

Walter Richard Sickert (1860 - 1942)

The Church of Santa Maria Maddalena, Venice

Oil, pen and black ink on paper, laid down on board.

Signed Sickert at the lower left.

244 x 148 m. (9 5/8 x 5 3/4 in.)

Walter Sickert once described Venice as 'the loveliest city in the world', and made several visits there, first briefly in 1894, and again in 1895-1896, 1900, 1901 and 1903-1904, staying for a few months each time. He produced a large number of drawings, oil sketches and finished paintings of Venetian subjects. As Robert Upstone has written of Sickert, 'For nearly a decade Venice formed the dominant subject in his art and the city inspired him to discover new modes of expression. Through hard work and experimentation in Venice, Sickert became the painter who was to be recognized as the most significant figure in early Modern British art. In short, Venice was the crucible in which Sickert's mature work was formed.'

The Sickert scholar Wendy Baron has noted that, 'Like many artists before him, Sickert was bewitched by the unique landscape of Venice. He chronicled both its great sites and its quiet backwaters.' During his first proper campaign of painting in Venice, in 1895 and 1896, Sickert wandered throughout the city, making numerous drawings and painting oil sketches. As he wrote at the time to his friend, the painter

Phillip Wilson Steer, 'Venice is really first-rate for work…and I am getting some things done. It is mostly sunny and warmish and on cold days I do interiors in St. Mark's.' While in general Sickert did not paint en plein air, Upstone points out that 'a number of small oil on panel pochades survive from his first Venetian painting trip that indicate he took up established impressionist practice and worked directly before the subject.' These works were usually quite small in scale, and the present sketch may perhaps be counted among them.

Probably datable to Sickert's first lengthy stay in Venice, in 1895-1896, this oil sketch depicts the small domed Neoclassical church of Santa Maria della Maddalena (usually referred to by Venetians simply as 'La Maddalena'), with the Fondamenta delle Colonnette at the left. Sickert drew this sketch while standing on the small Ponte Correr, which crosses the Rio della Maddalena, just behind and to the southeast of the church. (A contemporary photograph of the same view is shown here.) Built around 1760 by the Venetian architect Tommaso Temanza on the site of an earlier, 13th century church, Santa Maria Maddalena has a circular plan inspired by the Pantheon in Rome. Set back in a small campo in a relatively isolated part of the Cannaregio district of Venice, it is one of the few completed buildings by Temanza, who was primarily an architectural historian and biographer. The church of the Maddalena is his most famous work, and the architect, who died in 1789, is buried there. The church has a very beautiful interior, but is usually closed.

The present sheet may be related to two other oil sketches of the same view by Sickert, both painted on panel. An oil sketch formerly in the collection of works by Sickert assembled by the Australian industrialist Sir Tristan Antico is much more superficial in appearance, and has been dated by Baron to c.1903. The present work, however, is closer in style and handling to another small panel, of similar dimensions, which was last documented in the collection of Viscount Radcliffe in 1960. Lillian Browse's succinct description of the latter painting may equally be applied to the present work: 'This small panel is large in conception, dark and sonorous in colour, and rich and 'juicy' in handling.'

Two drawings related to this composition are also recorded in Wendy Baron's catalogue of Sickert's works. One of these, drawn in charcoal with touches of pastel and titled 'The Sea is in her Broad, her narrow Streets', appeared at auction in 1968, while an ink and pencil drawing of the same church was formerly in the collection of Vera Russell and was recently sold at auction.

The first recorded owner of this small oil sketch was Mrs. Frances Evans, who, with her husband Judge William Evans (1847-1918), was among Sickert's most loyal patrons and collectors between 1907 and 1914. Judge and Mrs. Evans would commission paintings from the artist based on drawings that he showed them in his studio. As Lillian Browse has written, 'Sickert, being a complete professional, saw nothing wrong in repeating a subject, sometimes several times over, according to his client's commissions. Both Lady Jowitt and Mrs. Francis Evans, old friends of his, bear witness to this fact… Mrs. Evans says that when she and her husband, Judge Evans, went to Sickert's studio he would show them a pile of small sketches and drawings and ask them to take their pick. He would then paint an oil from whatever they chose, usually for £25.' The Evanses bought or commissioned at least four paintings of Venetian views by Sickert, and also owned several paintings of Dieppe, as well as a handful of figure compositions.

Judge and Mrs. Evans formed their collection over a period of some twenty years. In an obituary, theBurlington Magazine noted of Judge Evans that 'He was a very genial and discriminating patron of contemporary art, and was, with Mrs. Evans who shared his taste, a constant visitor at all exhibitions, galleries, and sales where works of contemporary painting or drawing were exhibited. He

and Mrs. Evans collected a large number of works which show contemporary art in England at its best.' An exhibition of works from the Evans collection was held at the Goupil Gallery in London in May 1918, and included, apart from several works by Sickert, paintings and drawings by Charles Conder, Harold Gilman, Spencer Gore, Augustus John, Henry Lamb, William Orpen, Phillip Wilson Steer, William Strang, Henry Tonks and many others. As a review of the exhibition stated, 'The interesting collection of pictures which was formed by the late Judge Evans…consists principally of works by living British artists, and might serve in some ways as a model to patrons of modern art.'

Provenance:

Probably Judge William Evans, Bayswater, London and Ilmington Manor, Warwickshire
His wife, Mrs. Frances Louise Evans
Given by her to Dr. Lloyd Williams
Given by him to a private collector
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 3 March 1989, lot 311
Piccadilly Gallery, London
Max Rutherston, London, in 1990
Purchased from him by the Misses A. and O. Heywood
Private collection, until 2012.

Exhibitions

Possibly London, The Goupil Gallery, The Judge Evans Collection, May-June 1918, no.137 ('Venice');
London, Max Rutherston, The Influence of the Slade, 1890-1920, October-November 1990, no.85.

Literature:

Wendy Baron, Sickert: Paintings and Drawings, New Haven and London, 2006, p.275, under no.181, no.1.