

Celebrating Engineering, Commerce, Roman Emperors or French Kings? Hubert Robert's Imaginary Triumphal Bridges

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Abstract

Among French painter Hubert Robert's many representations of bridges, several are covered with triumphal architecture, or lead to magnificent palaces. Such monumental structures were clearly intended to evoke admiration for great works of engineering, as can be seen in contemporary texts concerning ancient Roman bridges and the inauguration ceremonies of modern structures (one of which, the Pont de Neuilly by Perronet, was represented by Robert). Bridges, furthermore, were also symbols for road systems celebrated for the efficiency they granted to transport and commerce.

Yet, although this common eighteenth-century view is surely present to some degree in Robert's pictures of triumphal bridges, it is also countered by several elements: technological prowess is here represented by sheer size and solidity, whereas the most advanced technology of the day sought a lighter profile and wider, flatter arches; likewise, although Robert's bridges may have reminded viewers of structures carrying the great roads radiating from ancient Rome and modern Paris, they often lead to monumental buildings which would obstruct any real commercial route.

Should an interpretation of these imaginary bridges thus focus more on the triumphal element? Robert sometimes shows structures inspired by Palladio's Rialto project and Piranesi's *Ponte magnifico* etching, representing equestrian statues under huge triumphal arches placed on bridges. This might refer to the glory of Roman Emperors. However, projects were simultaneously appearing, in Paris, for temporary or permanent bridges honouring the King of France, a theme which was also selected for several academic competitions. A study of Robert's bridges should thus integrate a thorough analysis of their complex temporality.

Through these various questions, this talk will attempt to show how the painter used several important cultural themes in these architectural fantasies, and examine how the development of the bridge-picture coincided with that of pictorial strategies which would allow it to become an artistically viable composition.