

Poussin to David

FRENCH DRAWINGS AT THE ALBERTINA

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Poussin to David

French Drawings at the Albertina

25 January – 25 April 2017

Be it poetic love stories or mythological epics, atmospheric portrait studies or picturesque ruins—today, the world of French Baroque and Rococo art is more inspiring than ever.

This exhibition's 70 major works, selected from the Albertina's rich holdings of drawings, sweep visitors into the dreamy and multi-layered cosmos of French art from the 17th and 18th centuries: the works on display include Nicolas Poussin's breath-taking free landscape studies as well as Claude Lorrain's light-drenched depictions of nature. Playful masterpieces by François Boucher and Jean-Honoré Fragonard likewise assume their rightful places here, as do the lovely scenes of Jean-Baptiste Greuze. And the crowning conclusion of this showing, which reflects two centuries of French art, is provided by the imposing creation of Jacques Louis David.

The art shown in *From Poussin to David* exudes the spirit of the Ancien Régime: the drawings by the great French masters of the 17th and 18th centuries come across as capricious, cheerfully glorified, escapist. And indeed, these works illustrate not the reality of their times, but much rather the escapism of a feudal aristocracy that was blind to the approaching revolution. In contrast to the criticism of society and its conventions voiced by contemporary authors such as Voltaire, the paintings of Watteau, Boucher, and Fragonard tell of feudal life's otherworldly conviviality in the late Baroque and Rococo eras. The foremost artists of those times portray an enraptured, unreal life ensconced in imaginary landscapes, a life that was the province not only of their nymphs and fauns, Greek goddesses, and Roman heroes: court society itself likewise dreamed its dreams of a peaceful Arcadian life far removed from the reality of bumpy country roads, impoverished villages, and unrelenting war.

The early 17th century, which came on the heels of a long phase of political stability and associated economic prosperity following the Edict of Nantes (1598), marked the true beginning of France's rise to become Europe's leading cultural force. Cardinal Richelieu, the ambitious co-mastermind of the arts under Louis XIII, recalled to Paris French masters who had gone to Italy: in particular Nicolas Poussin and the Lorrain native Claude Gellée, known as Claude Lorrain, contributed decisively to the development of a French national style with their atmospheric landscapes.

The 18th century bore witness to the dawn of a renewed golden era: Watteau's "fêtes galantes,"—depictions of imaginatively costumed romantic couples in idealised dream-landscapes—and Boucher's graceful portrayals of mythological and erotic content are now viewed as the epitome of French Rococo. The late 18th century's glorious zenith, on the other hand, is embodied by the masterpieces of Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Alongside portraits,

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Fragonard's oeuvre includes religious and mythological subjects, illustrations after literary works, and galant genre paintings, as well as amorous pastoral and boudoir scenes.

The popularity of this otherworldly aesthetic continued unbroken in the enchanting depictions of everyday life by Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whose oeuvre bridges the gap between Rococo and Classicism. His melodramatic diptych with the "ungrateful son" already points to Classicism's pathetic and heroic pictorial language, and thus to Jacques-Louis David's monumental battle sketch *The Combat of Diomedes*. The latter drawing was created in the year that the United States of America declared its independence: 1776 was a historical turning point and a pinnacle of the enlightenment, and it also marks the conclusion of this selection of French drawings from the 17th and 18th centuries. It is with this masterpiece by David that the Ancien Régime drew to a close—and the revolutionary era dawned.

The collection founded by Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen at the Albertina owes much to that spirit of the enlightenment that, with its proclamation of human rights, placed personal freedom and equality above the laws of an old order based on lineage. The individual masterpieces here, on the other hand—from the majestic idealisation of Lorraine's nature to David's monumental creation—convey the ideals of that feudal order's doomed elite.

Wall texts

French Drawing in the Seventeenth Century

Under the reigns of Louis XIII (1610–1643) and Louis XIV (1643–1715), France advanced to become the leading cultural nation. During the first half of the seventeenth century, Simon Vouet, a painter of numerous altarpieces and monumental decorations, was the most influential artist at the French royal court and on the Parisian art scene. The multitude and diversity of his projects explain the large number of surviving drawings by his hand, which not only include compositional designs, but also and above all studies of individual figures and details, mostly executed in black and white chalk. From his large studio emerged such renowned artists as Pierre Mignard and Eustache Le Sueur. Their drawings primarily served as indispensable study material to prepare paintings, frescoes, and tapestries. However, the artists' handling of drawing became increasingly liberal, and drawing developed into an artistic genre that was on a par with painting. That drawings were gradually also seen as autonomous works of art must be credited to Claude Lorrain; his oeuvre comprises numerous highly finished landscape drawings made outdoors that were greatly coveted and collected early on. Nicolas Poussin is equally known for having drawn views of the Roman Campagna that can be seen as pictorially accomplished works of art in their own right.

Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain

Villers near Les Andelys 1594 – 1665 Rome / Chamagne 1600 or 1604/5 – 1682 Rome

Poussin and Lorrain numbered among the leading French artists of the seventeenth century, even if they had adopted Rome as their second home. Both of them left the Eternal City only briefly: Poussin at the behest of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu in order to supervise the decoration of the Grande Galerie at the Louvre and other projects around 1640–42, and Lorrain in order to work in Nancy in 1625/26.

Although Poussin was primarily interested in history painting – in Raphaelesque figural compositions set in mythological or religious scenes – the landscape subject plays an important role in his art. Like Lorrain, the major exponent of the ideal landscape approach, Poussin made drawings *en plein air*: the Roman Campagna, with its soft hills, charming river valleys, monumental mountain cities, and picturesque castles and ruins, perfectly accommodated the ideas of a harmoniously accomplished landscape. Both artists preferably produced monochrome brush-and-wash drawings, but whereas Poussin's landscape renderings are governed by a strict rational clarity, an atmospheric element prevails in those of Lorrain.

French Drawing in the Eighteenth Century

French draftsmanship is said to have reached its zenith in the Rococo. The style was introduced by Watteau as the ingenious inventor of the cheerfully poetic genre of the “*fêtes galantes*,” pictures of imaginatively costumed amorous couples in romanticized natural settings. The powerful aestheticism of his unreal pictorial worlds inspired an entire epoch. His drawings executed in sanguine or the “*trois-crayons*” technique proved equally pioneering. A yearning for Arcadian idylls and amorous conviviality continued to be reflected in the art of Charles-Joseph Natoire, François Boucher, Hubert Robert, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard. Displaying refinement and a serene gracefulness, the artists described a lighthearted dream world removed from reality. What all of them shared was the great importance they attached to their drawings. They were frequently conceived as autonomous works of art and mostly executed with soft crayons, as virtuoso monochrome brush-and-wash drawings, or as charming watercolors. Their elegance and visual sensuousness reflected the spirit of the Ancien Régime, but due to their verve and brisk execution their impact was more spontaneous and immediate than that of any painting.

The second half of the eighteenth century was a period of social and intellectual change: the Enlightenment and sentimentalism turned against playful and courtly Rococo culture. One of the most productive and inventive draftsmen at the dawn of Neoclassicism was Jean-Baptiste Greuze, whom Diderot celebrated as a great moralist.

Hyacinthe Rigaud and French Portraiture

Perpignan 1659 – 1743 Paris

Rigaud is considered the founder of official French court portraiture, which around 1700 became a leading influence throughout Europe. For his approach, the artist harked back to the more austere French portrait tradition established by Philippe de Champaigne and to the example of Anthony van Dyck. This new type of portraiture was characterized by both a distanced portrayal and a sensuous presence of the sitter. A court painter to Louis XIV, Rigaud portrayed primarily members of the royal household, the aristocracy, and the clergy. Dividing the work up among themselves, the numerous specialized collaborators of his large workshop completed or copied many of his portraits, to which he eventually added the finishing touches. Rigaud always made drawings after completed portraits and never in advance, as preparatory works. These drawings, already greatly coveted during the artist's lifetime because of their precision and brilliantly rendered surface textures, were sometimes presented to a patron as a souvenir, or Rigaud archived them in order to show prospective clients advantageous poses, attires, gestures, and facial expressions. Reproductions in the form of engravings contributed to the dissemination of his portraits and to the increase of his fame.

Charles-Joseph Natoire

Nîmes 1700 – 1777 Castelvetro

Natoire's study of the landscape began early on during his stay in Rome from 1723 to 1729 on a grant from the French Academy. Upon his return to Paris, he was initially highly successful as a decorative painter. Having been appointed director of the French Academy, he went back to Rome in 1751 and once again increasingly devoted himself to landscape drawing. He was not only interested in recording landscape motifs, but also in the integration of real architecture, frequently in the form of classical monuments. In order to achieve a painterly effect, Natoire developed a new technique: over an initial sketch executed with black chalk and reinforced with pen or sanguine, he applied a brown or gray wash and additionally used watercolors and tinted paper. Most of his landscape watercolors date from the period between 1755 and 1766. For his depictions he chose a real situation, which he defamiliarized by adding a stage-like foreground and figural staffage, thus turning his motifs into idealized decorative views. With his teaching method of encouraging the scholarship holders to draw out of doors in Rome and in the Campagna, he influenced his students Jean-Honoré Fragonard and Hubert Robert.

François Boucher

Paris 1703 – 1770 Paris

The delightful elegance and graceful compositions of his chivalrous subjects made Boucher the most illustrious interpreter and epitome of French Rococo art under Louis XV. The artist's superb decorative abilities corresponded to the contemporary taste for splendid outer appearances lacking in content-related profundity. His versatile talent was not confined solely to paintings and drawings depicting mythological, religious, erotic, and genre scenes, but also encompassed decorations for interiors and the theatre, as well as designs for the applied arts, such as tapestry, porcelain, and furniture. Moreover, Boucher was a much-sought-after portraitist who achieved fame primarily through the works commissioned by Madame de Pompadour, his art-loving patron. His numerous drawings – increasingly produced as autonomous works of art in addition to the obligatory preliminary studies – are on a par with his extensive painted oeuvre.

Hubert Robert

Paris 1733 – 1808 Paris

Robert was the author of fantastic landscapes featuring architecture and ruins that perfectly suited the taste of the Ancien Régime. Displaying a pronounced sense of decorativeness, his depictions combine a nostalgically romanticizing view of monuments of the past, an emotionally charged natural atmosphere, and idyllic figural staffage.

In Rome, Robert was friends with Giovanni Battista Piranesi and studied perspective under Gian Paolo Pannini. From them, he adopted the art of the architectural capriccio and of ruin painting: real architectural motifs, predominantly the city's famous monuments, merely served as a starting point and were reinterpreted by the artist in a theatrically exaggerated fashion. Views of Rome enjoyed great popularity, as the Grand Tour, a sightseeing trip through Italy, was an inherent part of the nobility's education. The interest in Italy was particularly keen in the eighteenth century, due to recent archeological discoveries made at Tivoli, Pompeii, and Herculaneum.

At the beginning of his career, Robert preferred red chalk, whereas later on he used the effective combination of pen, brush, black ink, and watercolor over preliminary drawing in black chalk, by which he produced the graceful impact so typical of French Rococo art. Following his return to Paris, he was admitted to the Academy as an architectural painter in 1766 and in 1778 was appointed "draftsman of the royal gardens."

At the Dawn of Neoclassicism

After the mid-1750s, a gradual change announced itself in French art. Reason and the Enlightenment started taking the place of the elegant and cheerful illusionary world of the Rococo. With his melodramatic diptych of the Prodigal Son, Greuze anticipated Neoclassicism's aesthetic pathos and heroism. Jacques-Louis David became the figurehead of this movement, which would spread far beyond France. His history paintings featuring heroic scenes from antique mythology and Roman history indirectly referred to contemporary political events and in their ethical and moralizing allusions were in line with the objectives of the state's official cultural policy: art was supposed to not only serve aesthetic pleasure, but also educational purposes. Themes, preferably from classical antiquity, that triggered feelings of patriotism, honor, and heroism were deemed highly desirable. A beauty idealizing nature was to be achieved through measure and harmony. For this, a rigid composition, a simplified language of form, and clear proportions were considered essential prerequisites.

Jean-Baptiste Greuze

Tournus 1725 – 1805 Paris

With his subject matter marking a thematic break with Fragonard and Boucher, Greuze sought to do justice to contemporary notions of morality, religion, and sentimentality. His works realized Denis Diderot's program "*of making virtues appear attractive and vices hateful.*" A large part of Greuze's oeuvre is characterized by pathos and didactic clarity, for which he was praised as being a "*painter of morality, of beneficence, of beautiful souls.*" The motivation behind his art was primarily a pedagogical one, which led to a simplification of form and a particular focus on gesture. This would leave its mark on such artists as Jacques-Louis David.

Greuze left behind a vast drawn oeuvre, which mainly comprises studies for his oil paintings but is largely autonomous in terms of artistic significance. A liberal, unaffected atmosphere can always be felt when Greuze succeeded in breaking free from the theatrical drama of his compositions and committed spontaneous studies from life to paper.

Jean-Honoré Fragonard

Grasse 1732 – 1806 Paris

With its chivalrous narratives, graceful lightheartedness, and refinement of painting style and subject matter, Fragonard's oeuvre represents one of the most brilliant highlights of late French Rococo art. Along with portraits, it not only comprises religious and mythological themes, idyllic park landscapes, genre scenes, and amorous pastoral and boudoir scenes, but also illustrations of literary texts.

Whereas Fragonard's paintings are largely dominated by luminous colors, his drawings are mostly executed in monochrome. They nevertheless similarly convey the impression of richly nuanced "valeurs," on account of his accomplished mastery of the brushwork in brown or black ink, ranging from the darkest of shades to the brightest of passages. Despite their highly individual artistic language, his drawings, founded on the play of light and shadow, recall works by Rembrandt. Fragonard was a great admirer of the Dutch artist and in 1771 was able to acquire several of the latter's drawings and etchings.

Fragonard's drawings rarely served as preliminary studies, but mostly represented autonomous pictorial inventions. The stylistic freedom and sovereignty that characterize Fragonard's works on paper demonstrate that he himself viewed his drawings as works of art in their own right, on an equal footing with his painted work.

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Louis-Léopold Boilly

La Bassé 1761 – 1845 Paris

Boilly was one of the most sought-after genre painters and portraitists of his period. A highpoint of his career coincided with the French Revolution. However, unlike David, he refrained from translating the current political events into history paintings. Yet although Boilly's cheerfully anecdotal scenes taken from everyday life betray a thematic influence of Fragonard and Greuze, their concreteness, achieved by means of a spatial illusionism and clearly structured forms, reveals his commitment to the Neoclassical style.

Boilly preferably used his ten children as models – possibly also for the two pastels exhibited here.