

LE CLAIRE
KUNST SEIT 1982



VICTOR HUGO

1802 Besançon - Paris 1885

Landscape with Ruins

Brown ink and brown wash on envelope paper; executed c.1847-51. Inscribed on the verso by another hand: *Pair de France / Membre de l'académie française / 6 Place Royale* [Fig. 1].

97 x 262 mm

PROVENANCE: Private collection, France – Sale, Tajan, Paris, 26 November 1998, lot 98 – Sale, Christie's, New York, 22 January 2004, lot 141 (bt. Krugier) – Jan Krugier and Marie-Anne Poniatowski, Geneva

EXHIBITIONS: *Turner - Hugo - Moreau. Entdeckung der Abstraktion*, Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt am Main, 2007-8, no. 126, repr. – *Victor Hugo. Dessins visionnaires*, Fondation de l'Hermitage, Lausanne, 2008, no. 15, repr. – *Schwarze Romantik. Von Goya bis Max Ernst*, Städel Museum, Frankfurt am Main 2012-3, no. 63, repr. – *L'ange du bizarre. Le romantisme noir de Goya à Max Ernst*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 2013, no. 46, repr.

This drawing was executed on the back of a large envelope sent to Victor Hugo at some point between April 1845, when he was nominated *Pair de France*, and July 1848, when he moved out of his property on the Place Royale, where he had lived since 8 October 1832. The drawing is a highly characteristic example of Hugo's style in the years between 1847 and 1851. Pierre Georgel comments on his stylistic development in these years: *A deeper experience of nature appears in the depiction of space. Supple trees interpose curtains of foliage between the light of the air and the light of the water. Even buildings lose their solidity and become delicate screens reminiscent of a shadow theatre. The naturalistic motifs, the sensitivity to atmosphere conveyed by subtly contrasting values relate the drawings of this period to a whole range of dreamlike Romantic landscapes.*¹

The drawing was developed from a series of seemingly random blots of diluted brown ink. As the ink dried it left a delicate web of ghostly lines at the edge of each blot. Hugo then worked over this, wiping it in downward sweeps with a dry brush to create broad, tonally graded areas of shadow. These appear as dark verticals that conjure up a mysterious backdrop pierced by patches of light – suggesting spatial depth. Fluid horizontal washes in the foreground – perhaps applied with a feather – create the impression of water. Hugo's imaginative skills are sparked by this randomly generated, raw configuration. He sees in his mind's eye a landscape with ruins, to which he then gives more concrete form, defining details with a brush and brown ink. But he leaves the metamorphosis half-finished for the viewer to resolve. At the left of the image architectural elements and open space meld and the border between them is undefined. The dark verticals can be interpreted as shadow from a high wall and as driving rain veiling a landscape.

¹ Cited after Pierre Georgel, *Drawings by Victor Hugo*, exhib. cat., London 1974, unpag. between nos. 11 and 12.

Visual ambiguity and interplay between illusion and reality are the defining features of Hugo's drawings in the years around 1850. Georgel notes: *The majority of these compositions isolate familiar landscapes and objects in empty space where confused illusionary appearances seem to float. This metamorphosis of familiar things, this intermix of reality and illusion relates to the dream state, and ranks a number of the drawings of 1850 among the masterpieces of fantasy in art.*²

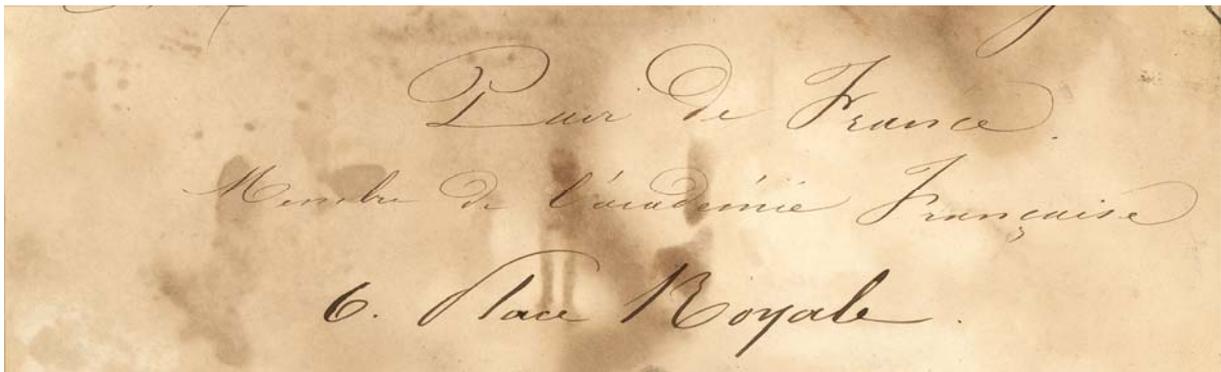


Fig. 1: Inscription on the verso.

² Ibid., between nos. 11 and 12.