

THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE



Art in France

Antoine Pesne's 'Samson and Delilah' | Fragonard's 'Little pilgrim'

Two rediscovered views of revolutionary Paris by Hubert Robert

A painting by Gavin Hamilton acquired by the Louvre | Renoir's visit to London in 1882

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announced that he had already begun some 'small' paintings. We know of at least two small paintings of the same subject and composition as the large painting in the Louvre. One of these, on canvas and measuring 50 by 62 cm., appeared in a sale at Christie's, New York, on 18th May 1994²⁸ and has a similar format to Hamilton's other known modelli. Another painting (30 by 38 cm.) was sold in Portland in 2005²⁹ and is currently in a private collection in New York (Fig.19). It is probable that in 1777 Hamilton produced his usual modelli for Lord Shelburne³⁰ including one or other of these small paintings. It would follow that for the Paris and Helen series, Hamilton would have wanted to start with the encounter of the two lovers that he had already painted for Kedleston Hall. Yet he failed to win the commission from Lord Shelburne. Did he paint the large Louvre painting in the hope of attracting another potential purchaser?

In 1781 Prince Marcantonio Borghese (1730–1800) offered Hamilton the chance to design the entire decorative scheme for one of the finest rooms in the Villa Borghese.³¹ Hamilton revived the subject of *Venus presenting Helen to Paris*, but the dimensions of this version are even larger than the painting now in the Louvre, its vertical axis probably dictated by the height of the room.

Hamilton's composition was not without influence among artists in Rome. In fact, Jacques-Louis David,³² profoundly impressed by the oath-taking scene in Hamilton's *Death of Lucretia* while he was painting his *Oath of the Horatii* in Rome in



20. *Paris and Helen*, by Jacques-Louis David. 1788–89. Canvas, 146 by 181 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

1784–85 (Musée du Louvre, Paris), also remembered Hamilton's *Paris and Helen*, probably seen during this same period. David's painting *Paris and Helen* (Fig.20), commissioned by the comte d'Artois (1757–1836), brother of the King of France, and exhibited at the Salon in Paris in 1789, almost certainly presents a reduced, concentrated variation on Hamilton's composition.

²⁸ Sale, Christie's, New York, 18th May 1994, lot 179.

²⁹ Sale, Barridoff Galleries, Portland, 5th August 2005, lot 17.

³⁰ This hypothesis is confirmed by the mention of five 'sketches' of the story of Paris and Helen referred to by Hamilton in a letter to Thomas Pitt, 1st January 1781; see Cassidy 2011, I, pp.422–23.

³¹ Ferrara, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.3–4. For the renovation of the Palazzina of the Villa Borghese, see C. Paul: *Making a Prince's Museum: Drawings for the Late Eighteenth-Century Redecoration of the Villa Borghese*, Los Angeles 2000.

³² R. Rosenblum: 'A Source for David's "Horatii"', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 112 (1970), pp.269–73.

Two rediscovered paintings by Hubert Robert and their French revolutionary context

by FRÉDÉRIQUE BAUMGARTNER

TWO SIGNIFICANT PAINTINGS by Hubert Robert (1733–1808), *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival at the Champ-de-Mars*, 14th July 1790, recently came to light on the occasion of the auction in 2012 of the comte and comtesse Niel's collection of eighteenth-century art (Figs.21 and 22).¹ Conceived as pendants, the paintings were last exhibited in the 1930s, most notably in 1933 in Paris at the Musée de l'Orangerie.²

This article stems from my doctoral dissertation, 'Transformation of the cultural experience: the art of Hubert Robert during the French Revolution' (Harvard University, 2011). In the course of my research, I located the allegedly lost pendants discussed in this article; I would like to thank Jean-Louis Raynaud for allowing me to see the paintings in 2009. For their response to my work, I wish to thank Ewa Lajer-Burchardth and Patrice Higonnet. For their funding of my research in France, I am grateful to Harvard's Department of History of Art and Architecture and Harvard's Center for European Studies. This article was written during my

In the intervening decades, their whereabouts were referred to as unknown, although it was recognised that the paintings had at some point been part of the Niels' collection. As the present writer discovered in 2009, the paintings had indeed remained in the possession of the Niel family since their acquisition by the comte and comtesse, probably in the late 1920s or early 1930s, until their recent sale at auction.

time as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University. I thank my Mellon colleagues Marisa Bass and Stephanie Porras for their helpful comments on this article. Unless otherwise noted, translations from the French are mine.

¹ Sale, Christie's, Paris, 16th April 2012, *Comte et Comtesse Niel. Une passion partagée*, lot 78 (sold as a pair).

² C. Sterling, ed.: exh. cat. *Exposition Hubert Robert. A l'occasion du deuxième centenaire de sa naissance*, Paris (Musée de l'Orangerie) 1933, p.101, nos.154 and 155.



21. *The Day of the Wheelbarrows*, by Hubert Robert. 1790. Canvas, 44 by 72.5 cm. (Private collection).

The Day of the Wheelbarrows and *The Federation Festival* relate to the first revolutionary festival that took place in Paris, one year after the storming of the Bastille. Officially known as the National Federation Festival, the event, although festive in nature, was aimed at establishing national unity. In this respect, it exemplifies the intertwined nature of the political and cultural spheres at this crucial moment of French history.

Robert's pendants belong to the body of work that the artist devoted to the portrayal of cultural episodes from the French Revolution, including *The temporary mausoleum of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the Tuileries Pool before the transfer of his ashes to the Panthéon* from 1794 (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin) and the *Project for the Grande Galerie of the Louvre* from 1796 (Musée du Louvre, Paris; Fig. 23), to name only two. The artist was a first-hand witness to these episodes: in spite of his dangerous ties with the crown and the aristocracy, he refused to emigrate, remaining in Paris throughout the revolutionary decade (1789–99).³ While this decision cost him nine months imprisonment during the Terror,⁴ it also allowed him to take part in the transformation of the Louvre's Grande Galerie into a public museum – a project in which he had been involved since 1778 and which finally

materialised during the Revolution (the Musée du Louvre opened its doors for the first time on 10th August 1793).⁵

It is not surprising that the revolutionaries reappropriated the Ancien Régime's Louvre project. The public museum embodied two of the Revolution's ambitions related to its Enlightenment ideals: to make art accessible to all and to develop education. Important for our purpose is the fact that in addition to his curatorial position at the Louvre, Robert made the Grande Galerie one of his primary pictorial themes, painting it at least ten times between 1789 and 1799. This reveals the degree to which subject-matter embodying such cultural shifts dominated his art during the revolutionary years. In fact, Robert painted the Grande Galerie for the first time in 1789 (Fig. 23),⁶ associating the public museum specifically with the Revolution, despite the fact that he had been involved in the monarchy's earlier plans for the Galerie. Similarly, *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival*, referring to the Revolution's reinvention of the festivity, indicate that the artist considered the transformation of the cultural sphere essential to the revolutionary project.

The recent rediscovery of the two paintings necessitates a reconsideration of Robert's stance vis-à-vis the Revolution.

³ In 1791, Robert declined the Empress of Russia Catherine II's second invitation to join her Court in Saint Petersburg (Robert had already declined an invitation from her in 1782). The artist's decision to remain in Paris in these troubled times, despite this appealing opportunity to leave, highlights how different his stance was from that of his close friend the artist Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, who emigrated as early as October 1789.

⁴ Robert was arrested shortly after the adoption of the 'Law of Suspects' (17th September 1793), and he was imprisoned from 29th October 1793 until 5th August 1794.

⁵ Robert's inclusion in the curatorial team during the revolutionary years was

intermittent: excluded in September 1792, he joined it again in April 1795 before finally retiring in 1802.

⁶ For a catalogue of Robert's Grande Galerie pictures, see M.-C. Sahut: *Le Louvre d'Hubert Robert*, Paris 1979. The painting reproduced here as Fig. 23 is not dated in the artist's hand; however, Sahut's thorough study has established its date as 1789. The arguments for this include the figures' clothing and the building of a large skylight in the Louvre's Salon Carré in 1789, similar to the skylights that punctuate the Grande Galerie's vault in Robert's painting.



22. *The Federation Festival at the Champ-de-Mars, 14th July 1790*, by Hubert Robert. 1790. Canvas, 44 by 72.5 cm, (Private collection).

Although the artist was received as *Peintre d'architecture* at the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1766, *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival* remind us that his career as a painter was not limited to the views of ruined monuments (be they antique temples consumed by time or contemporary edifices destroyed by fire) that earned him the nickname of 'Robert des ruines'. Moreover, the pendants challenge the perception of Robert as a mere chronicler of the Revolution, a *vedutista* who stripped revolutionary events of their political meaning, as Bernard de Montgolfier suggested: 'The ideas and the events [of the Revolution] seem to have less interested [Robert] than their consequences on the Parisian landscape and on his own life. A painter above all, Robert only sought *motifs* in revolutionary Paris'.⁷ De Montgolfier's apolitical interpretation of Robert's revolutionary *œuvre* was reiterated in the 1989 catalogue entirely devoted to the topic, in which Robert is described as having developed a revolutionary repertory simply to alter his image of a successful artist of the Ancien Régime.⁸ As a mere opportunist devoid of political conviction, Robert inevitably emerges as the antithesis of Jacques-Louis David, the radical Jacobin who placed his art in the service of his political commitment.

However, *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival* reveal Robert's critical understanding of the fundamental revolutionary notion of universalism (i.e. the Revolution's conception of the world as an entity in which all individuals are equal and share the same ideals) and the complex incorporation of individualism within this universalist framework.⁹ As such, the pendants not only speak for the politicisation of Robert's work in the 1790s, but are also key to establishing the nature of his commitment to the Revolution. In their representation of a crowd engaged in a public event, the pendants simultaneously preserve the individual experience and honour the universalist worldview. In this respect, they attest to Robert's perception of culture as the arena in which the Revolution could succeed.

The Day of the Wheelbarrows represents Parisians spontaneously coming to the assistance of the workers in charge of transforming the Champ-de-Mars – the site of the Federation Festival – into an immense amphitheatre capable of welcoming some 400,000 participants. *The Federation Festival* represents the actual day of the Festival; Robert relegates the ceremony to the background of the composition, whereas the triumphal arch built specifically for the occasion is in full view.

⁷ 'Les idées et les événements de la Révolution semblent avoir moins intéressé [Robert] que leurs répercussions sur le paysage parisien et sa propre vie. Peintre avant tout, il n'a cherché dans le Paris révolutionnaire que des motifs'; B. de Montgolfier: 'Hubert Robert, peintre de Paris au Musée Carnavalet', *Bulletin du Musée Carnavalet* 1–2 (1964), p. 14 (his emphasis). Along the same lines, Philippe Bordes stressed Robert's tendency to 'neutralise' the subject-matter in paintings such as *The Bastille in the first days of its demolition*; see P. Bordes: *Aux Armes et Aux Arts!*, Paris 1988, p. 108.

⁸ See C. Boulot et al.: exh. cat. *Hubert Robert et la Révolution*, Valence (Le Musée

de Valence) 1989.

⁹ As Patrice Higonnet has repeatedly argued, revolutionary universalism did not intend to negate individual rights. However, as the Revolution's most fervent supporters realised that the universalist project might fail, they opted for the enforcement of ever stronger universalist policies, which inevitably involved the negation of individual rights; see P. Higonnet: *Goodness beyond virtue. Jacobins during the French Revolution*, Cambridge MA 1998, pp. 76–100; and, more recently, *idem*: 'Le Sommeil de la raison', *La Revue historique* 653 (2010), pp. 99–159.



23. *Project for the Grande Galerie of the Louvre*, by Hubert Robert. 1789. Canvas, 46 by 55 cm. (Musée du Louvre, Paris; copyright RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource NY; photographed by Stéphane Maréchalle).

While a slightly larger version of *The Federation Festival*, formerly owned by the marquis de Lafayette, is today at Versailles (Fig. 24), to date, no other version of *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* is known.¹⁰ Whether the Versailles painting was commissioned from Robert by Lafayette, whose popularity culminated at the Federation Festival, is not known; nor is the intended destination of the pendants documented. Signed and dated 1790, the Versailles painting suggests that the pendants, which are not dated but are very similar in their conception and style to the Versailles canvas, were completed in that year. This would be consistent with Robert's practice of painting revolutionary events in their immediate aftermath, unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Charles Thévenin or Pierre-Antoine Demachy. In addition, Robert usually completed his paintings within days.¹¹ This also implies that the pendants should be examined in their immediate historical context – an important factor considering the extremely rapid pace of the Revolution.

In each composition, Robert has opted for a very low horizon that gives way to striking atmospheric effects occupying two-thirds of the pictorial space. Joyful figures enliven the large expanse of foreground. Monuments and greenery, viewed at various distances, subtly break the horizontality of each composition. The mini-narratives in which the figures are involved invite closer scrutiny (note, for example, the figures perched on the tree on the far right of *The Federation Festival*); however, this anecdotal vein is counterbalanced by the dramatic skies.

The Day of the Wheelbarrows and *The Federation Festival* reflect Robert's sensibility as a landscapist: the transmission of a clear message, as one typically sees in history painting, is not his concern. Although revolutionary implications pervade these paintings, they do not reveal a didactic impetus or propagandist purpose on Robert's part. Instead, the panoramic representation

of the Champ-de-Mars, describing an all-encompassing celebratory space accommodating a mixed crowd, holds, but does not emphasise, revolutionary meaning.

As is the case with the French Revolution's other cultural events that Robert depicted, the National Federation Festival of 1790 was centrally planned and orchestrated by the new government. Jean-Sylvain Bailly, ex-Deputy of the Third Estate, emblematic figure of the Oath of the Tennis Court and by then Mayor of Paris, was the primary political figure associated with the organisation of the Festival. In a discourse to the National Assembly, Bailly presented the project as the logical outcome of the fraternal alliances formed between some provincial *Gardes nationales*, designating Paris as the obvious host for a ceremony that would celebrate the alliance at a national level.¹² The ceremony was to climax with an oath of fidelity 'to the Nation, to the Law and to the King', to be taken by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the Deputies of the National Assembly, delegates from the eighty-three departmental *Gardes nationales*, as well as thousands of citizens.

As an event that managed to create a sense of political, social and territorial unity, albeit temporarily, the Festival was perhaps one of the most felicitous moments of the Revolution. However, it is crucial to note that the perception of the Festival as a success was largely due to the unparalleled collective expression of fraternity known as the 'Day of the Wheelbarrows' that preceded the Festival by a few days. A soldier named Cartheri had the idea of volunteering to assist the workers of the Champ-de-Mars, who were struggling to transform the shapeless field into an amphitheatre: a hollowed circle surrounded by mounds where thirty rows of terraces had to be built to welcome the spectators.¹³ The population of Paris, arming itself with spades and wheelbarrows, responded overwhelmingly to Cartheri's initiative. Thanks to this tremendous effort, the site was ready for 14th July. As Louis-Sébastien Mercier, the most vivid storyteller of the French Revolution, remembered, the 'Day of the Wheelbarrows' crystallised the ideals of the Federation Festival before the ceremony took place:

Never, perhaps, has there been seen amongst any people such an astonishing and even memorable instance of fraternity! [...] Here I saw a hundred and fifty thousand citizens, of every class, age, and sex, forming the most delightful picture of concord, labour, motion, and joy which was ever exhibited!¹⁴

Robert's decision to represent the Festival as a two-fold event, where the 'Day of the Wheelbarrows' plays the role of key preamble to the ceremony, was therefore particularly shrewd. It is even more remarkable insofar as Robert was one of very few artists to conceptually pair the two events – perhaps the only artist beside the draughtsman Jean-Louis Prieur to do so (Figs. 25 and 26).¹⁵

Although *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival* were clearly conceived as pendants, they differ in compositional approach. On the one hand, their formats are identical and their palettes are similar. Their compositions

¹⁰ On Lafayette's collection of paintings by Robert, see J. Cloquet: *Souvenirs sur la vie privée de Lafayette*, Paris 1836, pp. 182–83.

¹¹ Thévenin and Demachy's paintings of the National Federation Festival (Musée Carnavalet, Paris) were completed in 1792 and 1793, respectively. Robert's painting *The Bastille in the first days of its demolition* (Musée Carnavalet, Paris), which was exhibited at the Salon of 1789, bears the inscription '20 juillet 1789', which attests

to Robert's extreme rapidity of execution.

¹² Bailly's discourse is reprinted in *Confédération nationale ou récit exact et circonstancié de tout ce qui s'est passé à Paris le 14 juillet 1790*, Paris 1790, pp. 3–4.

¹³ 'Je propose à mes camarades et frères d'armes de l'armée parisienne de prendre chaque jour dix hommes par compagnie, lesquels iront au Champ-de-Mars bêcher la terre, charger et rouler la brouette'. Cartheri's invitation, originally published

24. *The Federation Festival at the Champ-de-Mars, 14th July 1790*, by Hubert Robert. 1790. Canvas, 52 by 96 cm. (Musée des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles; copyright RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource NY; photographed by Gérard Blot).



operate in harmony, as both feature the same horizon line, creating continuity between them. The same monuments, including the *église Sainte-Geneviève* and the *Ecole Militaire*, stand out against the skies. On the other hand, each painting adopts a different viewpoint. In *The Day of the Wheelbarrows*, the viewer is invited to enter the arena of the Champ-de-Mars in the centre of which workers, aristocrats, ecclesiastics, *femmes du monde* and children strive to elevate the Altar of the Motherland where the communal oath will be taken. In *The Federation Festival*, Robert unexpectedly represents the Champ-de-Mars in the distance. A few figures, standing apart from the arena and remaining close to the tents that were pitched during the 'Day of the Wheelbarrows', animate the foreground.

Robert's scrutiny of the men, women and children at work in *The Day of the Wheelbarrows*, in contrast to his distant view of the ceremony in its pendant, has significant political ramifications. The 'Day of the Wheelbarrows' was a memorable event because the collective effort that sustained it was spontaneous and authentic. *The Federation Festival*, on the other hand, was dominated by a heavy ideological agenda, where individualism was deliberately sacrificed in the name of universalism. Robert's pendants encapsulate this critical gap between universalism as a sentiment and universalism as an ideology.

The Day of the Wheelbarrows is characterised by a careful rendering of the clothing and attitudes of the Champ-de-Mars volunteers. The figures in the foreground reflect the diversity of gender, age and social background that Mercier insisted on in his account of the event: the two stylishly dressed women in the centre push a wheelbarrow into which a child has climbed for fun, whereas the two women behind them, holding shovels, wear much simpler attire. Further to the left, a priest in black cassock is helped by two youths in red cassocks in pushing a

wheelbarrow. A soldier holding a spear guards the tent closest to the picture frame. In the lower right corner, a worker digs with a spade, his position mirroring the man in the lower left corner, who pushes a wheelbarrow and wears clothes that indicate his aristocratic rank.

The precision with which Robert renders social diversity in *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* signals a departure from his earlier work. In his pictures of ruins, Robert always includes figures; however, the latter are atemporal characters that the artist invariably reintroduces in each of his compositions: the shepherdess, the solitary walker, the artist sketching, the barking dog. They are virtually interchangeable from one painting to the next, since the figures' identity does not ultimately inflect the meaning of the paintings. Denis Diderot, who deplored this decorative tendency, warned the painter: 'Just bear in mind that all these figures, all these meaningless groups are strong evidence that the poetics of ruins remains to be done'.¹⁶ In *The Day of the Wheelbarrows*, on the other hand, the figures are meaningful, for they are endowed with a historical and social specificity that turns their gathering in the Champ-de-Mars into a tangible manifestation of universalism as it was understood in 1790: regardless of their respective social status, the figures coexist in the same space, occupy it in the same capacity and share the same purpose. Also significant is Robert's emphasis on the figures' communal labour: note the two strings of characters of various social conditions harnessed to large wheelbarrows at the bottom of the Altar of the Motherland. Work transcends their social differences: universalism is, literally, at work.

These human chains take on an additional meaning when comparing *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* with an earlier painting by Robert, *View of the gardens of Versailles towards the Tapis Vert at the time of the felling of the trees* from 1777, which also deals with

in *La Chronique*, was rapidly extended to the Parisian population as a whole. The invitation is reprinted in its entirety in *Confédération nationale*, op. cit. (note 12), pp. 58–59.

¹⁴ L.-S. Mercier: *New picture of Paris*, London 1800, I, p. 45.

¹⁵ Prieur completed sixty-seven drawings for the 'Tableaux historiques de la

Révolution française', a visual chronicle of revolutionary events to which several draughtsmen contributed; see P. de Carbonnières: Prieur. *Les tableaux historiques de la Révolution. Catalogue raisonné des dessins originaux*, Paris 2006.

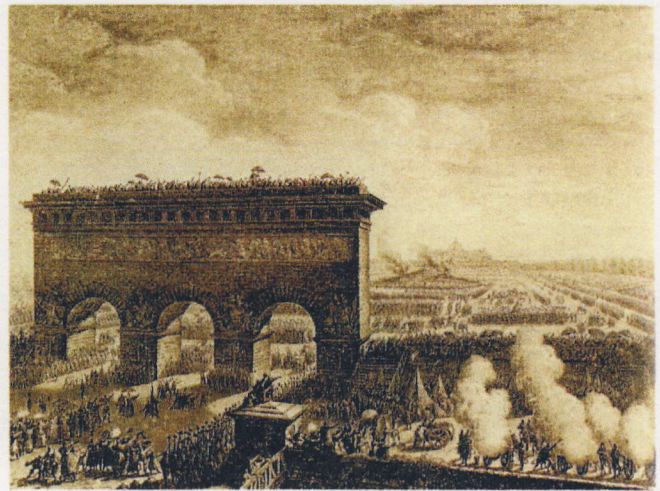
¹⁶ D. Diderot: *Diderot on art: Salon of 1767*, transl. J. Goodman, New Haven and London 1995, II, p. 203.



25. *Labours at Champ-de-Mars for the Federation of 14th July 1790*, by Jean-Louis Prieur. 1790. Black ink, grey wash and pencil on paper, 19.8 by 25.8 cm. (Musée Carnavalet, Paris).

the transformation of a landscape (Fig. 27).¹⁷ In this work the spotlight is on Marie Antoinette, her children, Louis XVI and the comte d'Angiviller, rather than on the workers (who, in fact, are inactive). In addition, the trunk lying in the middle of the composition creates a conspicuous barrier between the workers and the representatives of the monarchy. In contrast, the landscape in *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* – an elongated and uninterrupted expanse of ground evenly lit – creates a cohesive rather than fragmented view, whose unity is emphasised by the repeated inclusion of figures at work and the absence of any hierarchical relationship between them. The transformation of the Champ-de-Mars into a unified space works as a visual metaphor for the new political landscape that the citizens, as a collective body, are in the process of creating.

The Federation Festival tells a different story. Admittedly, in preserving the panoramic view as the main structural element of the composition, Robert reiterates the notion of universalism. However, while he focuses on the image of a diversified yet unified society in *The Day of the Wheelbarrows*, in the second painting he subtly addresses the question of the individual experience within the universalist framework. For, instead of representing the crowd gathered in the amphitheatre – as did Thévenin (Fig. 28) and many other artists – he concentrates on a few figures who remained outside the arena. Chatting, socialising in small groups, relaxing in their tents or heading leisurely towards the Champ-de-Mars, the protagonists of *The Federation Festival* experience the event differently from the majority of their compatriots by choosing not to take part in the ceremony unfolding in the amphitheatre. In fact, the viewer gains little insight into the ceremony beyond the vague silhouette of the Altar of the Motherland and the suggestion



26. *General Federation in Paris, July 14th 1790*, by Jean-Louis Prieur. 1790. Black ink, grey wash and pencil on paper, 20.5 by 27.5 cm. (Musée Carnavalet, Paris).

of a compact crowd rendered in multiple dots. These unusual compositional choices, which suggest some resistance vis-à-vis the ceremony, gain meaning when we examine the larger context in which the Festival was planned.

Unlike the 'Day of the Wheelbarrows', the National Federation Festival was a carefully organised event with well-defined objectives. As the first revolutionary festival in Paris, it not only aimed to celebrate national unity, but also sought to initiate a new form of festivity that countered the monarchical celebration. Bernard Poyet, one of the architects involved in the Festival project, clearly articulated the difference between these two festivities: 'History provides too many examples of these lavish festivities organised to flatter the pride of conquerors and despots; it was the role of a generous nation, truly great for its sentiment of liberty, to teach history to celebrate only the events sanctioning the happiness of the people'.¹⁸ Poyet's understanding of the revolutionary festival as a validation of collective happiness was not altogether new. The affective potential of the public celebration was explored by Enlightenment thinkers, most notably Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who, in his *Letter to d'Alembert on the theatre* (1758), envisaged the public festivity as an opportunity to bring together civic-mindedness and happiness. Relying on the mere gathering of a community, the festivity required no sumptuous decor for it to succeed: 'Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of a square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival', stated Rousseau.¹⁹ Similarly, Poyet's colleagues made it a point to limit the decor of the Champ-de-Mars in order to underscore the new political principles that the Festival was celebrating: 'The most beautiful finery, the most pompous luxury [of the Federation Festival] will be a group of free men'.²⁰

¹⁷ This painting, along with its pendant, *View of the Bosquet des Bains d'Apollon at the time of the felling of the trees*, was commissioned from Robert by Louis XVI.

¹⁸ 'L'histoire ne fournit que trop d'exemples de ces fêtes fastueuses ordonnées pour flatter l'orgueil des conquérants et des despotes; mais il était réservé à une nation généreuse et vraiment grande par le sentiment de sa liberté, d'apprendre à l'histoire à ne célébrer que les événements consacrés par le bonheur des peuples'; B. Poyet: *Idées générales présentées par le sieur Poyet, Architecte du Roi et de la Ville, sur le projet de la fête du 14 juillet, à l'occasion du pacte fédératif, entre les Gardes nationales et les troupes de ligne de la France, pour célébrer l'époque de la Révolution*, Paris, 16th June 1790, pp. 1–2.

¹⁹ J.-J. Rousseau: *Letter to d'Alembert on the theatre*, transl. A. Bloom, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Hannover and London 2004, X, p. 344.

²⁰ 'La plus belle parure, le luxe le plus pompeux [de la Fête de la Fédération] sera une foule d'hommes libres'; *Confédération nationale*, op. cit. (note 12), p. 52.

²¹ 'Que l'on se figure trois cent mille personnes réunies sous un ordre amphithéâtral où nul ne pourrait échapper au regard de la multitude. De cet ordre des choses résulterait un effet unique: c'est que la beauté de cet étonnant spectacle proviendrait des spectateurs qui, seuls, le composeraient'; quoted in E.L. Boullée: *L'Architecte visionnaire et néoclassique. Textes réunis et présentés par J.-M. Pérouse de Montclos*, Paris 1993, p. 125. Boullée designed two

It is with this aspiration in mind that the Festival's organisers chose to have the ceremony take place in a gigantic amphitheatre. Indeed, its circular shape was perceived as most efficient for focusing on the crowd. In the early 1780s, the architect Etienne-Louis Boullée had already identified the amphitheatre as the space that best highlighted the crowd:

Imagine these three hundred thousand people gathered in an amphitheatre where none of them could escape the gaze of the crowd. From this order of things would arise a unique effect: the beauty of this amazing spectacle would stem from the spectators who, themselves, would form the spectacle.²¹

Rousseau's goal – 'let the spectators become an entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united'²² – thus found its architectural analogue in the amphitheatre. Accordingly, Poyet and his colleagues, whose goal was precisely to celebrate unity, naturally opted for such a setting.

The National Federation Festival's ambition, however, exceeded Rousseau's restrained recommendations. The historical reality of 1790 was such that the Festival could not be a simple validation of national unity and collective happiness. A recent event – the Great Fear that swept through France from 20th July 1789 – was still too vivid in many minds. The Great Fear, a revolt led by the peasantry, chiefly against the feudal system, which itself echoed rumours in Paris concerning an alleged aristocratic plot against the Third Estate, embodied the absence of social cohesion. The abolition of privileges on the night of 4th August 1789 was supposed to have neutralised social distinctions, but a sentiment of class-based animosity remained.²³ In this context, the Federation Festival could not possibly be a confirmation of social consensus; at best, it was to act as an antidote to the Great Fear.²⁴ Instead of naturally demonstrating national unity, the Festival had to produce this sentiment. As Poyet acknowledged, a public gathering was the most effective means through which to achieve this goal: 'Public festivities motivated by great principles based on common interests have the following characteristic: each person's sentiment becomes everyone's sentiment through a kind of electrification that even the most perverse men can hardly resist'.²⁵ Poyet's statement points to the Festival's implicit weakness: some 'perverse men' – most probably the aristocracy, the group that Mona Ozouf defined as 'the hidden witness, the obverse image of those days of unanimity'²⁶ – were resisting the alliance. However, in an amphitheatre where no one could escape the gaze of the crowd, as Boullée had suggested, the sentiment of unity would necessarily extend to them. Therefore, it is the perversity of the revolutionary festival itself, characterised by a manipulation of subjectivity in the name of revolutionary ideology, to which Poyet alludes. As Ozouf put it: 'Although the legislator makes the laws for the people, festivals make the people for the laws'.²⁷ It is this repression of individual thought and behaviour, this

projects for a circus in about 1782, which were based on the Colosseum in Rome. The above is excerpted from the text Boullée wrote in connection with these projects. The Colosseum could take some 50,000 spectators, which indicates that Boullée was envisaging a much larger arena.

²² Rousseau, *op. cit.* (note 19), p.344.

²³ For a synthesis of these events, see F. Furet and M. Ozouf, eds.: *A Critical dictionary of the French Revolution*, transl. A. Goldhammer, Cambridge MA 1989, esp. pp.74–80 and 107–14.

²⁴ For Michel Vovelle, the Federation Festival was the 'anti-Grande Peur'; see



27. *View of the gardens of Versailles towards the Tapis Vert at the time of the felling of the trees*, by Hubert Robert. 1777. Canvas, 124 by 191 cm. (Musée des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles).



28. *The Federation Festival at the Champ-de-Mars, 14th July 1790*, by Charles Thévenin. 1792. Canvas, 127 by 183 cm. (Musée Carnavalet, Paris; copyright of Alfredo Dagli Orti/Art Archive at Art Resource NY).

quest for normalisation, that Robert's figures in *The Federation Festival* challenge.

Unprecedented compositions in Robert's œuvre, *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* and *The Federation Festival* exemplify the ways in which the artist pictured universalism, while also hinting at the limits that a universalist ideology imposed on individual liberty. In 1790, the dream of unanimity still seemed within reach; *The Day of the Wheelbarrows* indicates Robert's hopeful stance. At the same time, the denial of individual liberty that shaped the celebration of 1790 – a prefiguration of the authoritarian universalism of the Terror of 1793 – is also recognised by the artist in *The Federation Festival*. The recently rediscovered pendants provide evidence that Robert was not an apolitical observer of the French Revolution, but a critical commentator on its potential for reconciling universalism and individualism in the festive realm.

M. Vovelle: *La Mentalité révolutionnaire: société et mentalités sous la Révolution française*, Paris 1985, p.161.

²⁵ 'Les fêtes publiques motivées par de grandes considérations d'intérêts communs ont cela de particulier que le sentiment de chacun devient celui de tous par une espèce d'électrification dont les hommes les plus pervers ont peine à se défendre'; Poyet, *op. cit.* (note 18), p.6.

²⁶ M. Ozouf: *Festivals and the French Revolution*, transl. A. Sheridan, Cambridge MA 1988, p.47.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.9.