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Nina L. Dubin, *Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert*. Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2010. 210 pp. 24 color and 54 b/w illustrations, index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 13:978-1-60606-023-0.

Review by Janet T. Marquardt, Eastern Illinois University.

Nina Dubin's study has compiled an impressive array of contemporary sources for a comprehensive analysis of the motivations, influences, and implications of Hubert Robert's paintings from the late eighteenth century. Some secondary authors are used multiple times and many points of Dubin's study are repeated, however, the contexts are apt and the reader can nearly always appreciate the new angle added to successive references.[1] Paris's pre-Revolutionary world of financial credit, real estate speculation, Neoclassical construction, and urban demolition which surrounded Robert upon his return from Rome in 1765 is brought fully to view in his work. He had acquired a profound appreciation for Classical architecture and the popular etchings of Piranesi. His close relationships with the financier class gave him an inside understanding of the mechanics of change at work in the city. He wove together his perception of contemporaries' hopes and fears with a popular association between the fate of Ancient Rome and Paris, presenting Parisian viewers with theatrical scenes of disaster, demolition, and construction that invoked the imaginative aesthetic sublime even as they underscored the culture of risk, volatility, and impermanence that was reaching its peak.

Dubin divides her study into four chapters: "The Unmade;" "Scenes from Hell;" "anti-edifice;" and "Posterity." The themes are derived from careful readings of contemporary critics and commentators. Her visual analyses of the artworks are both intricately complete and masterfully applied. In her brief introduction, she establishes the main issues on which her study relies and the direction her questions will take. Ultimately, Dubin characterizes Paris of the eighteenth century as a locus of risk, pursuant to the introduction of paper currency, overrun with gambling, real estate speculation, and irreverence for its own past. The aesthetic of the ruin, which Robert exploited, spoke to the pleasure caused by witnessing change and envisioning the future even as concomitant fear of loss and nostalgia engendered a Romantic emotional pathos.

In chapters one and two, "The Unmade" and "Scenes from Hell," Dubin introduces the culture of risk in eighteenth-century Paris with a Robert painting of a Roman ruin sheltering peasants playing dice (fig. 1) as a preface to his series of fire paintings—of the Opéra and Hôtel Dieu in Paris, of Rome, and of Mt. Vesuvius's eruption. By quoting contemporary critics of the new credit market economy and the effects of the growing art print culture, especially regarding Piranesi's fictional representations of Antiquity, she establishes the function of Robert's paintings in the transition between the Rococo and Neoclassical styles. The "good taste" of the latter style was undercut by the unstable credit that financed it, creating fears of a return to the decadence of the former. Dubin relates both the terrifying aspects of disasters and the rapid pace of refashioning the cityscape to Burke's notion of the sublime (p. 69, 110), making tourists of Parisian residents in their own neighborhoods. This argument suggests Susan Stewart's *On Longing* point about the souvenir—by definition always incomplete and serving to prompt narrative imagination.[2]

Robert created modern artworks that performed the souvenir function and captured contemporary

appetites for risk: Romantic views of fragmented buildings, whether eroded by time, destroyed by disaster, demolished by speculators (especially medieval churches), or merely unfinished construction. Dubin probes the layers of meanings this invoked, quoting Grimm, that the more an artist left to the imagination, the more the work was sure to affect the viewer (p. 97). This was most certainly driven by the observation of ruins and the cult of *anticomanie* of the early eighteenth century, whereby tours to remains and trade in fragments catered to speculative reconstructions of the past conditions of monuments (pp. 18, 41). I have claimed elsewhere that partial buildings, neither fully razed nor restored after the Revolution, evoked a particularly intense form of nostalgia and regret.^[3] Dubin applies this concept, not just to Robert's subject matter, but also his unfinished "sketch" technique. Long before the Impressionists, art critics decried Robert's lack of finish and equated the results with the contemporary culture of speculation and shoddy building construction, claiming that the style evidenced his apparent desire for payment (pp. 64-65, 95). Even his preference for Classical or Neoclassical architecture blurred the boundaries between the Antique and Modern.

In chapter three, "anti-edifice," Dubin continues to elucidate how Robert blurred the boundaries between constriction and mobility, solidity and dissolution. In his paintings of Paris undergoing renovation during the late 1780s, Robert contrasted small, sketchy canvases of bridge demolitions (figs. 44, 45) that cleared views of the open river as the model for circulation—both in terms of hygiene and as symbolic of laissez-faire capital—with more fully finished *capriccio* of Parisian monuments gathered into single grand-scale works of enduring solidity (fig. 53). During a time of increasing financial crises from urban speculation and royal failure to meet Crown debts preliminary to the Revolution, Robert offered two outlooks for the future, both freshness and stability. At the same time, by signifying both demolitions incurring impossible mortgage liabilities and monuments redolent of aristocratic excess, the works also speak to contemporary unease and the desire to forget recompense and escape bankruptcy. Dubin enjoys pairing Robert's work in sets ("pendants") of contrasting subjects and meanings throughout the book. For instance, she does the same with his scene of the Bastille demolition and one of the 1789 ice storm. She also makes careful analysis of his direct references to Piranesi compositions, showing the implications of the echoes and adjustments that transform commercial energy and movement into Robert's favored contrasts of confinement and imagination.

Dubin's final chapter, "Posterity," chronicles Robert's period as administrator during the Louvre's transition from palace to public museum after the Revolution. Again, she uses a set of pendant views that he made of the Grande Galerie: the first projecting his plans for its renovation, and the second its distant future condition as a ruin (figs. 64, 65). He pictures himself sketching in both, young and old, as the witness to art's enduring importance. Dubin emphasizes the complementary aspects of the works to suggest a confidence in the new government, proving the transfer of power to the people and underscoring a shift from destruction to conservation after revolutionary chaos. Even as the ruin painting reminded viewers of the vandalism they had recently experienced, the clear reference to Robert's own images of Rome evoked the nobility of Antiquity sought during the overthrow of the Old Regime. However, these paintings were done at the same time that conquering French armies were transporting Italian works northwards to fill the Louvre galleries, causing polarizing public debates about the boundaries of *liberté* and *fraternité*, threatening to turn the museum into a monument to imperialism and art into a commodity of trade within a newly precarious world of financial straits. In arguments now reminiscent of the battle over the Parthenon marbles, proponents of spoliation claimed asylum for art too vulnerable in Rome, while accusing those who decried art's decontextualization as being anti-Republican. Their insistence that the value of the art would make France's fortune returned Dubin to the realities of risk underlying all Robert's work. And, although he may have pictured only works that were already in France to fill his projected building, the works hanging in his Grande Galerie were not French and thus begged the question of whose genius was being preserved for posterity. Indeed, the very fact of ruins being once again Robert's subject matter came under heated criticism as an example of artists who worked from imitation and memory rather than observing nature directly, another forecast of interest in *plein air* painting. In fact, a second view of the even further

ruined space, which Robert executed two years later, returns to his brushy style of the sketch. This composition Dubin equates, not with decay, but future imminence, once again suggesting that Robert's greatest gift to viewers was the imaginative possibilities that lay in his scenes, offering them the agency of the artist.[4]

NOTES

[1] The repetition may be due to previous publication of portions as free-standing essays in *Cabinet 20* (2006) and Rebecca Zorach, ed., *The Virtual Tourist in Renaissance Rome: Printing and Collecting the Speculum Romanae Magnificentiae* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[2] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: narratives of the miniature, the gigantic, the souvenir, the collection* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 135-136.

[3] Janet T. Marquardt, *From Martyr to Monument: the Abbey of Cluny as Cultural Patrimony* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007; pb, 2008), pp. 9, 39-40, 253-254.

[4] Here Dubin could have underscored Robert's visual resonance between his "modern" skylights for the Grande Galerie and the standard trope of ruins open to the sky.

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