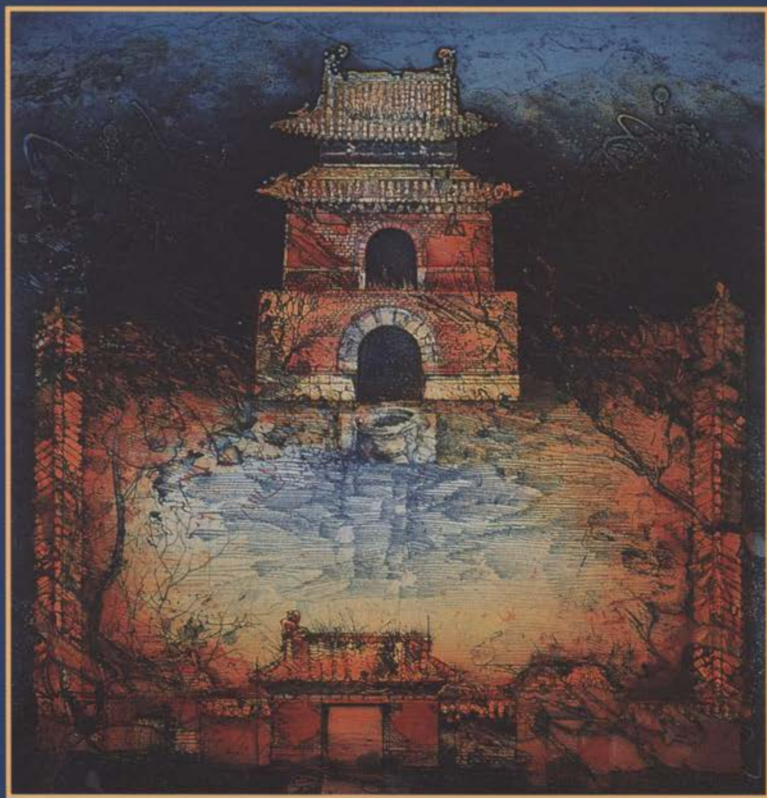
MVSE

VOLUME TWENTY-SIX 1992



ANNUAL OF THE MUSEUM
OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA

AN EIGHTHEENTH-CENTURY COLLABORATION: FRAGONARD, ROBERT AND THE ABBÉ SAINT-NON

PATRICIA CROWN

Some of the complexities of art production in the mid-eighteenth century are exemplified by the relationship of two French prints acquired by the Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri. Hubert Robert's *Gardens with a Classical Fountain*, an etching with aquatint by the abbé Jean Claude Richard de Saint-Non in 1767, and Jean Honoré Fragonard's *The Little Park*, etched by Fragonard himself circa 1763, are the products of three men: two professional artists and an art patron who was also an enthusiastic printmaker.[1] Fragonard's etching is after one of his own drawings and thus is an "original" print, that is, one drawn and executed by the artist and not copied from another's work. Saint-Non's etching is a reproductive or interpretive print after a drawing made by Robert, and purchased or otherwise acquired by Saint-Non. The distinction between original and reproductive prints was somewhat less important in the eighteenth century than it became in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the cult of originality was only beginning to flourish.[2] There were economic reasons for eighteenth-century artists to cede or dilute some of their putative uniqueness. The number and importance of prints increased during the period as art collecting, art travel, art commerce, the trade in antiquities and historical artifacts of all kinds increased. Books illustrated with prints were a means of diffusing the rococo style in general, as were prints of designs for interior decoration, pavilions, fountains (usually fanciful), furniture and views of gardens, issued separately or collected into volumes.[3] Robert and Fragonard knew that prints made after their drawings would be published or otherwise promulgated by the wealthy and influential Saint-Non. Prints could function as a kind of advertisement for the artist's other more ambitious or expensive productions, such as paintings.

The drawings after which these prints were made were produced in 1759-1761 when Robert and Fragonard were in Italy together with Saint-Non. At various times the men travelled together, resided together at the Villa d'Este, and were part of the international artistic circles that formed in Rome and other Italian capitals in the middle of the eighteenth century. The subjects are inspired by aspects of Italian landscape and architecture, but do not reproduce the appearance of any specific

place. Both display liveliness of surface and intricacy of linear design made more intricate by a subtle and variegated pattern of chiaroscuro. The human figures are very small in comparison to the trees, architecture, and sky. These are all typical features of the rococo style, as is the illusion that the drawings were executed spontaneously, without the intellectual and time-consuming effort required for planned composition or careful finish. Spontaneity is one of the chief myths perpetuated about the rococo style, and cherished most by those who at the same time insist on the style's artificiality, a word which implies calculation. Rococo artists did cultivate the appearance of graceful ease in their work, of the effortlessness associated with the natural flow of inspiration. Both Robert and Fragonard display these qualities in their works.

The two artists knew each other, worked side by side and drew from the same motifs. They were proximate contemporaries who had received their professional training in Paris. Fragonard had studied (futilely, for a short time) with Chardin, and then very fruitfully with Boucher. Robert's education was first for an ecclesiastical career, an education that included some Classical learning; subsequently he studied art with René Michel Slodtz, a member of a dynasty of French sculptors. Neither artist ever studied at the Royal Academy. This point must be stressed because of the importance usually and understandably attributed to the Academy's role in all aspects of eighteenth-century French art, and in view of the two artists' subsequent careers both within and outside the Academy. Fragonard became a pupil at the *École Royale des Élèves Protégés*, a school created to complete the instruction of future masters of French painting before they left for Rome. Thus, Fragonard studied in an academic institution only *after* he had won an important academic distinction: the *Grand Prix de l'Académie Royale de Peinture, i.e. the Prix de Rome*. This was a travelling fellowship enabling and requiring its holder to study in Italy under the auspices of the French Academy.[4]

In 1760 Fragonard stayed with Saint-Non at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, which Saint-Non had rented for the summer. The villa was set in extensive and profusely overgrown gardens and parks. Fragonard made numerous studies and finished drawings of these gardens and of views from them. *The Little Park* (Fig. 1), probably executed in Paris after Fragonard's return from Italy, is based upon a slight red chalk sketch made at the villa.[5] Because of the remarkable similarities of subject, style and materials employed by Robert and Fragonard at this time, it has long been supposed that both artists stayed at the Villa d'Este. There exists at least one identifiable view

Fig. 1. Abbé Jean Claude Richard de Saint-Non, *Garden with a Classical Fountain*, (91.275), gift of Museum Associates.

of the garden by Robert from this period. While there are no documents to prove their simultaneous residence, it is evident that the artists and Saint-Non were all in close working contact during the summer of 1760.[6] In April of 1761 Saint-Non returned to Paris, bringing Fragonard with him on the five-month-long journey. Saint-Non arranged for Fragonard to make drawings of the places they passed through, of antiquities and of paintings. He executed about three hundred drawings after Poussin, Lafranco, Tiepolo, Tintoretto and others. Saint-Non kept a journal of this trip and probably intended to publish it along with Fragonard's drawings. He did not do so, but he did publish his own etchings after many of the drawings Fragonard made on the journey (*Les Griffonis*, see below) and he provided the young painter with a kind of artistic education that would not otherwise have been available to him.[7]

Robert was in Rome because he too was connected with the French Academy. He was a pensioner there and a special student. This place had been arranged for him by an influential family friend, the Comte de Stainville, later the Duc de Choiseul.[8] Robert spent eleven years in Italy, where he met, among others, Piranesi and Pannini,

Fig. 2. Jean Honoré Fragonard, *The Little Park,* (90.127).

two artists famed for their architectural drawings and prints, especially of ruins ancient and not so ancient, a genre which would prove to be important in the development of Robert's subsequent career, when he became known as "Robert des ruines." Saint-Non took Robert with him to Naples in 1760 and commissioned from him drawings which were to illustrate publications on Italian cities, antiquities and works of art, especially his *Voyage pittoresque de Naples et des deux Siciles*, 1781-86. Saint-Non published a group of prints after Robert's drawings of landscape and buildings in 1762, and another group after his drawings of antiquities in 1765. Finally, forty-six prints after Robert's drawings were included in *Les Griffonis* (1792), a miscellaneous collection of 299 of Saint-Non's prints after Fragonard, Rubens, Ango, Clodion, Tiepolo, Della Bella, Rembrandt and others. Number 109 of this collection is *Gardens with a Classical Fountain (Vue d'une fontaine antique)*, the print now in the collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology (Fig. 2).[9]

Jean Claude Richard de Saint-Non (1727-91) was an erudite aristocrat who was in a position to patronize the arts in various ways, especially by supporting individual

artists, as has been seen in the cases of Robert and Fragonard. He devoted himself and his riches to collecting art, to drawing and printmaking. He copied the works of Renaissance and Baroque artists, drew garden views, ancient ruins, Classical fragments, and made caricatures. It was fashionable in the middle of the eighteenth century for gentlemen of artistic tastes to be caricatured, and to caricature one's friends was a sign of casual, sophisticated good humor. Saint-Non was modest about his own work, deprecating his prints as "wretched scratchings" (*méchants griffonis*) and eager to learn from the skilled technicians whom he cultivated. He seems not to have meddled with their work, nor imposed his wishes and suggestions too heavily on Robert and Fragonard when they produced all those drawings for him on the travels which he subsidized. Fragonard, Robert and Saint-Non apparently remained on good terms all their lives. Pierre Rosenberg draws attention to the continuing friendship between Fragonard and Saint-Non by quoting from Saint-Non's biographer:

> Due to a particular event, the productions of this artist [most certainly Fragonard] suddenly began to fetch extraordinary prices. The abbé de Saint-Non, who owned a large number of them, gave them back, saying, "My friend, I have greatly appreciated these works, but I have been unaware of the value that others attached to them; I return them to you so that you may benefit from their favor with the public, and derive from them the profit that you are entitled to expect."[10]

Saint-Non was an *amateur*, that is, not only an admirer of art, a connoisseur and a collector, but a practicing artist as well. During the seventeenth century, around the time of the establishment of the French Royal Academy, terms such as *curieux, amateur, connoisseur* came into use to describe those who were interested in the arts but were not themselves artists. Early in the eighteenth century the definitions had crystallized. The curieux were those who collected miscellaneous rare objects or complete series of such things as "seashells, insects, weapons, and so on."[11] Such a person was a relatively passive accumulator of curiosities. The amateur connoisseur was different; he was represented as a critic, a man of judgement and erudition who knew history, philosophy and ancient literature, one whose view of art had a wider compass and a more balanced comprehension than the limited survey of the artisan. The amateur was master of all aspects of art except execution.[12] By the middle of the century, however, even practical participation, actual manual work, became accept-

able for gentlemen. The continually recurring argument, dating from the Renaissance, concerning the artist's status — was he a mere mechanic, was he not a genius, could he be a gentleman — was not concluded, but its terms were expanded. Madame Pompadour, Lalive de Jully, C.H. Watelet and others of elevated social status learned and practiced etching. Saint-Non was, as has been said, particularly adept at, and fond of aquatint, a technique that permitted tonal effects, sometimes very subtle ones, and etching, which characteristically was light, delicate and free. Saint-Non was elected to the Royal Academy of Art in 1777 as an *honoraire-associé libre*, a category of membership that had been instituted for laymen who had demonstrated recognized knowledge of and activity in the arts.[13] It was Saint-Non's activities and technical knowledge as a working artist that made him different from the ordinary, casually interested nobleman who acquired artifacts and paid artists for this or that interior design, portrait, chimney surround, ceiling rosette, drawing of Vesuvius. In Saint-Non's career it can be seen that distinctions between professional artist and amateur, patron and practitioner, originator and copyist were fluid.

Another somewhat soft-edged category is that of the "capriccio," in which these two prints belong. That is, the pictures incorporate parts of actual places, actual fragments of architecture, sculpture and other elements, but they are imaginative juxtapositions and variations of those elements. In the eighteenth century there was a vogue for views of Italy, the topographically accurate *vedute* in which such artists as Canaletto, Piranesi and Guardi specialized. These painters, and other more or less well known artists in the international colonies in Italy, like Robert Adam, C.L. Clérisseau, and Hughes Taraval, produced *vedute* and at the same time fanciful landscapes which, combining memory and imagination, were open to multiple possibilities of meaning. Sometimes, as in the case of Piranesi particularly, the distortions and ambiguities characteristic of the witty licence of capriccios grew so mysterious, bizarre and even nightmarish that they became the defining elements of another kind of subject, the architectural grotesque.[14] Fragonard's and Robert's landscape subjects, however, remain poetic pastorales, with ruins inhabited by shepherds, women washing clothes, musicians, itinerants of all kinds, staffage that lends a dreamy, somewhat melancholy mood to the pictures. These artists, by artful arrangement of components and manipulation of light and shadow, infused the actual Italian countryside with a kind of contemplative air, an invitation to the viewer to meditate on the beauties of nature enhanced by time and accident.

This kind of architectural and landscape capriccio was intimately connected with eighteenth-century garden design and the esthetic category known as the pictur-

esque.[15] In the paintings that Fragonard is best known for — "The Progress of Love" series, for instance, he places his figures and characters in informal or picturesque gardens, that is, landscapes that seem part garden, part wilderness — landscapes in which sculpture, urns, walls, pavilions have been placed to enhance the effects of the luxuriant, seemingly uncontrolled vegetation. *The Little Park* is a particularly fine example of this kind of landscape garden and its use by Fragonard. The symbolic framework of the garden of love was of course part of a long tradition used by many French eighteenth-century painters, among them Fragonard's immediate predecessors Watteau and Boucher, whose painted gardens were idealized or even theatrically stylized. Fragonard's garden settings owe much to his experiences of Italian landscape and the capriccios he fabricated from them. They may also have been given form, in part, by his acquaintance with Claude Henri Watelet, a friend of Saint-Non and like him an amateur artist of elevated social status. Watelet was the leading exponent in France of the picturesque garden, which had developed in England earlier in the century and became widely admired and imitated in Europe. He published a treatise on the topic in 1774, by which date he had become a long-time friend of Robert's.

While Fragonard painted picturesque gardens and landscapes, Robert became a designer of actual picturesque gardens. In 1778 he was named Dessinateur de Jardins du Roi, and among other projects created some parts of the parks at Versailles, Fontainebleau, and Rambouillet. In planning and executing these and other gardens, it was Robert's custom to begin with a painted view, one in which he combined various elements, artificial and natural, and into which he always introduced small figures. He was following the procedures of the capriccio, bringing together diverse components, some imaginary, some real.[16] The print of *Gardens with a Classical Fountain* is very much in this spirit, and clearly an early example of Robert's thinking about garden design.

Saint-Non's motto, which he had printed in his publications, was "Les arts sont à la vie ce que les fleurs sont aux jardins" (the arts are to life as flowers are to gardens).[17] This motto, which links the most appealing aspect of cultivated nature with the beauty of art, may be seen as a pervasive principle in eighteenth-century aesthetics. Saint-Non's graceful, nonchalant modesty about his accomplishment as an amateur and patron is like the rococo artist's skill in disguising effort and difficulty. It is like the seeming naturalness of the picturesque garden. They are all manifestations of a more subtle artifice.

NOTES

[1] Saint-Non, Acc. no. 90.127. Gilbreath-McLorn Fund. Dimensions: (sheet) 29.5 x 41.0 cm; (image) 25.3 x 32.3 cm. Fragonard, Acc. no. 91.275. Gift of Museum Associates. Dimensions: (sheet) 10.7 x 14.8 cm; (image) 10.3 x 14.0 cm. Saint-Non's print after Robert's drawing is reproduced in Louis Guimbaud, *Saint-Non et Fragonard d'après des documents inédits* (Paris, 1928) opposite page 98, where it is called *Fontaine Antique*. In Claude Gabillot, *Hubert Robert et son temps* (Paris, 1895) it is called *Vue d'une belle fontaine antique (sur le devant, des laveuses)*, p. 283. In Saint-Non's publication of his prints, the *Griffonis* (1792), it appears as *Vue d'une fontaine antique*. See Jean de Cayeux, "Introduction au catalogue critique des *Griffonis* de Saint-Non," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Art Français* 108 (1963), p. 340. The Fragonard etching entitled *Le petit parc* is discussed and reproduced with related works: copies, variant drawings and prints, including an etching by Saint-Non, in Pierre Rosenberg, *Fragonard* (New York, 1988), pp. 153-154. It is also discussed by Victor Carlson in *Regency to Empire: French Printmaking 1715-1814* (Baltimore Museum of Art, 1984), pp. 150-151. *Le petit parc* is the title given to all these variations.

[2] George Levitine, "French Eighteenth Century Printmaking in Search of Cultural Assertion" in *Regency to Empire*, pp. 10-21, discusses these distinctions, and the social and professional hierarchies that informed eighteenth-century printmaking.

[3] See Alastair Laing, "French Ornamental Engravings and the Diffusion of the Rococo" in *Le Stampe e la diffusione delle immagini e degli stili*, ed. Henri Zerner, Comité International d'Histoire de l"Art XXIV (Bologna, 1979) pp. 109-127.

[4] For a detailed description of Fragonard's early years and training as well as his biography in general see Rosenberg, *Fragonard*. For Robert's biography see J. de Cayeux and Catherine Boulot, *Hubert Robert* (Paris, 1989).

[5] Eunice Williams in *Claude to Corot: The Development of Landscape Painting in France*, ed. Alan Wintermute (New York, 1990), pp. 186-188.

[6] V. Carlson has thoroughly analyzed the evidence concerning this association in *Hubert Robert: Drawings and Watercolors* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1978) pp. 20, 38.

[7] Rosenberg, *Fragonard*, pp. 188-120 describes the trip and its benefits for Fragonard.

[8] A recent and extensive exhibition dealing with Robert's and Fragonard's various Italian journeys is *J. H. Fragonard e H. Robert a Roma*, ed. P. Rosenberg and Jean-Pierre Cuzin (Rome, 1990).

[9] Guimbaud, *Saint-Non et Fragonard*, pp. 99, 127, 196, 205-206; J. de Cayeux, "Introduction au catalogue critique des *Griffonis* de Saint-Non," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire de l'Art Français*, 108 (1963), pp. 297-370. There exists a counter-proof of this print in the Bibliothèque Nationale, and two paintings based upon its theme; see pp. 340-341.

[10] Gabriel Brizard, *Notice sur Jean Claude Richard de Saint-Non*, (Paris, 1792), quoted in Rosenberg, *Fragonard* p. 150; L. Guimbaud, *Saint-Non et Fragonard*; Georges Wildenstein, "L'abbé de Saint-Non: artiste et mécène," *Gazette des Beaux Arts* 54, pp. 225-244. Most recently Rosenberg and Barbara Brejon de Lavergnée have edited *Saint-Non, Fragonard, Panopicon Italiano: Un diario di viaggio ritrovato*, 1759-1761 (Rome, 1986), which contains a biography of Saint-Non. This work was not available to me.

[11] L. A. Oliver, *Curieux, Amateurs and Connoisseurs: Laymen and the Fine Arts in the Ancien Régime*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Johns Hopkins, 1976, pp. 8, 38.

[12] Ibid., pp. 120-121.

[13] J. de Cayeux and C. Boulot, *Hubert Robert*, p. 108.

[14] This is the form that the capriccio took in Goya's work, when it had been removed from its associations with landscape and architecture. Goya's announcement for his *Caprichos* in 1792 says: "Painting, like Poetry, chooses from the universal what it considers suitable to its own ends: it reunites in a single fantastic personage circumstances and characteristics that nature had divided among many. From such a combination, ingeniously arranged, results [a work] for which a good artificer deserves the title of inventor and not that of servile copyist." Translated by José López-Rey in Fred Licht, ed., *Goya in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1973), pp. 130-131.

[15] Kimerly Rorschach's article, "French Art and the Eighteenth-century Garden" in *Claude to Corot: The Development of Landscape Painting in France*, ed. A. Wintermute (New York, 1990), pp. 111-121, is an excellent and broad-ranging essay on this multiform subject. Also see Mary Sheriff, *Fragonard: Art and Eroticism* (Chicago and London, 1990), pp. 58-94.

[16] J. de Cayeux, *Hubert Robert et les jardins* (Paris, 1987) is a comprehensive survey of Robert as designer and painter of gardens.

[17] Guimbaud, *Saint-Non et Fragonard*, p. 155.

PATRICIA CROWN is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has published works on William Hogarth, comic art, the picturesque, English book illustration, British Rococo, and William Morris. In 1988 she collaborated with the Museum of Art and Archaeology as the guest curator and author of the catalogue for the exhibition *British Comic Art, 1730-1830, from the Yale Center for British Art*.