

## The art of strolling or the spectacle of life

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Robert and Fragonard dominated landscape painting in France, alongside their elder Joseph Vernet. The two former comrades continued to develop complementary approaches: Robert composed views in which nature enveloped everyday buildings or ancient structures in ruins, whereas Fragonard used it to conceal the pleasures and entertainments of his time.

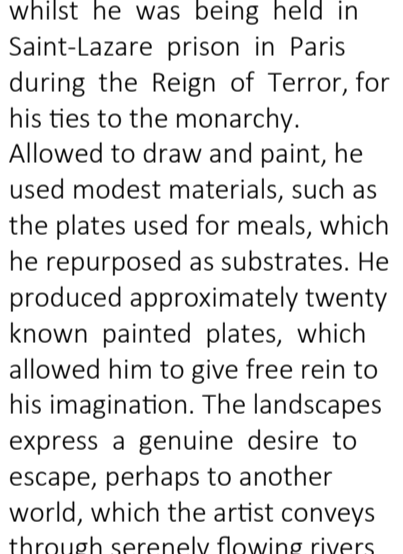
Both artists broke free from the theoretical framework of landscape painting to play with the visual codes of the *fête galante*, pastoral scenes, ruins and garden views. They conceived of nature as a space for play, physical well-being and social interaction, with walking being the ultimate expression of this. This practice is the common thread running through their works: Fragonard depicts it in a lush, fairy-tale setting, whereas Robert presents it as a genuine spectacle, as illustrated by the view of a night-time party at the Petit Trianon. Both men used a varied colour palette, ranging from greens to purples, sometimes even including silvery tones. All of this is conveyed through rapid, allusive brushstrokes that invite the viewer to give free rein to their imagination.

When Fragonard withdrew from the art scene in the late 1780s, Robert was deprived of a fruitful emulation. Whilst his colleague remained sensitive to English painting, in which nature reflects the state of mind, Robert continued his work on tombs and ancient ruins immersed in nature. These memorial motifs encouraged meditation on the moral sensibility advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Unlike Fragonard, Robert was mindful of his reputation: the recurring signature on his works and the image of the artist at work reveal a concern for posterity, mixed with a desire to defy the fragility of the human condition.

Towards the end of their careers, Robert and Fragonard developed what would now be termed an ecological conscience. In 1795, having become curators of the Muséum central des arts – which later became the Louvre – they signed a petition against the felling of trees:

*“The undersigned citizens, artists, represent that, without denying the urgent need for firewood for the city of Paris, for which reason most of the Bois de Boulogne is being cut down, it would be beneficial for the studies of artists and even for the property of the Republic to preserve the small portion that runs alongside the village of Auteuil.”*

They defended other values, aesthetic and heritage-related, and suggested protecting a remarkable natural space, since they considered it to be a landscape.



### Hubert Robert

#### *The Waterfall*, 1793

#### *By the river*,

Circa 1793-1794

Oil on glazed pipe clay

Valence, Musée de Valence – art et archéologie

Robert created these two works whilst he was being held in Saint-Lazare prison in Paris during the Reign of Terror, for his ties to the monarchy.

Allowed to draw and paint, he used modest materials, such as the plates used for meals, which he repurposed as substrates. He produced approximately twenty known painted plates, which allowed him to give free rein to his imagination. The landscapes express a genuine desire to escape, perhaps to another world, which the artist conveys through serenely flowing rivers and powerful waterfalls.



### Hubert Robert

#### *Napoléon Bonaparte in front of a Folly Designed for the Gardens of Malmaison*

Circa 1800

Oil on canvas

Private collection, courtesy of Pierre-Antoine Martenet

Here, Robert imagines a stroll through the park at Malmaison. Napoleon Bonaparte and Josephine de Beauharnais, depicted surrounded by ladies-in-waiting, are heading towards a rustic pavilion decorated with flowers, symbolising his passion for botany. With this image, Robert was undoubtedly seeking to attract Josephine's attention and assert his expertise in the art of gardening, whilst pursuing a broader reflection on the primitive origins of architecture, which he associated with nature and the simplicity of forms.



### Hubert Robert

#### *The Solitary Walk*

Circa 1777-1780

Oil on canvas

Private collection



### Jean-Honoré Fragonard

#### *The Promenade*

Circa 1780-1790

Black chalk, grey wash on laid paper, stylus marks

Private collection

In the tranquillity of a wood, Robert depicts a woman walking towards a ruined tomb, evoking contemplation and the passage of time. The view unfolds under an arch formed by jagged branches and trunks, reflecting the solitary walker's state of mind, as if echoing the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In Fragonard's painting, the vegetation seems to quiver as the elegant young woman and her dogs pass by. With quick, light brushstrokes, he suggests a journey that is both physical and introspective.