

Hubert ROBERT (Paris 1733 - Paris 1808)

Figures in the Courtyard of an Italian Palazzo

Black chalk.

Laid down on a backing sheet.

Inscribed Paul Anezi del. Cab. De Spengler N0.11. on the old mount

172 x 135 mm. (6 3/4 x 5 1/4 in.)

Previously unknown and unpublished, this drawing is a study for Hubert Robert's painting Staircase with Columns, datable to the 1770s and today in the collection of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg. The painting was one of eight works that Robert sent to Czar Alexander I in 1803 by way of Count A. S. Stroganov, and may be regarded as among the finest of the group. The painting was admired for Robert's handling of light and his ability to create the illusion of an expansive space in what is quite a small canvas. The present sheet is the only known preparatory study by Robert for this important painting.

We are grateful to Sarah Catala for confirming the attribution of the present sheet to Hubert Robert.

Artist description:

A student of the sculptor Michel-Ange Slodtz, Hubert Robert travelled to Rome in 1754 in the retinue of the new French ambassador to the Vatican, the future Duc de Choiseul. It was probably through the influence of Choiseul that, although he was not officially a pensionnaire at the Académie de France in Rome, the young Robert was able to study there for several years. Succinctly described by the director of the Académie de France, Charles-Joseph Natoire, as a young man 'who has a penchant for painting architecture' ('qui a du goût pour peindre l'architecture'), Robert spent a total of eleven years in Italy, mostly in Rome. He fell under the particular influence of Giovanni Paolo Panini, the leading Italian painter of architectural views and capricci, who taught perspective at the Académie de France. Robert's earliest paintings and drawings, both in composition and technique, are greatly indebted to the example of Panini. At the Académie de France Robert met and befriended Jean-Honoré Fragonard, and with him made sketching tours of the countryside around Rome.

Robert returned to Paris in 1765, and the following year was admitted into the Académie Royale as a 'peintre des ruines', rather unusually being both reçu and agrée in the same year. He made his debut at the Salon in 1767, exhibiting picturesque landscapes and capricci, and soon had developed such a reputation for paintings of real and imagined Roman views, often incorporating ancient ruins, that he was given the sobriquet 'Robert des Ruines'. A versatile artist, Robert often repeated and developed favourite views or compositions in several different formats, including chalk drawings, finished watercolours, small cabinet pictures and large-scale wall paintings. Appointed dessinateur des jardins du roi in 1778, Robert was also able to incorporate his artistic ideas into his landscape designs for gardens at Versailles and elsewhere. Despite being imprisoned during the Revolution, he remained a significant figure in the artistic scene in Paris until the end of the century.