

Giovanni Boldini (Ferrara 1842 - Paris 1931)

A Venetian Canal

Oil and pencil on panel.
Inscribed no 173 inv. at. Boldini / Emilia Cardona Boldini / 1931 on the reverse.
350 x 267 mm. (13 3/4 x 10 1/2 in.)

Giovanni Boldini remained fond of Venice throughout his life, and returned often to the city on the lagoon. He first visited Venice in 1879 and, like both Whistler and Sargent before him, rented a studio in the Palazzo Rezzonico. He returned to Venice several times in the first decade of the 20th century, and was sometimes a guest of the Marchesa Luisa Casati at the Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. Boldini would explore the city in a gondola, often accompanied by the Marchesa Casati and the Comtesse d'Orsay, and would translate his impressions of the city into quick sketches in watercolour or small oil sketches on panel. He was often drawn towards the less populated areas of the city, and his Venetian subjects only rarely include figures. Instead he delighted in depicting the play of light on the waters of the canals, the distinctive forms of the gondolas, and the buildings of the floating city.

As one modern scholar has noted, at the time of an exhibition devoted to the artist's drawings of Venice, 'Boldini did not do just one portrait of Venice, but a hundred, and always with renewed passion...Venice must have fascinated Boldini because everywhere she offered him what his drawings most aptly express: movement and architecture. The play between sky and water, the bobbing of the gondolas, the lapping of the Rio, the variations in tone and color contrasting with the monumental stability of the palaces and the maze of canals crossing and defining each other, this solid presence of a city bathed in sea vapor...These drawings are not merely the record of a trip to Venice, but rather, the impassioned testimony of a great lover whom she bewitched with her endless, deep, powerful spell...after Guardi's shimmering vedute, we have Giovanni Boldini, who has taken possession of Venice and recorded her sky, stones and water with his proud, untiring hand.'

The present view has been identified as the small Venetian canal known as the Rio di San Vio, as seen from the Ponte della Calcina, on the Zattere, looking towards the Grand Canal. The building at the left is

the Pensione Saguso, while the palace in the distance behind the two bridges (one brown and the other white) is the Palazzo Loredan, now the Palazzo Cini, which today houses the Cini collection of Ferrarese paintings.

Provenance:

Among the contents of Boldini's Paris studio at the time of his death in 1931
The artist's widow, Emilia Cardona Boldini, Ferrara
Ludovico Cartotti, Lessona Biellese, by 1963
Mondial Gallery, Milan, in 1968
Private collection, Italy.

Literature:

Carlo Ragghianti and Ettore Camesasca, L'opera completa di Boldini, Milan, 1970, pp.104-105, no.202; Bianca Doria, Giovanni Boldini: Catalogo generale dagli Archivi Boldini, Milan, 2000, Vol.I, no.269, Vol.II, pl.269 (where dated 1890)1; Piero Dini and Francesca Dini, Giovanni Boldini 1842-1931: Catalogo ragionato. Vol.III: Catalogo ragionato della pittura a olio con un'ampia selezione di pastelle e acquerelli, Turin, 2002, pp.314-315, no.577; Bertrand Galimard Flavigny, 'Boldini à Venise', Le Quotiduen juridique, 19 April 2013.

Artist description:

The son of a minor painter and restorer in Ferrara, Giovanni Boldini arrived in 1864 in Florence, where he enrolled in the Accademia di Belle Arti. He first exhibited his work in Florence in 1867, and in the same year visited the Exposition Universelle in Paris. From the earliest years of his career he displayed a remarkable talent as a portrait painter. During a trip to London in 1870 he obtained several portrait commissions, and by October 1871 he had settled in Paris, taking a studio on the Place Pigalle, and making his public debut at the Salon de Mars in 1874. Boldini's bold, fluid style of painting was to prove immensely popular in Paris.

In the late 1870s and early 1880s he produced genre paintings of elegantly dressed women portrayed in lavish interiors - subjects made popular by Alfred Stevens and James Tissot - and these works found a ready market in England and America through the efforts of the Parisian art dealer Adolphe Goupil. By the time he moved to a new studio in 1885, however, he had begun to paint society portraits, and soon developed a formidable reputation for his dazzling, elegant depictions of the fashionable women of Paris, painted with a virtuoso technique of bold, fluid brushstrokes. Within a few years Boldini had risen to a position of prominence in Parisian art circles. He befriended other society portrait painters such as Paul-César Helleu, John Singer Sargent and James A. McNeill Whistler, and became a close friend of Edgar Degas, who is said to have once told the artist, "Vous êtes un monstre de talent!".

By the turn of the century Boldini had become the most sought-after portrait painter in Paris, achieving such success that his reputation rivalled that of his friend Sargent in London. His fame reached as far as America, from where he received several portrait commissions, stimulated by an exhibition of his work held at Boussod, Valadon and Co. in New York in 1897.

Boldini was a gifted and somewhat compulsive draughtsman, and filled many sketchbooks with drawings. (He would also use whatever paper came to hand, and there are examples of quick sketches drawn on menu covers, receipts, ledger paper, postcards, hotel stationery, pages torn from auction catalogues, and so forth.) His drawings, characterized by a restless energy and a spirited technique wholly in keeping with the bravura brushwork of his oil paintings, range from quick sketches of figures, landscapes, buildings and objects to more elaborate studies of these same motifs. As Richard Kendall has recently written, 'Evident in almost all of [Boldini's drawings] is a vivid engagement with the pleasures of looking and with the nervous exuberance of the drawing process, irrespective of the chosen subject…Some of these drawings would have taken only minutes or even seconds to complete, while others are the work of hours of concentrated labor…This engagement was vividly physical and

sensuous, as his hand erupted in wild flourishes of pencil, pen and ink, crayon, and charcoal, or opted for extreme delicacy as the situation demanded.' The largest surviving group of drawings by Boldini, bequeathed by the artist's widow, is today in the collection of the Museo Boldini in Ferrara.