

# French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor



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## Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80

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<b>Artist</b>	Hubert Robert, French, 1733–1808
<b>Title</b>	<i>Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château</i>
<b>Object Date</b>	ca. 1775–80
<b>Alternate and Variant Titles</b>	<i>Imaginary View of the Terrace at the Château of Marly; The Terrace at the Château de Marly; Vue prise de Marly vers Saint Germain-en-Laye; Three Ladies on the Terrace at Marly</i>
<b>Medium</b>	Oil on canvas
<b>Dimensions (Unframed)</b>	35 1/4 x 52 1/4 in. (89.5 x 132.7 cm)
<b>Credit Line</b>	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 31-97

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doi: 10.37764/78973.5.330

### Catalogue Entry

#### Citation

##### Chicago:

Sarah Catala, "Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80," catalogue entry in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.330.5407>.

##### MLA:

Catala, Sarah. "Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80," catalogue entry. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.330.5407.

Long thought to be a view of the terraces of the Château de Marly, this painting remains a purposeful mystery. While there is no doubt that this is the work of Hubert Robert, the interpretation of its subject, proposed by various commentators over the last century, deserves to be revisited. When the painting was exhibited to the public in Paris in 1928, it was presented under the evocative title *View from Marly Toward Saint-Germain-en-Laye*. However, Marly's gardens did not include elevated terraces with views of a neighboring valley, as seen in this painting. Quite to the contrary, Marly is nestled in the hollow of a valley, where it was a favorite retreat for Louis XIV and his court. Behind the estate was the "Marly Machine," used to supply water to the Marly fountains as well as the château and gardens of Versailles. The Marly Machine was also within sight of the old and new châteaux of Saint-Germain-en-Laye. However, the château depicted by Robert does not correspond to either the new château (destroyed in 1810) or the old one, which today houses the National Museum of Archaeology. Finally, although the painting's title had included the word "Marly" since at least 1928, the Nelson-Atkins Museum retitled it in 2022, during the

preparation of this catalogue, in order to acknowledge its invented nature.<sup>1</sup> This revision not only addresses the complexity of connecting the painting to Robert's documented views of Marly but also positions it within the tradition of *capriccio*, or architectural fantasy. Robert was an undisputed master of this genre in France during the second half of the eighteenth century.



Fig. 1. Hubert Robert, *Ruins on the Terrace in Marly Park*, early 1780s, oil on canvas, 23 3/16 x 34 1/4 in. (59 x 87 cm), The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, inv. ГЭ-5647. Photo © The State Hermitage Museum / photo by Pavel Demidov

Accepted into the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture in 1766 as an architectural painter, Robert also taught landscape drawing to wealthy amateurs before being appointed Keeper of the King's Paintings in 1778 and then Designer of the King's Gardens in 1784. From the beginning, he transformed the locations that he painted, adding famous sculptures to flatter the tastes of his clients, who first included Grand Tour collectors and then the financial elite gathered around the powerful Duc de Choiseul. In 1775, Robert's first garden view exhibited at the Salon depicted those of the Château de Gaillon, a perfect architectural example of the transition between medieval and Renaissance art in France, which was then an interest of Robert's.<sup>2</sup> Just as viewers were admiring Robert's painting at the Salon, workers were beginning to enhance the gardens at the Château de la Roche-Guyon, a medieval estate on the Seine River owned by the La Rochefoucauld family, where Robert provided decorative work.<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of Robert's works at the Salon during this time show that the artist was keen to associate his name with the representation of domesticated nature, featuring prominent gardens: "Two Views of the Gardens of Versailles," "View of Marly's Surroundings," and "Two Paintings from Nature in Ermenonville" in 1777; and "Two Paintings from Nature in the Gardens of Marly" in 1783.<sup>4</sup> This brief

examination of the Salon booklets reflects the artist's social circles, including owners of these châteaux, and his active participation in the passion for gardens that was then underway in France.<sup>5</sup> It also attests to the importance of Marly in Robert's work. Nevertheless, a question remains: which, if any, of these paintings have survived to the present day?

In 2016, Yuriko Jackall inventoried Robert's paintings of Marly exhibited at the Salon and sold in the eighteenth century, but she found no parallel to the Kansas City painting or to the lone extant documented view by Robert of Marly, now in the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg (Fig. 1).<sup>6</sup> I contend, however, that the Saint Petersburg painting is probably the one mentioned in the catalogue for a sale of works owned by the sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828) in 1795 and immediately acquired by Prince Nikolai Borisovich Yusupov, a Russian nobleman and statesman.<sup>7</sup> Very early on, Robert adopted the habit of capitalizing on the popularity of compositions he first exhibited at the Salon (like those of Marly) and providing variants for his loyal clients, particularly those who were committed to the development of the arts in France.<sup>8</sup> We can intuit from the Salon booklets that the series of views they described as of Marly probably depicted the promenade and the sculpture area in the gardens. Although the other versions are lost, a compositional link can be inferred through the sculptures depicted in the Saint Petersburg painting, which features the equestrian group the *Marly Horses* by Guillaume Coustou the elder (1677–1746), and the Nelson-Atkins painting, which shows *Mercury Fastening His Sandal* by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (1714–85), both associated with the paintings that have come to be known as Robert's "Marly series."<sup>9</sup> For the aristocracy, who would have been trained in connoisseurship, making connections between real and imagined landscapes and famous contemporary sculptors was like a game and contributed to their enjoyment of not only Robert's paintings but also the places they alluded to.

Both paintings reveal the artist's careful attention to the overall composition along with his painstaking study of details. A black chalk sketch from early in Robert's artistic process, preserved in a notebook in the Musée du Louvre (Fig. 2), depicts a couple in a low, horizontal foreground near a stone balustrade, standing before a distant valley. This view echoes the experience that visitors on the Grand Tour had when discovering the Tivoli Gardens in Lazio, Italy, overlooking the Aniene River Valley and the Apennine Mountains. Robert reworked the composition in a red chalk drawing, which



Fig. 2. Hubert Robert, *Figures in a Park Bordered by an Overhanging Balustrade*, ca. 1775, black chalk on laid paper, 4 9/16 x 3 1/2 in. (11.6 x 8.8 cm), Département des Arts graphiques, Musée du Louvre, Paris, RF 11567, recto



Fig. 3. Hubert Robert, *Terrace of an Italian Villa*, ca. 1765, watercolor, brown ink, and red chalk counterproof on laid paper, 13 15/16 x 11 7/16 in. (35.5 x 29 cm), National Museum, Warsaw, acc. no. Rys.Ob.d.556 MNW

has been lost, but its counterproof, enhanced with watercolor, is at the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> Robert modeled this composition on the Louvre drawing but elaborated the couple further, showing them contemplating the vista while the woman points to a monument visible in the valley beyond. Robert expanded this idea in the Nelson-Atkins painting by integrating three elegant women, previously sketched in isolation with black chalk on paper (Fig. 4), as well as Pigalle's statue of Mercury, which Robert had previously drawn in red chalk (Fig. 5). He relied on his imagination, rather than an accurate model, to draw the fountain with the lion's muzzle and the vases on the balustrade.<sup>11</sup> Finally, Robert freely evoked words on stone, deliberately making them illegible.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 4. Hubert Robert, *Study for "Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Chateau,"* ca. 1775–80, black chalk on paper, 6 5/8 x 8 5/8 in. (16.8 x 21.9 cm), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 55-81



Fig. 5. Hubert Robert, *Two Statues in a Park*, 1765–70, red chalk drawing on fine cream laid paper, 11 7/16 x 14 1/2 in. (29 x 36.8 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Quimper, inv. no. 873-2-40

No inscription or known archival document provides a date for the Nelson-Atkins painting, but comparison with other works helps to establish a chronological range. As noted above, Robert presented two medium-size landscapes inspired by Marly at the Salon of 1777 and two small vertical sketches at the Salon of 1783.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, these works are lost.<sup>14</sup> However, we know that the period beginning in 1775 marked a turning point in Robert's career, as he designed the layout of his clients' gardens and also depicted those same clients, surrounded by nature, in his paintings: Élisabeth Louise de La Rochefoucauld, wife of the future Duc de Rohan-Chabot, drawing in front of La Roche-Guyon (ca. 1775; Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen); and Pierre Jacques Onésyme Bergeret and his mistress, Jeanne Viguier, renowned collectors and Grand Tour travelers, in front of an immense landscape inspired by Tivoli and the Alps, painted in 1779 (Fig. 6).<sup>15</sup> We may therefore estimate that the Nelson-Atkins painting was completed during this period, between about 1775 and 1780.



Fig. 6. Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of the Tivoli Waterfall*, 1779, oil on canvas, 97 5/8 x 148 13/16 in. (248 x 378 cm), Château de Maisons, Maisons-Laffitte, acc. no. MAI 1989000058. Photo: © Reproduction Patrick Cadet / CMN

Searching Robert's work for a perfectly faithful view of a place or a person is a futile task. Robert was neither a topographer nor a portraitist but an artist who inspired the imagination of his admirers, as when he painted the renovation of the gardens surrounding the Palace of Versailles in 1777 (Fig. 7). The composition of that work, a royal commission, recalls that of the Nelson-Atkins painting, with the foreground covering the entire bottom section of the canvas, pushing the view of nature into the background. Both canvases highlight female figures in the foreground and sculptures by French artists.<sup>16</sup>

Although he sketched *sur le motif*, Robert painted his final works in his studio at the Louvre, where he combined aspects of studies, like the Warsaw drawing, with compositions from fully realized paintings, like the one of Versailles that he completed for the king. In the Bergeret painting (see Fig. 6), he used a model (whose identity has not been established) for the woman raising her arm, and for the Nelson-Atkins painting he reversed and combined her with the sketch of three women (see Fig. 4). Finally, he added the statue of Mercury, taken from the red chalk drawing (see Fig. 5), which he had already used at least once before in *The Bathing Pool*, painted for the Château de Bagatelle and commissioned by the Comte d'Artois in 1777 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 7. Hubert Robert, *The Entrance to the Tapis Vert at Versailles*, 1777, oil on canvas, 48 13/16 x 75 3/16 in. (124 x 191 cm), Château de Versailles, acc. no. MV 774. Photo: Christophe Fouin. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

Apart from preliminary studies completed on site, Robert usually made a large painting first, often displaying it at the Salon, and later created reduced versions for private clients. Given the modest dimensions of the Saint Petersburg painting, it is likely that it was created after the Nelson-Atkins painting and may have been inspired by it.<sup>18</sup> The proposed date range of both paintings seems to be reinforced by multiple links between them and the paintings mentioned above, dated from 1777 to 1779. All of them depict the need for rest during a walk, in order to relax with family or as a couple, and to indulge in the contemplation of nature and works of art in the gardens.

Robert generally worked on commission, but sometimes he took the liberty of creating paintings tailored to his clients' tastes on speculation, without receiving a commission in advance.<sup>19</sup> Because we can trace the provenance of the Nelson-Atkins painting only to 1892,

we can merely speculate about the reasons for its creation. I propose that the painting is a *capriccio* with Pigalle's statue and a medieval château. Robert may have wanted to refer to the relocation of a lead copy of the Mercury statue—formerly the property of the Marquise de Pompadour—to the garden of the Château d'Anet in 1775,<sup>20</sup> although the painted château does not resemble Anet. As for Robert's painted château, its location on the hillside without a defensive position identifies it as a place of leisure. It is composed of two *corps de logis* (main buildings) with two levels of bays, separated by three semi-separate towers topped with conical roofs, as well as one or two large entrance towers connected to a smaller *corps de logis* with a roof pierced by richly decorated dormers. Below, cut by irregular bastions, the enclosure recalls a medieval château. A possible inspiration is the Château de Josselin, which the Duc de Rohan-Chabot planned to renovate around 1775, just as Robert was working to complete a decorated portal for the medieval tower of La Roche-Guyon, which was owned by the family of the duke's wife.<sup>21</sup> The duchess wanted to transform Josselin into a spinning mill, a fact that could explain the presence of the women in the Nelson-Atkins painting examining an idealized château.

It is conceivable that this painting was intended for a wealthy woman from among Robert's acquaintances. Here he takes the rare—and possibly unique—step of painting a pair of blue-and-white faience Medici vases filled with pink flowers. Robert rarely depicted flowers, instead giving priority to the order and colors of his compositions. Robert saturates the surface with shades of green, modulated by the lateral light and framed by ochre shades, darker for the ground and lighter for the clouds. The subtle angles—repeated in the spread of moss on the ground, the raised arm of the woman in white, the tree leaning to the left, and the ascending line of the hill—provide the viewer with an immersive effect. Robert presents a true *mise en abyme* (image within an image): a landscape being observed by women, who are themselves under the eye of a viewer with a broader vista of the scene. Robert also painted similarly scaled paintings for mantelpieces, perhaps with a wink of humor.<sup>22</sup> Could the Nelson-Atkins painting allude to the idea of waiting by a fire during the wintertime, hoping to find oneself among friends during the long walks promised by spring?<sup>23</sup>

The Nelson-Atkins painting reveals a new direction in Robert's art after 1775 as he developed a rich dialogue among nature, his paintings, and his garden projects. While the painting cannot be linked definitively to Marly

or any other specific château, it nevertheless remains an invaluable testament to Robert's growing interest in the architecture marking the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance in France. It is precisely the discovery of this vernacular heritage, and how it became the object of fashionable promenades, that Robert depicts in this painting.

Sarah Catala  
May 2025

## Notes

Translated from the original French by Nicole Halton and David Auerbach, courtesy of Eriksen Translations.

1. The title in 2022 was *Imaginary View of the Terrace at the Château of Marly*. For the painting's relationship to Marly, see Sarah Catala, *Hubert Robert: De Rome à Paris*, exh. cat. (Paris: Galerie Éric Coatalem, 2021), 46.
2. Hubert Robert, *Vue du Château de Gaillon in Normandy*, ca. 1775, oil on canvas, 165 3/8 x 126 in. (420 x 320 cm), Salle des Etats, Palais archiépiscopal de Rouen. For an overall image of the painting as well as it in situ in the Salle des Etats (on the far left), see "Rouen, le Palais de l'Archevêché," Patrimoine-Histoire, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://www.patrimoine-histoire.fr/Patrimoine/Rouen/Rouen-Archeveche.htm>. See also *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie Royale* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Veuve Herissant, 1775), 15, no. 73.
3. Sarah Catala and Gabriel Wick, eds., *Hubert Robert et la Fabrique des Jardins*, exh. cat. (Paris: RMN-Grand Palais, 2017), 21–22.
4. *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie Royale* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Veuve Herissant, 1777), 16–18, nos. 76, 81, 82; *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures de Messieurs de l'Académie Royale* (Paris: Imprimerie de la Veuve Herissant, 1783), 18, no. 66.
5. See Jean de Cayeux, *Hubert Robert et les Jardins* (Paris: Herscher, 1987). In the second half of the eighteenth century, particularly under Louis XV and Louis XVI, France experienced widespread enthusiasm for garden design. This was fueled by changing aesthetic tastes, scientific curiosity, and aristocratic competition, as royals and financiers

- vied to create increasingly refined and imaginative landscapes. Gardens like these required a great deal of money to be developed and maintained.
6. See Yuriko Jackall's entry on the Nelson-Atkins painting, in Margaret Morgan Grasselli and Yuriko Jackall, *Hubert Robert*, exh. cat. (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2016), 237–38, cat. 70.
  7. The painting is described in the Houdon sale: “Vue intérieure du Parc de Marly. Ce tableau, orné de figures, est touché avec l'esprit et la facilité ordinaire aux ouvrages de cet artiste. Hauteur 24 pouces, largeur 32 pouces” (Interior view of the Marly Park. This painting, decorated with figures, exhibits the spirit and facility typical of this artist's works. Height 24 inches, width 32 inches). See *Catalogue de quelques tableaux, peints par le Bourguignon, Oudry; Danlos du cabinet du C.en Houdon, sculpteur* (Paris: F. L. Regnault, October 8, 1795), 5, no. 5. While the height of the Saint Petersburg painting differs by five centimeters from the description in the Houdon sale catalogue, this change probably corresponds to the upper edge of the canvas being trimmed, where today we see that the tops of the trees are cut off. The painting owned by Houdon may have been part of the payment for a posthumous bust of Robert's eldest daughter that Houdon exhibited at the Salon of 1783. See *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures* (1783), 48, no. 244.
  8. This is addressed in Sarah Catala, “Démarches d'incitation,” in “Hubert Robert et le temps de la citation” (PhD diss., University of Lyon Lumière 2, 2020), 211–60. See also Yuna Blajer de la Garza, “A House Is Not a Home: Citizenship and Belonging in Contemporary Democracies” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2019).
  9. The marble sculpture group *Marly Horses* was installed at Marly in 1745 but is now located in the Cour Marly in the Musée du Louvre in Paris: Guillaume Coustou the elder, *Marly Horses*, 1745, Carrara marble, 133 7/8 x 111 13/16 x 50 in. (340 x 284 x 127 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, MR 1803, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010091993> (and see also its pendant sculpture, Guillaume Coustou the elder, *Marly Horses*, 1745, Carrara marble, 133 7/8 x 111 13/16 x 50 in. [340 x 284 x 127 cm], Musée du Louvre, Paris, MR1802, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010091992>). For the enlarged replica of *Mercury* (which was commissioned by King Louis XV to present to Frederick the Great of Prussia), see Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1748, marble, 76 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 37 13/16 in. (195 x 120 x 96 cm), Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Bode-Museum, Berlin, no. 356, <https://id.smb.museum/object/1368124/merkur>. For the smaller, original version, see Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1744, marble, 22 13/16 x 14 x 13 in. (58 x 35.5 x 33 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. MR 1957, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010092060>.
  10. The red chalk lines, from top to bottom and from right to left, indicate an inversion of the direction of Robert's composition, since he was right-handed. It is not certain whether it was enhanced by the artist himself.
  11. Robert often used these two motifs in his works. However, there is a particular affinity with a red chalk drawing at the Louvre, annotated “Ce 7 janvier 1773” (This January 7, 1773), which suggests that it was made during a drawing session with the aristocratic and financial circle of amateurs with whom Robert associated. See *Jeune femme, tenant un panier, descendant des marches près d'une fontaine*, 1773, red chalk on paper, 14 5/16 x 11 in. (36.4 x 27.9 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 28984, recto, <https://arts-graphiques.louvre.fr/detail/oeuvres/1/228359-Jeune-femme-tenant-un-panier-descendant-des-marches-pres-dune-fontaine>.
  12. As Charlotte Guichard has noted in other instances; see Charlotte Guichard, *La Griffes du peintre, la valeur de l'art (1730–1820)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2018), 151.
  13. *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures* (1777), 16–18, nos. 76, 81, 82; *Explication des Peintres, Sculptures, et Gravures* (1783), 18, no. 66.
  14. We only know them through the descriptions in the Salon booklets; the extant works (see “related works” in this entry) do not match the dimensions and formats.
  15. The paintings of Geoffrin, currently unlocated, are reproduced in Cayeux, *Hubert Robert et les jardins*, 120–24; the La Rochefoucauld painting is Hubert Robert, *Vue du château de La Roche-Guyon*, ca.

- 1775, oil on canvas, 76 3/4 x 108 11/16 in. (195 x 276 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, inv. 1909.37.1, <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/07290022333>.
16. The sculptures in *The Entrance to the Tapis Vert at Versailles* (Fig. 7) are the work of Pierre Puget (1620–94).
17. Hubert Robert, *The Bathing Pool*, ca. 1777–79, oil on canvas, 68 3/4 x 48 3/4 in. (174.6 x 123.8 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, acq. no. 17.190.29, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437473>.
18. For compositional reasons, this is also the hypothesis proposed by Ekaterina Deriabina in “Ruines d’une Terrasse dans le Parc de Marly,” in *Hubert Robert (1733–1808) et Saint-Pétersbourg: Les commandes de la famille Impériale et des Princes russes entre 1773 et 1802*, ed. Hélène Moulin, exh. cat. (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1999), 152.
19. As noted by Pierre de Nolhac, *Hubert Robert, 1733–1808* (Paris: Goupil, 1910), 71–72, about a painting that Robert decided independently to paint for the artist Charlotte Eustache Sophie de Fuligny Damas, Marquise de Grollier (1741–1828). This painting, used as a mantelpiece, has dimensions that are very similar to those of the Nelson-Atkins painting: 92.5 x 126 cm. Today in a private collection, it is reproduced in Véronique Damian, *L’Art au féminin: Portrait de la marquise de Grollier (1741–1828), par Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842)* (Paris: Galerie Canesso, 2018), 9.
20. Since then held by the Musée du Louvre: Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1753, lead, 73 5/8 x 42 1/2 x 41 3/4 in. (187.1 x 108 x 106 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 3023; see “Mercure attachant ses talonnières,” *Ministère de la Culture*, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/joconde/M5037011602>. This interpretation follows the identification of the statue proposed by Jean-René Gaborit in *Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, 1714–1785: Sculptures du Musée du Louvre* (Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1985), 45.
21. The Château de Josselin is located in Brittany. Built between 1490 and 1505, with its Renaissance façade overlooking the courtyard and the l’Oust River, it is the seat of the aristocratic Rohan family. While the three towers were still in place in the eighteenth century, the keep and the gatehouse had been destroyed by 1762. The castle was renovated beginning in 1860. See “Josselin Castle, Place de la Congrégation (Josselin),” *Ministère de la Culture*, accessed September 2, 2025, <https://pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/merimee/IA00121519>.
22. See De Nolhac, *Hubert Robert*, 71–72.
23. This is a hypothesis based on the similarity of the painting’s format to the one Robert painted for the Marquise de Grollier (see n. 19), whose subject was entirely customized. According to Robert’s own description, the painting depicts a house on fire with people saving a floral still life by the Marquise. Without Robert’s letter to the Marquise, reproduced in De Nolhac, *Hubert Robert*, between pages 70–71, it would have been impossible to understand Robert’s economic strategies and artistic liberties. The painting is also reproduced as an engraving in De Nolhac, *Hubert Robert*, between pages 72 and 73.

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## Technical Entry

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### Citation

#### Chicago:

Susan Pavlik Enterline, “Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80,” technical entry in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.330.2088>.

#### MLA:

Enterline, Susan Pavlik. “Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80,” technical entry. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.330.2088.

*Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* was completed on a plain-weave canvas with numerous irregularities and slubs. Prior to its acquisition in 1931, the painting was glue-paste lined,<sup>1</sup> and the tacking

margins were removed, limiting study of the original canvas. There is slight cusping along the upper, lower, and right edges, with less cusping along the left edge. Vertical crossbar cracks are not centrally located, and their position (left of center) is more prominent using infrared reflectography (IRR) (Fig. 8). Taken together, these findings indicate that approximately seven centimeters were trimmed from the left side of the composition.



Fig. 8. Infrared reflectogram captured at 2050 nanometers, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80), revealing a detailed underdrawing and highlighting the off-center vertical crossbar cracks

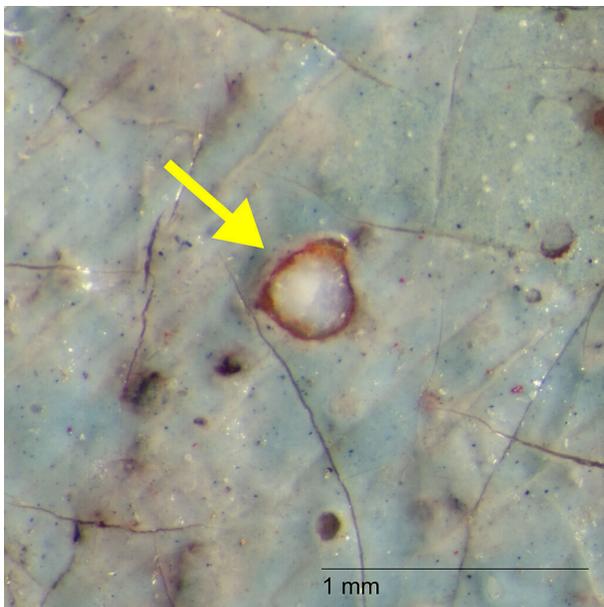


Fig. 9. Photomicrograph of a crater from a metal soap in the sky, revealing the red and white ground layers, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80)

The canvas was prepared with a double ground consisting of a warm red layer beneath an upper whitish-gray layer.<sup>2</sup> Both layers are visible through

ruptured lead soap aggregates on the surface of the painting (Fig. 9).<sup>3</sup> The x-radiograph (Fig. 10) reveals dense, curving lines across the upper half of the canvas that are likely caused by the curved knife traditionally used to prime canvases.<sup>4</sup> Several incised lines are also apparent, though it is unclear whether they are artifacts from the ground application or compositional planning.

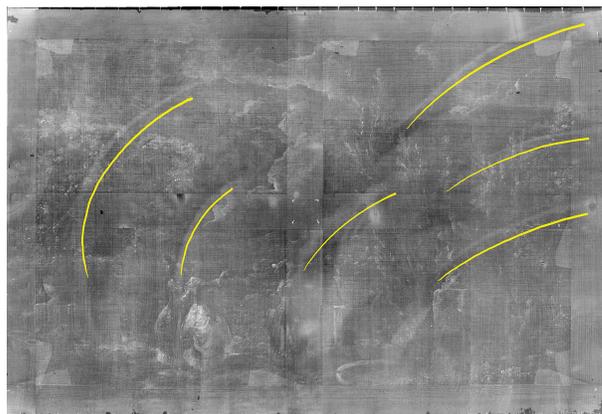


Fig. 10. Composite digital radiograph of *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80), highlighting the varying thickness of ground application (yellow lines)

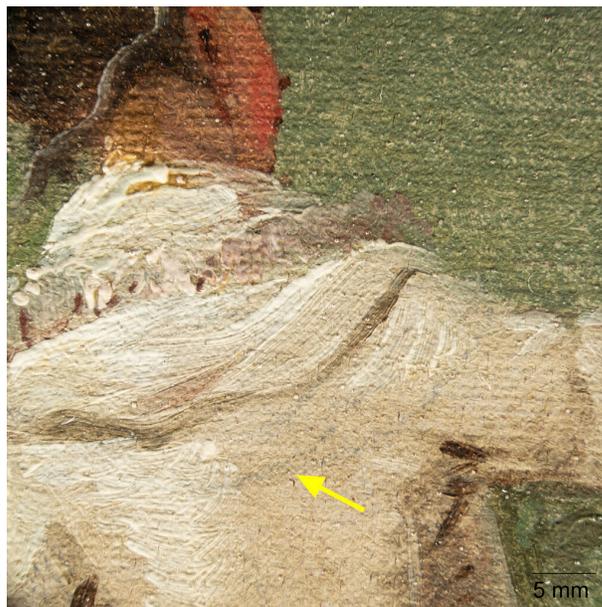


Fig. 11. Photomicrograph of the visible underdrawing in the center figure, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80)

Some sketchy graphite lines are visible beneath thinly painted passages in normal illumination (Fig. 11), but a comprehensive view of Robert's underdrawing was achieved using IRR (Fig. 8). Robert loosely represented the foliage and horizon with gestural, looping, or undulating lines. The figures, statue, and objects on the

terrace are more fully described in the underdrawing, establishing their place in the composition. Robert developed and edited the composition as he was drawing, one example being reshaping and adding feet to the urns (Fig. 12). In contrast to the simple oval sketches outlining the three figures' faces (Fig. 13), the statue of Mercury has a detailed underdrawing, with a defined profile and fully developed musculature (Fig. 14). Interestingly, there is no underdrawing beneath the inscription on the statue's base, and although Robert often incorporated his signature and other data (like the year or his patron) into his paintings as part of inscriptions on architectural elements,<sup>5</sup> this text is largely illegible (Fig. 15).

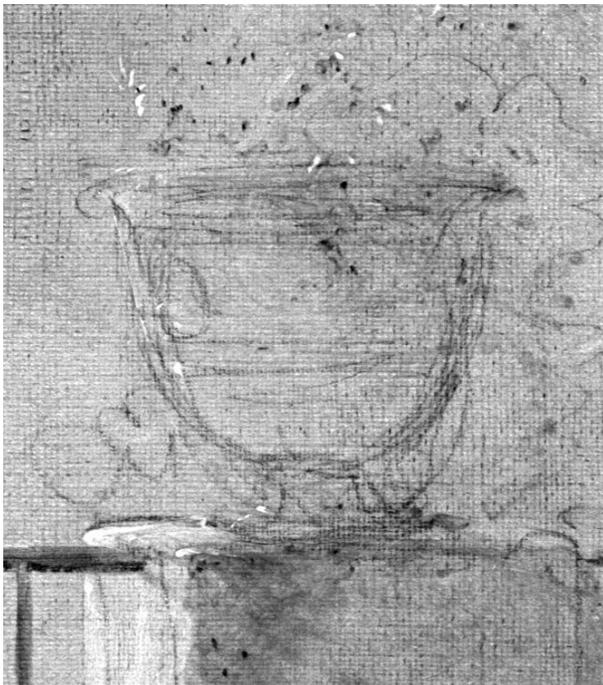


Fig. 12. Infrared reflectogram captured at 2050 nanometers, showing changes in the underdrawing in the large urn on the right, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80)

Following his underdrawing, Robert blocked in the composition with thin washes—greens for foliage, pale blue in the sky, and brown tones for the statue and figures. Some of these initial washes remain visible, representing the midtones of the bodies of the large urns and the figures' hair. Consistent with contemporaneous accounts of his process,<sup>6</sup> Robert appears to have almost exclusively painted wet-into-wet and wet-over-wet, executing the painting over a short period of time. He built up passages in thin layers, generally using painterly brushwork and minimal

impasto. The trees and foliage are defined with short, curving brushstrokes, stippling, and dabs of darker green for individual leaves. Trunks are laid in over the foliage using deep brown. Thicker, diagonal, blue brushstrokes in the sky provide a cool contrast to the robust pink clouds in the center and the thinly painted sky to the left, where the underlying red ground adds warmth. Concurrent painting of the sky and landscape resulted in spots of soft blending in the upper canopy of the left trees and along the horizon (Fig. 16).



Fig. 13. Two detail images of the left figure's head, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80). On the left, a normal illumination detail. On the right, an infrared reflectogram that reveals the simple oval underdrawing of the figure's face. The figure's hat was once much larger, as seen in the underdrawing (yellow arrow) and an earlier painted version (pink arrows).

The soft grays of the château (Fig. 17) are the result of Robert's wet-into-wet application of pink paint, intentionally pulling it across the wet green beneath. The same intentional blending with lively brushwork and dragging of one color over another appears in the figures' gowns. To add dimension to the statue of Mercury, Robert first built up shadow, following with brown and gray outlines to strengthen forms, then using thicker wet-over-wet brushstrokes and dabs for bright areas of highlight. Similar dark outlining also defines the shape of the figures' gowns, hands, and faces (Fig. 18). In the immediate foreground, Robert developed the terrace with brushy application of tans, browns, peach, and yellow, allowing much of the ground or underpainting to remain visible. Zig-zagging strokes are clear in darker paint, and there is evidence of frenetic blending, especially at the interface of the greenery and the ground beneath the figures. In the final stages of painting, Robert added highlights and details like flowers using thick dabs of paint (Fig. 19).



Fig. 14. Infrared reflectogram captured at 2050 nanometers, showing the statue's highly detailed underdrawing, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775-80)

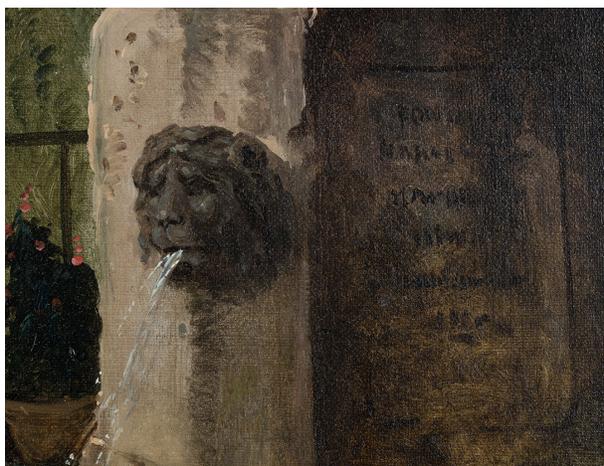


Fig. 15. Detail image of the inscription on the base of the statue, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775-80)



Fig. 16. Photomicrograph of soft blending along the upper canopy of trees, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775-80)



Fig. 17. Photomicrograph of the chateau in the background, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775-80)

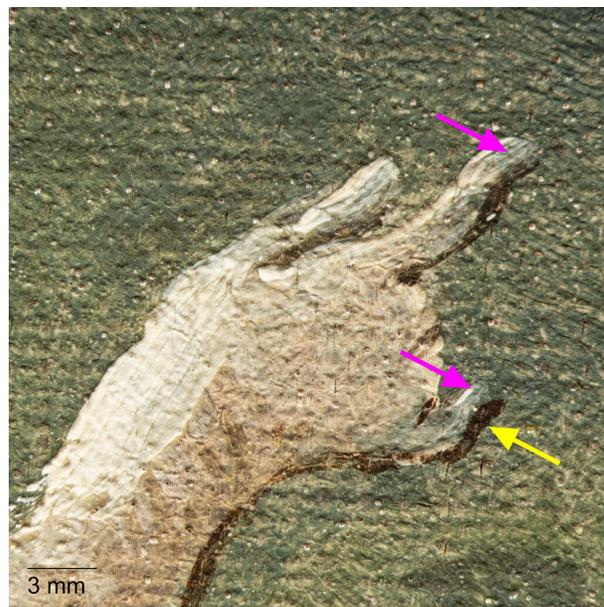


Fig. 18. Photomicrograph of the center figure's hand, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775-80), showing dark brown outlining to strengthen forms (yellow arrow) and artist's changes indicated by areas of green visible through the figure's fingers (pink arrows)



Fig. 19. Photomicrograph of flowers in the urn to the right, showing dabs of paint with slight impasto creating highlights, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80)

As he painted, the artist continued making numerous adjustments to the composition. For example, underlying green from the background is visible through parts of the central figure's extended hand (Fig. 18), indicating a slight shift to its shape and size. Robert originally positioned the right figure's walking stick at a steeper angle, closer to her body. The figure's proper right hand was first sketched lower than its current location, and a pentimento hand appears above its final placement (Fig. 20).

Paint over the artist's change in the hand does not visually match the color of the adjacent foliage; the same phenomenon occurs behind the right figure's head and above the left figure's hat. IRR shows that the left figure's hat is much larger in the underdrawing, and underlying paint texture indicates that it was the same larger size in an earlier painted version (Fig. 13). To cover his sketching and reduce the size of the hat, Robert would have added green paint in this area, which likely contained different pigments than the green used for background foliage. Visually similar in color to start, the two paints aged differently over time and possibly became increasingly transparent.<sup>7</sup> Aged, discolored overpaint may further complicate this area. Neither examination using ultraviolet (UV) radiation nor magnification was conclusive. Modern retouching is typically identifiable by its non-fluorescence, appearing dark in UV (Fig. 21). Older retouching can be difficult to

differentiate from original paint, as its UV-induced visible fluorescence can appear similar, which is the case here. Examination under magnification was hampered by the presence of later retouching obscuring the layering structure. A definitive conclusion would require instrumental analysis or destructive sampling.

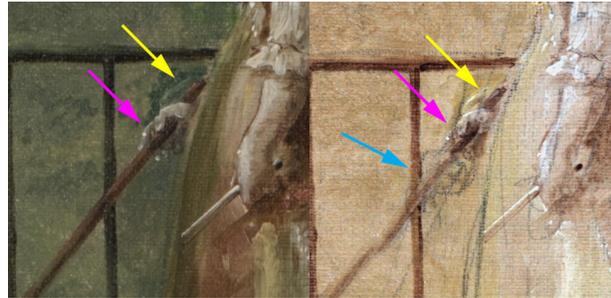


Fig. 20. Details of the right figure's hand, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80). On the left, normal illumination detail. On the right, an infrared reflectogram that shows the hand shifting from a low position in the underdrawing (blue arrow) to a high position in an earlier painted version (yellow arrows), ending in the center in the final composition (pink arrows).



Fig. 21. Ultraviolet-induced visible fluorescence image showing the three figures, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château* (ca. 1775–80)

The painting is in good condition. There is craquelure throughout the sky and mechanical cracking at both upper corners associated with the tensioning of the canvas. The past lining caused an overall enhancement of the weave texture, several small bulges in the canvas, and a raised line running horizontally through the painting. Widespread paint abrasion is likely the result of a harsh cleaning during a past treatment, and these abraded areas were reintegrated in a 1946 treatment by Nelson-Atkins conservator James Roth.<sup>8</sup> Small spots of Roth's retouching are most prevalent in the sky. There are few larger passages of retouching, although a diagonal passage 5 centimeters in length cuts across the base of the statue, and there is evidence of one or more campaigns of retouching in the faces of the right and left

figures (Fig. 21). The painting has a surface coating of dammar varnish and an additional synthetic varnish layer; both varnishes have likely discolored.<sup>9</sup>

Susan Pavlik Enterline

March 2025

## Notes

1. A customs stamp on the reverse of the lining canvas indicates that the painting was lined before it arrived in the United States.
2. For a discussion on double grounds, see Elma O'Donoghue, Rafael Romero, and Joris Dik, "French Eighteenth-Century Painting Techniques," supplement, *Studies in Conservation* 43, no. S1 (1998): 185–89. The authors also specifically refer to a "fantasy landscape" by Hubert Robert in Los Angeles County Museum of Art's collection.
3. For an explanation of metal soap formation in paintings, see Francesca Caterina Izzo, Matilde Kratter, Austin Nevin, and Elisabetta Zendri, "A Critical Review on the Analysis of Metal Soaps in Oil Paintings," *ChemistryOpen* 10, no. 9 (September 2021): 904–21.
4. See Maartje Witlox and Leslie Carlyle, "'A Perfect Ground is the Very Soul of the Art' (Kingston 1835): Ground Recipes for Oil Painting 1600–1900," in *ICOM 14th Triennial Meeting, The Hague, 12–16 September 2005* (London: James and James, 2005), 1:519–28.
5. One such inscription can be found in Robert's 1787 painting *The Obelisk* (The Art Institute of Chicago), <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/57049/the-obelisk>.
6. Charles Fournier des Ormes, a student of Robert, is quoted as saying the artist "worked with extraordinary facility; he would often complete a large painting in a single day." Translated in Margaret Morgan Grasselli and Yuriko Jackall, *Hubert Robert* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2016), 53. Robert's close friend and fellow artist Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842) said, "[H]e could paint a picture as fast as he could write a letter." Cited and translated in Joseph Baillio, "Robert's Decorations for the Chateau de Bagatelle," in *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 27 (1992): 158.
7. For a discussion of increasing transparency in paint over time, see Andrea Kirsh and Rustin S. Levinson, *Seeing Through Paintings: Physical Examination in Art Historical Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 161.
8. James Roth, treatment report, December 1946, NAMA conservation file, no. 31-97. A label on the stretcher indicates that Marcel-Jules Rougeron treated the painting. Rougeron (1875–1954) was a paintings restorer, art dealer, and collector in New York. For more on Roth and conservation at the Nelson-Atkins, see Seth Adam Hindin, "How the West Was Won: Charles Muskavitch, James Roth, and the Arrival of 'Scientific' Art Conservation in the Western United States," *Journal of Art Historiography*, no. 11 (December 2014): <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/hindin.pdf>. There are no records of subsequent treatment, but NAMA conservation files are incomplete prior to 1973.
9. Mary Schafer, technical notes, April 12, 2011, NAMA conservation file, no. 31-97. The presence of a synthetic varnish was confirmed through solvent tests.

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## Documentation

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### Citation

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#### Chicago:

Glynnis Napier Stevenson, "Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80," documentation in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.330.4033>.

#### MLA:

Stevenson, Glynnis Napier. "Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château*, ca. 1775–80," documentation. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2026. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.330.4033.

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## Provenance

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Possibly Baron Gustave Samuel James de Rothschild (1829–1911), Paris, by May 25, 1892 [1];

Possibly given to his daughter, Berthe Juliette Gudule Leonino (née de Rothschild, 1870–1896), Paris, May 25, 1892–December 14, 1896 [2];

Baron Emmanuel David Berénd Leonino (1864–1936), Paris, by June 1928–July 24, 1931 [3];

Purchased from Leonino by Charles Michel, Paris, by July 24, 1931;

Purchased from Charles Michel, through Richard Owen and Harold Woodbury Parsons, by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 1931 [4].

## Notes

[1] According to dealer Richard Owen, April 25, 1932, “The picture formerly was in the collection of the Baron Gustav [*sic*] de Rothschild of Paris, and on his death passed into the hands of Baron Leonino, his son-in-law, from whom it was purchased.” See letter from Owen to Paul Gardner, NAMA, April 25, 1932, NAMA curatorial files. However, Baron de Rothschild’s posthumous inventory from 1912 does not include any definitive indication of the Nelson-Atkins painting. There was one painting, no. 756, by the French eighteenth-century school, entitled *Personnages dans un parc* (Figures in a Park), that might correspond to The Nelson-Atkins painting, but it was not noted as being given to Baron Leonino. Sixty other paintings from Baron de Rothschild’s collection were given to Baron Leonino, but none of them correspond to the Nelson-Atkins painting. See “Inventaire après le décès de Monsieur le Baron Gustave de Rothschild,” April 26, 1912, 000/1037/122, and 000/929/38 (OE/346), The Rothschild Archive, London.

[2] It is possible that Baron de Rothschild’s daughter, Juliette Leonino (née de Rothschild), and her husband, Baron Leonino, already owned the Nelson-Atkins painting before the time of Baron de Rothschild’s posthumous inventory in 1912. In fact, a manuscript note in the Nelson-Atkins files says that Baron de Rothschild gave the painting as a wedding present to Juliette on May 25, 1892. See manuscript note, ca. 1934, NAMA curatorial files.

MacKenzie Mallon, provenance specialist, and Glynnis Stevenson, project assistant, NAMA, researched at the Rothschild Archive, London, and there is nothing definitive placing this painting in the collection of Gustave de Rothschild nor Juliette Leonino.

[3] Although Baron Leonino may have inherited the painting when his wife died in 1896, he was a collector too and may have purchased the painting himself. He definitely had the painting by June 1928 when he lent it to the *La Saison de Bagatelle* exhibition.

[4] See letter from Harold Woodbury Parsons to Herbert V. Jones, NAMA, February 15, 1932, NAMA curatorial files. Edward Morton is also erroneously given as the seller of the painting in several of the Nelson-Atkins documents, but he was the secretary to dealer Richard Owen, London.

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## Related Works

Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1744, marble, 22 13/16 x 14 x 13 in. (58 x 35.5 x 33 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. MR 1957.

Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1748, marble, 76 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 37 13/16 in. (195 x 120 x 96 cm), Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, Bode-Museum, Berlin, no. 356.

Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, 1753, lead, 73 5/8 x 42 1/2 x 41 3/4 in. (187.1 x 108 x 106 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 3023.

Jean-Baptiste Pigalle, *Mercury Fastening His Sandal*, cast 1753, bronze, 73 5/8 x 42 1/2 x 41 3/4 in. (187.1 x 108 x 106 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, no. RF 3023.

Hubert Robert, *Imaginary View of the Tivoli Waterfall*, 1779, oil on canvas, 97 5/8 x 148 13/16 in. (248 x 378 cm), Château de Maisons, Maisons-Laffitte, acc. no. MAI 1989000058.

Hubert Robert, *Ruins on the Terrace in Marly Park*, early 1780s, oil on canvas, 23 3/16 x 34 1/4 in. (59 x 87 cm), The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.

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## Preparatory Works

Hubert Robert, *Two Statues in a Park*, 1765–70, red chalk drawing on fine cream laid paper, 11 7/16 x 14 1/2 in. (29 x 36.8 cm), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Quimper, 873-2-40.

Hubert Robert, *Terrace of an Italian Villa*, ca. 1765, watercolor, brown ink, and red chalk counterproof on laid paper, 13 15/16 x 11 7/16 in. (35.5 x 29 cm), National Museum, Warsaw, acc. no. Rys.Ob.d.556 MNW.

Hubert Robert, *Young Woman Holding a Basket, Descending Steps Near a Fountain*, 1773, red chalk on paper, 14 5/16 x 11 in. (36.4 x 27.9 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv. RF 28984, recto

Hubert Robert, *Figures in a Park Bordered by an Overhanging Balustrade*, ca. 1775, black crayon on laid paper, 4 3/5 x 3 1/2 in. (11.6 x 8.8 cm), Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Arts graphiques, RF 11567, recto.

Hubert Robert, *Study for "Imaginary View of Three Women Contemplating a Château,"* ca. 1775–80, black chalk, 6 5/8 x 8 5/8 in. (16.8 x 21.9 cm), The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 55-81.

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## Exhibitions

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*La Saison de Bagatelle: Exposition des Peintres de Jardins des XVIIIe et XIXe Siècles*, Château de Bagatelle, Paris, June–July 1928, no. 79, as *Vue prise de Marly vers Saint Germain-en-Laye*.

*Exposition de l'Art des Jardins et des Peintres de la Fleur*, Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret, Nice, March–April 1929, no. 201, as *Vue prise de Marly vers Saint Germain-en-laye*.

Exhibition, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, MO, April 11–May 20, 1932.

*Loan Exhibition of Prints, Drawings, and Paintings Illustrating the Development of the Fountain*, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, April 4–27, 1935, no. 46, as *The Terrace at Marly*.

*French Painting and Sculpture of the XVIII Century*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, November 6, 1935–January 5, 1936, no. 53, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*French Painting, 1100–1900*, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, October 18–December 2, 1951, no. 91, as *Terrace of Château de Marly*.

*French Eighteenth Century Painters: Loan Exhibition for the Benefit of the Education Program of The Minneapolis Institute of Arts*, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, October 6–November 2, 1954; Wildenstein, New York, November 16–December 11, 1954, no. 24, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*Great French Paintings: An Exhibition in Memory of Chauncey McCormick*, The Art Institute of Chicago, January 20–February 20, 1955, no. 36, as *Terrace at the Château de Marly*.

*The Century of Mozart*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, January 15–March 4, 1956, no. 94, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*Homage to Mozart: A Loan Exhibition of European Painting, 1750–1800, Honoring the 200th Anniversary of Mozart's*

*Birth*, Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, CT, March 22–April 29, 1956, no. 52, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*Fontinalia: The Art of the Fountain and the Fountain in Art: A Loan Exhibition of Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings, Prints, and Photographs*, The University of Kansas Museum of Art, Spooner Hall, Lawrence, KS, October 19–November 30, 1957, no. 45, as *The Terrace at Marly*.

*The French Tradition*, Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, TX, February 8–March 12, 1961, no cat., as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*Hubert Robert, 1733–1808: Paintings and Drawings*, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, NY, October 9–November 11, 1962, no. 15, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*The Romantic Era: Birth and Flowering, 1750–1850*, Art Association of Indianapolis, Herron Museum of Art, February 21–April 11, 1965, no. 5, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*The Eye of Thomas Jefferson*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, June 5–September 6, 1976, no. 208, as *The Terrace of the Château at Marly*.

*Hubert Robert: The Pleasure of Ruins*, Wildenstein, New York, November 15–December 16, 1988, unnumbered, as *Terrace of the Château de Marly*.

*Hubert Robert*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, March 9–May 30, 2016; National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, June 26–October 2, 2016, no. 70 (Washington, DC, only), as *The Terrace at the Château de Marly*.

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