

*The Ponte Salario*

c. 1775

oil on canvas, 91.3 × 121 (35<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> × 47<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>)

Samuel H. Kress Collection

*Distinguishing Marks and Labels*

On stretcher: two encapsulated NGA labels; typed label with blue border, “H. ROBERT / ‘Le vieux pont’”; printed label, “JAMES BOURLET & SONS, Ltd., / Fine Art Packers, Frame Makers, / B61268 / 17 & 18, NASSAU STREET, / MORTIMER STREET, W. / Phones: MUSEUM 1871 & 7588”; small label with red border, “N.Y. 289”; small label with red border, “C8905 / Wildenstein”; label with blue border, inscription crossed out; small label with blue print, “FOGG / ART MUSEUM / LOAN / 114.1931”; written on the stretcher, “1417” and “47126F.”

*Technical Notes:* The primary support is a medium-weight, plain-weave fabric that has been lined. Although the tacking margins have been removed, cusping around the perimeter of the picture indicates that it probably retains its original dimensions. The current stretcher is modern, but there are cracks in the paint running vertically through the center of the painting that probably were caused by the vertical crossbar of a former stretcher, possibly the original.

The support was prepared with a dense, off-white ground, and the X-radiographs reveal the presence of five sweeping strokes across this priming, suggesting that it was very broadly laid onto the canvas, perhaps with a cloth. The handling of the paint is smooth and fluid throughout the picture. There is almost no paint texture, with the exception of low impasto on the highlights of the tollhouse greenery, the smaller arch, and the grasses below it. The artist created an illusion of texture in the stonework by allowing the ground to show through the paint film. Local color was applied with a stiff brush, almost as if it were scratched on, allowing the off-white preparation to show through and create the palest tones of the architecture. The darks were differentiated by the use of more opaque pigment of a fluid consistency. The sky and distant riverscape were handled in much the same way, using superimposed applications of relatively opaque paint with little or no ground showing through. Although there are no pentimenti, the X-radiographs show an amorphous shape between the two figures in the foreground, possibly another washerwoman that the artist decided to paint out.

The painting is structurally stable. It has an overall crackle pattern, which is very slightly cupped. The varnish has not discolored markedly, but there are at least two layers of inpainting, some of which has whitened with age, especially in the stone blocks of the bridge and tollhouse, in the craquelure in the sky, and along a crease created by the pressure of a previous stretcher bar. According to Colin Eisler, the painting was “relined, cleaned, and restored by [Stephen] Pichetto in 1946–7.”<sup>1</sup>

*Provenance:* Jean Frédéric Perregaux [1744–1808], Paris and Viry-Châtillon; by inheritance to his daughter, the maréchale duchesse de Raguse [1779–1855, née Anne Marie Hortense Perregaux], Paris and Viry-Châtillon; (her estate sale, Hôtel des Commissaires-Priseurs, Paris, December 14–15, 1857, no. 42); Madame Louis Stern, Paris, by 1911; (sale, Galerie Georges Petit, Paris, April 22, 1929, no. 19); (Wildenstein & Co., Inc., New York); sold December 23, 1946, to the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York.

*Exhibited:* *Loan Exhibition of Eighteenth Century French Painting*, Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, no cat. (no. 31 in checklist). *Exhibition of French Painting from the Fifteenth Century to the Present Day*, California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1934, no. 53. *Paintings and Drawings by Hubert Robert*, Wildenstein & Co., New York, 1935, no. 32. *The Splendor of Ruins*, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2005, no. 30.



Cat. 86. Hubert Robert, *The Ponte Salario*



The Ponte Salario takes its name from the Via Salaria, the old route linking Rome and the salt-producing areas of the Sabine country. Spanning the river Aniene near its confluence with the Tiber, at a location just north of the capital where once stood the ancient settlement of Antemnae, it is one of the oldest of Roman bridges. Its history and numerous transformations are well chronicled. It was constructed in the fourth century B.C. Legend has it that it was on or near the Ponte Salario that c. 360 the Roman consul Manlius Imperiosus Titus slew a soldier from Gaul and removed a gold chain, or *torque*, from his body, hence his cognomen Torquatus. The bridge endured through the Roman Republic and Empire, but in 546, during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, it was destroyed by the army of the Ostrogoth king Totila, only to be rebuilt c. 565 by general Narses, who ultimately defeated the invaders.

The crenellated tower serving as a tollhouse in Robert's time, which looms so large in the National Gallery of Art's painting, was a medieval addition to the bridge and was no doubt meant to serve a military purpose.<sup>2</sup> The Ponte Salario remained more or less unchanged until 1798, when Neapolitan forces damaged it in an attempt to impede the advance of the French Republican army. In 1849 the French general Oudinot ordered it blown up as soldiers under his command were attempting to overthrow the Roman republic. In 1867, during the rout of Giuseppe Garibaldi's forces by the Franco-pontifical troops under General de Failly, the bridge was all but demolished; only the piers on either side of the river remained standing.<sup>3</sup> By 1874 it had been reconstructed, and in 1930 it was widened.<sup>4</sup> Today it is unrecognizable as the subject of the National Gallery's painting.

In the history of the *veduta*, bridges were seen as “emblematic of the passage of life.”<sup>5</sup> This philosophical resonance greatly appealed to Hubert Robert, and he exploited the motif throughout his career. In 1767 he sent one of his most brilliant evocations of the Roman Campagna to the Salon, a work in which one bridge is seen through the ruined arch of another (fig. 1). The artist was especially fond of juxtaposing the vestiges of Roman and medieval architecture in a single composition; he did this in a work of 1776, *The Bridge* (fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> The Ponte Salario as he had known it during his Italian sojourn was a monument in which such elements were naturally combined.

In the National Gallery's painting, Robert suggests the corrosive effects of time on manmade structures. A wooden railing replaces a lost section of the bridge's ramp, and on the abutment at right, the timbered substructure of the bridge can be seen through a large, gaping hole in the crumbling masonry. As the real subject of the painting is the bridge, various types of Italianate figures in the scene are no more than colorful props. Peasants enter the tollhouse tunnel; a woman gestures to her cat from the balcony; a herdsman prods his cattle across the bridge; women wash and hang their laundry on the bank of the river. A tollman or constable holding a stick stands in the shadows of the embankment, and a woman crouches behind him. Seen through the great arch against the backdrop of the Sabine hills, a boatman transports several figures across the water. Other details enhance the picturesque quality of the composition: carpets and bedding hang from the balcony and the bridge's parapet; a papal escutcheon surmounts the tollhouse door; and weeds, grasses, and vines grow along the river's edge, the wooden railing,

Fig. 1. Hubert Robert, *A Bridge under which Can Be Seen the Sabine Country Forty Leagues from Rome*, 1767, oil on canvas, private collection



Fig. 2. Hubert Robert, *The Bridge*, 1776, oil on canvas, Montpellier, Musée Fabre



and the pergola surmounting the tower. The opposition of solids and voids, closed and open spaces, and ponderous and aerial effects help dramatize the landscape. Finally, the sophisticated geometry of the composition, with its multiple arches, is made even more complex by the play of warm light and cool shadows.

Hubert Robert produced two versions of *The Ponte Salario*, of which the National Gallery's painting is probably the earlier. The second, larger picture (fig. 3) was executed in 1783 and was last recorded in the 1920 sale of Sigismond Bardac.<sup>7</sup> This is in all likelihood the picture described as representing *An Ancient Bridge Three Miles from Rome on the Tiber*, which the artist exhibited in 1783 as no. 60 in the Salon of the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. The dimensions given in the exhibition handbook are somewhat larger than those of the ex-Bardac painting — “5 pieds 9 pouces de large, sur 4 pieds 6 pouces de haut” (175 cm wide by 137 cm high) — but measurements of paintings in Salon catalogues were sometimes those of the frames. The scene is captured from a slightly more distant viewpoint, and the figures on the bridge and in the tollhouse are more numerous and varied. The foreground is cluttered with additional figures — more washerwomen and fishermen in boats — while other fisherfolk on the river's edge are shown pulling in their nets. Despite the ex-Bardac painting's larger size, its overall effect is less monumental than that of the National Gallery's picture.

Robert's two views of the Ponte Salario could be considered as *capricci*, for he has taken considerable license with both the architecture and the topography. Unlike Claude Lorrain (1604/1605–1682, cats. 19, 20), whose role in the creation of the *veduta* tradition was paramount, Robert does not use the bridge as a mere poetic accessory in a wider landscape. For him it is the absolute focus of his composition. He was surely inspired by the example of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720–1778), whose splendid etching of the bridge (fig. 4) was executed in the mid-1750s as part of his *Vedute di Roma*.<sup>8</sup> Piranesi had placed himself nearer the gradient that leads to the bridge, thereby emphasizing the bulk of the architectural monument, which in his print has an almost sinister appearance. He also depicts more of the embankment on the opposite side of the river and a tomblike structure rising in the distance. Johannes Langner has examined the bridge motif in Piranesi's art, and his analysis could be applied equally well to Robert's conception:

[T]he bridge is no longer an object among many, but the exclusive object viewed in such a manner as to occupy the visual field in all of its scope. Rising to a menacing height above our heads, it thrusts itself towards the other bank in a vertiginous foreshortening. Its immediate presence confers on it a dramatic character. From this vantage point, the arch becomes the primordial element. It alone makes us sense the enormous mass and weight of the structure, it alone captures the eye by the elementary character of its form and by the boldness of its dimensions.<sup>9</sup>

The National Gallery's *The Ponte Salario* was featured in the catalogue of the estate sale of the maréchale duchesse de Raguse, née Anne Marie Hortense Perregaux, widow of one of Napoleon's marshals, Auguste Frédéric Louis Viesse de Marmont (1774–1852). Born in Paris in 1779, she was the daughter of the Swiss-born banker Jean Frédéric Perregaux, a native of Neuchâtel, and his French wife Adélaïde de Praël de Surville (1758–1794). The preface to the catalogue, written by the “expert” Mennechet, states that the



Fig. 3. Hubert Robert, *The Ponte Salario*, 1783, oil on canvas, private collection

Fig. 4. Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Ponte Salario*, 1756/1757, etching, Washington, National Gallery of Art, Gift of David Keppel, 1943.10.47





paintings of the late eighteenth-century French school in the sale had been acquired by the decedent's father from the artists themselves. Perregaux had owned major works by Louis Léopold Boilly (1761–1845), Jean Louis Demarne (?1752–1829), François Gérard (1770–1837), Marguerite Gérard (1761–1837), Jean Baptiste Greuze (1725–1805, cats. 54–56), Jean Baptiste Le Prince (1734–1781), Nicolas Antoine Taunay (1755–1830), Joseph Vernet (1714–1789, cat. 92), and Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (1755–1842, cats. 93–95),<sup>10</sup> and among the stars of his collection were four Roberts: a pair entitled *La Fontaine* and *Le Manoir*, a landscape depicting *Dancers in a Park*,<sup>11</sup> and the National Gallery's *The Ponte Salario*. (The latter was included in the postmortem inventory of Perregaux's collection, which was drawn up on February 25, 1808, by the *commissaire-priseur* Jean Baptiste Théodore Sensier.)<sup>12</sup> Perregaux, the first regent of the Banque de France, left Hortense a considerable fortune and part ownership of his bank, which was taken over by his associate, Jacques Laffitte.<sup>13</sup> Her collection was sold in 1857, two years after her death, and in the catalogue Hubert Robert's *The Ponte Salario* is described as follows:

The bridge. View of a large single-arched bridge occupying the entire painting, and upon which rises a ruined fortress which has been transformed into a rustic dwelling. Above the crenellations are posts bearing grapevines. On the bridge, the stone parapet of which is half-destroyed and replaced by joists, can be seen a cow passing by, and below, women wash and hang their laundry. This work is of the most admirable execution and of the finest effect.<sup>14</sup>

No preparatory studies for the composition are known. An anonymous copy of the Gallery's painting was featured in a London auction in 1990.<sup>15</sup> A very fine copy in gouache is in a private American collection (fig. 5).

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Fig. 5. After Hubert Robert, *The Ponte Salario*, possibly late eighteenth century, watercolor and gouache on paper, private collection



## Notes

1. Eisler 1977, 338.
2. Similar towers were built on other bridges in and around Rome, among them the Ponte Mammolo, the Ponte Molle, the Ponte Milvio, and the Ponte Nomentano.
3. A photograph of the nearly demolished bridge was taken at the time by John Henry Parker (illus. in Brizzi 1975, 213).
4. For illustrations of various views of the Ponte Salario, both engraved and drawn, see Rome 1975, nos. 117, 124, 130, 155, 177, 207, 219, 220. Another fantastical depiction of the bridge attributed to the Swiss-born architect and draftsman Jean François Thomas (1758–1813), called Thomas de Thomon, is one of a pair of drawings recently with the Galerie Didier Aaron in Paris. See also Karlsruhe 1991–1992, 252; Faunce 1996–1997, 57, fig. 2.
5. Eisler, 1977, 338. See also Sweetman 1999, 1–21.
6. A similar picture was last recorded in a Paris sale (Drouot Montaigne, June 25, 1991, lot 63, repro.).
7. Paris, Galerie Georges Petit, May 10–11, 1920, no. 32, repro.
8. Robert may also have known Giuseppe Vasi's engraving of the Ponte Salario (see Scalabroni 1981, 73, no. 165, pl. 83).
9. "[L]e pont n'est plus un objet entre autres, mais l'objet exclusif, envisagé de manière à occuper à lui seul le champ visuel dans toute son étendue. S'élevant à une hauteur menaçante au-dessus de nos têtes, il s'élance vers l'autre rive dans un raccourci vertigineux. Sa présence immédiate lui confère un caractère dramatique. Avec cet angle de vision, l'arche devient l'élément primordial. C'est elle qui nous fait sentir la masse et le poids énormes de l'ouvrage, c'est elle qui captive le regard par le caractère élémentaire de sa forme et par la hardiesse de ses dimensions." Langner 1976, 294–295. On this print, see also Sweetman 1991, 30–31, no. 14.
10. Vigée Le Brun's portrait of Madame Perregaux is in the Wallace Collection, London. See Hedley 2004, 224–233.
11. Bielefeld, Germany, August Oetker collection. For a discussion and color illustration, see the entry by Hermann Arnhold in Münster 2003, no. 62.
12. In the inventory of Perregaux's estate (Archives nationales de France, Paris: Étude x, liasse 882), the National Gallery's painting was one of several decorating the salon of Perregaux's townhouse at 9, rue du Mont Blanc and was valued at 120 francs. ("Item, un autre [paysage] par Robert représentant un pont cadre de bois doré Pris cent vingt francs, ci . . . . . 120.")
13. For the lives of Perregaux and his daughter, consult Pury 1919, 7–12; Lhomer 1926; Szramkiewicz 1974, 311–318; De Bellaigue 1986, 80–90. A portion of the collection was bequeathed to the banker's son, Alphonse Claude Charles Bernardin Perregaux (1785–1841), who married the daughter of another of Napoleon's marshals, Étienne-Jacques-Joseph-Alexandre Macdonald, duc de Tarente. The younger Perregaux's estate sale took place in Paris at the Galerie Le Brun

on December 8–9, 1841, and was composed primarily of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings.

14. “Le pont. Vue d’un grand pont d’une seule arche qui occupe tout le tableau, et sur lequel s’élève un château-fort en ruines, changé en habitation rustique; au-dessus des créneaux sont plantés des poteaux qui portent une vigne. Sur le pont, dont le parapet de pierre est à moitié détruit et remplacé par des solives, on voit passer une vache, et dessous, des blanchisseuses lavent ou étendent leur linge. Ce morceau est de l’exécution la plus admirable et du plus bel effet.” Paris, Hôtel des Commissaires-Priseurs, *Catalogue des tableaux des écoles française, hollandaise et flamande formant la collection de M<sup>me</sup> la Maréchale Duchesse de Raguse*, December 14–15, 1857, no. 42.
15. Christie’s, South Kensington, February 7, 1990, no. 42, repro.

#### References

- 1857–1858 Blanc: 585.  
1910b Nolhac: 127.  
1911 Guiffrey: 22, repro.  
1922 Gillet: n.p., color repro.  
1929 *Beaux-Arts*: 13, repro.  
1929 *Bulletin*: 259, 257, repro.  
1929 *Le Gaulois Artistique*: 344, repro.  
1931 *Parnassus*: 27, repro.  
1934 Bouyer: 24, repro.  
1935 *Art Digest*: 15, repro.  
1935 Morsell: 1, 4, repro.  
1948 New York: 4.  
1951 NGA: 230, no. 103, repro.  
1952 Frankfurter: 118, 127, 121, repro.  
1953 Isarlo: 33.  
1956 Einstein: 236, 235, repro., fig. 21.  
1959 Cooke: 40, color repro.  
1959 NGA: 371, repro.  
1962 Cairns and Walker: 114, color repro.  
1963 Walker: 318, repro.  
1965b NGA: 115.  
1966 Cairns and Walker: 2:324, color repro.  
1967 Burda: 45–46, 136, repro., fig. 32.  
1968 NGA: 102, repro.  
1975 NGA: 306, repro.  
1977 Eisler: 338–339, fig. 305.  
1979 Watson: 88, pl. 76.  
1984 Walker: 341, no. 462, color repro.  
1985 NGA: 353, repro.  
1991–1992 Karlsruhe: 94, under no. 51, repro.  
1992 NGA: 174, color repro.

## PIERRE HENRI DE VALENCIENNES

1750–1819

Pierre Henri de Valenciennes still awaits a rigorously documented biography, especially for his early career and travels, before he settled into official artistic life in Paris in 1787. Born in Toulouse, he trained at the local art academy under the history painter Jean Baptiste Despax (1709–1773) and the miniaturist Guillaume Gabriel Bouton. According to Robert Mesuret, he was sponsored by a member of the *Parlement* of Toulon, Mathias du Bourg, who may have underwritten a first trip to Rome in 1769. In the early 1770s (and by 1773, on the evidence of dated drawings made in the Paris area), Valenciennes was in Paris, where he entered the studio of the history painter Gabriel François Doyen (1726–1806) in 1773. He began a four-year visit to Italy in 1777, documented by drawings made on the outward journey. While in Paris for a brief stay in 1781–1782, Valenciennes wrote that he met the landscape and marine painter Claude Joseph Vernet (1714–1789, cat. 92), who gave him valuable instruction in the science of perspective; however, it is perhaps more likely that such lessons would have been imparted during Valenciennes’ student days in the early 1770s. The present writer and others have suggested that during the 1781–1782 encounter, Vernet introduced Valenciennes to the practice of painting landscape oil studies in the open air. Certainly, the older painter’s precocious naturalism and his contemporary reputation as a plein-air painter make him an important predecessor for Valenciennes’ own practice and his theories of landscape painting. It is assumed — although not proven — that Valenciennes’ series of open-air landscape studies in oil, made in and around Rome, date to his return to Italy for another three or four years, from 1782 to 1785 or 1786. Most of the surviving oil studies are now in the Musée du Louvre.

Through both his artistic practice and his theoretical writing Valenciennes holds a position of considerable importance in the history of landscape painting of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. In 1800 he published the influential treatise on landscape painting, *Elémens de perspective pratique, à l’usage des artistes, suivis de Réflexions et conseils à un élève sur la peinture, et particulièrement sur le genre du paysage*, which was still recommended by Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) in the 1880s. Much of this book is devoted to the detailed study of perspective. But Valenciennes was perhaps more influential for his advocacy of an almost systematic program of study by painting oil sketches from nature out-of-doors, which he believed was a better way for the young artist to understand nature’s myriad appearances and to train the hand and eye in capturing them in paint. This theory was based on Valenciennes’ own experience of painting oil studies in the open air during his last Italian sojourn between 1782 and 1785. He passed on the practice of painting open-air landscape studies in oil to his pupils, including Achille Etna Michallon (1796–1822) and Jean Joseph Xavier Bidault (1758–1846, cat. 1). This working method became a cornerstone of landscape painting in the nineteenth century, from Camille Corot (1796–1875), who studied with his precocious contemporary Michallon, to Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), who was mentored in plein-air painting by Pissarro.