically arranged around a central axis, reveals Fragonard's rapid execution, by which he sought to express the vital energy of nature. More than a representation of a garden, the artist offers a fantastical vision with an overtly erotic tone in order to awaken the viewer's imagination. The trees and vegetation on either side of the composition form contours that explicitly resemble female genitalia, with a female statue enthroned at the centre, like a deity presiding over the revelation of a hidden world.



Hubert Robert

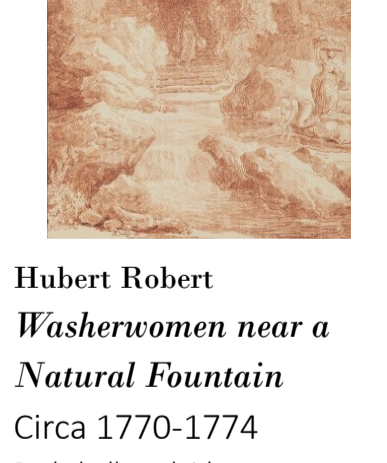
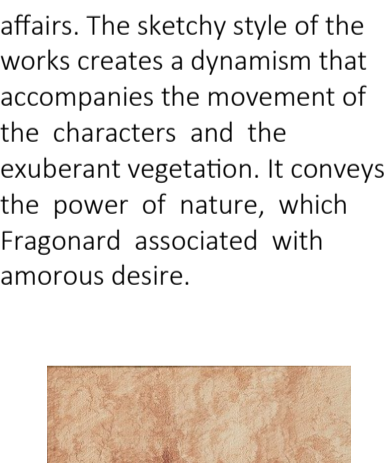
The Baths of Apollo Grove at Versailles

Circa 1777

Black chalk, pen, Indian ink, grey ink, highlights in grey wash, brown wash and water-colour on two sheets of laid paper

Versailles, Musée national des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon

By combining references to sculpture and ruined architecture in rocky landscapes of his own invention, Robert developed a style of painting that served as a model for gardens. This practice led to him being commissioned to create "fabriques," or installations designed to adorn parks, such as the one designed to showcase a group of sculptures once for Louis XIV. This spectacular artificial grotto project brought him decisive recognition, culminating in his appointment as designer of the king's gardens in 1784.



Hubert Robert

The Great Rock

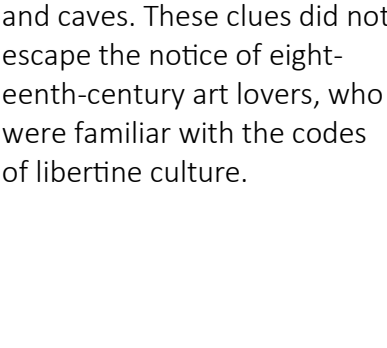
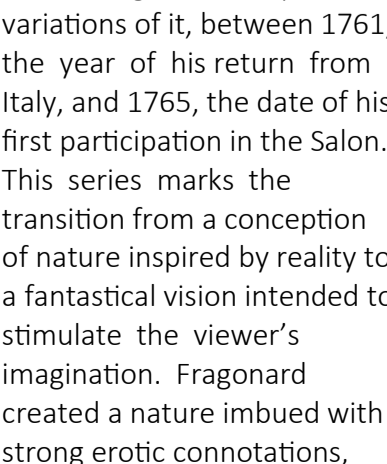
The Great Waterfall

Circa 1790

Oil on canvas

Paris, Galerie Éric Coatalem

In 1786, Robert was commissioned by the banker Jean-Joseph de Laborde (1724-1794) to renovate the Méréville estate, located between Paris and Orléans. Using existing plans, he added architectural creations inspired by Antiquity and monumental sculptures of artificial rocks in the park. He also produced paintings to decorate the interior of the castle, such as this pair, designed for the billiard room. These paintings resonate with the garden, evoking the structures built under his direction. They bear witness to the innovative landscaping project at Méréville, based on the idea of nature as both spectacular and omnipresent.



Jean-Honoré Fragonard

The Surprise

The Pursuit

Circa 1771

Oil on canvas

Angers, Musée des Beaux-Arts

These two works are sketches for a series of paintings entitled *Les Progrès de l'amour*, commissioned by Madame du Barry (1743-1793), the king's favourite. Fragonard sought to create an atmosphere in the salon that was as joyful as that in the gardens. Here, he depicts young people chasing each other, observed by Venus and stone *putti*, allegories of love. In eighteenth-century literature, the garden is a place for relaxation, daydreaming or leisure, as well as a space conducive to libertine love affairs. The sketchy style of the works creates a dynamism that accompanies the movement of the characters and the exuberant vegetation. It conveys the power of nature, which Fragonard associated with amorous desire.

Hubert Robert

Washerwomen near a Natural Fountain

Circa 1770-1774

Red chalk on laid paper

Valence, Musée de Valence – art et archéologie

This red chalk drawing reinterprets a view of a garden drawn around 1734 by Jean-Baptiste Oudry (opposite). At the request of collector Pierre-Jean Mariette, Robert added the figure of a water carrier. Here, he revisits this motif, tightening the frame on the edge of the woods, whose shape evokes female genitalia. This choice reveals his understanding of nature as anthropomorphic and associated with women's labour, reconnecting with the idea of nature as both mysterious and hidden.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

The Little Park, View of the Villa d'Este in Tivoli

Circa 1763-1764

Etching on laid paper

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Department of Prints and Photography

Le Petit parc occupies a unique place in Fragonard's work. He produced at least six drawn, engraved and painted variations of it, between 1761, the year of his return from Italy, and 1765, the date of his first participation in the Salon. This series marks the transition from a conception of nature inspired by reality to a fantastical vision intended to stimulate the viewer's imagination. Fragonard created a nature imbued with strong erotic connotations, with evocative hollows, foliage and caves. These clues did not escape the notice of eighteenth-century art lovers, who were familiar with the codes of libertine culture.