

Francesco TIRONI (Friuli c.1745 - Venice c.1797)

Venice: The Piazza San Marco Decorated for the Festa della Sensa on Ascension Day

Pen and brown ink, black and grey wash, heightened with white, over traces of an underdrawing in black chalk, with framing lines in brown ink.

Laid down on a 19th century mount.

Inscribed Canaletto on the reverse of the mount.

349 x 590 mm. (13 3/4 x 23 1/4 in.)

Watermark: A large coat of arms crowned with a crescent(?).

Long attributed to Antonio Canaletto and previously unpublished, the present sheet is a new and significant addition to the small corpus of drawings by Francesco Tironi, and may indeed be counted among his very finest works as a draughtsman. Larger than almost all of the artist's extant drawings, this splendid view of the Piazza San Marco in Venice is also unusual in that it does not seem to have been intended as a design for a print. The composition depicts the Piazza decorated for the Feast of the Ascension ('Sensa', in Venetian dialect), the most significant of the city's annual festivals. This event had a particular significance in Venice since the Republic was said to have been founded on that feast day in 421. For just over two weeks during the annual Festa della Sensa, the Piazza San Marco was filled with temporary structures, housing market stalls and craftsmen's workshops, that were set up in two parallel rows on both sides of the square and attracted numerous visitors. These structures took a fairly ramshackle form until 1776, when it was decided that a specific temporary structure should be built to accommodate the stalls. This was an elaborate Neoclassical-style arcade designed by the architect Bernardino Macaruzzi – as seen in this composition – which housed shops, cafés, markets and exhibitions during the Festa della Sensa. Macaruzzi's wooden structure remained in use during the festival every year from 1776 until the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797, and the present sheet must date from this period.

As an 18th century German visitor to Venice, writing in 1730, noted, 'If a traveller cannot contrive to be at Venice in carnaval-time, the best way to retrieve that loss, is so to order his route so as to be there about Holy-Thursday; or if one of the two must be omitted, I would advise it should be the carnaval. For the ascension festival affords all the diversions of the carnaval, as masquerades, opera's, &c…The annual fair begins on the Sunday before Ascension-day, and lasts till Whitsunday. During this fair, St. Mark's Place is taken up with booths so arranged as to form several streets; and all sorts of goods

are exposed to sale at the shops in the little streets called Le Mercerie, near the Piazza di S. Marco.'

Almost a hundred years later, the Irish writer and traveller Sydney, Lady Morgan, wrote that 'The centre of St. Mark's Palace [sic], that noble space surrounded by objects so imposing and so gay, was always the theatre of every public festivity – the grand scene of those primeval, simple, and natural epochs of national enjoyment – the Feste Veneziane, which originated in the great eras of Venetian grandeur, and were each founded to celebrate some event characterised by glory, or productive of prosperity. Among all these festivals, there was none more splendid or more ancient than the Fiera dell' Ascensione, or "La Sensa", instituted in 1180 – a period when the liberties and prosperity of Venice were at their height, and when her commerce and manufactures brought all nations to her markets. This fair or festival, which served at once the purpose of thrifty trade, national pride, and pleasurable pursuit, began on the feast of the Ascension, and lasted eight days. Temporary shops of the most fantastic architecture were erected in the Piazza of St. Mark; and silken, woolen, and velvet stuffs of Venice, chains of gold and mirrors of crystal, toys and trinkets and jewels, fire-arms and musical instruments, were mingled with all which the arts produced from age to age, till the spectacle of La Sensa at last exhibited works no less precious than those of a TITIAN or a TINTORETTO…'

The decoration of the Piazza San Marco for the Festa della Sensa is only occasionally found in Venetian art of the 18th century. A large drawing of the same subject by Francesco Guardi, showing the temporary arcade in the years before Macaruzzi's final structure was established, is in the collection of the British Museum, while two oil paintings by the same artist of the Piazza during the Festa are in the Museu Calouste Gulbenkian in Lisbon and a third is in Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Two drawings of the Piazza San Marco decorated for the Festa della Sensa, both showing Macaruzzi's arcade and likely to be the work of Giacomo Guardi, are today in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

This large sheet bears the drystamp of the Leipzig merchant Heinrich Wilhelm Campe (1770-1862), who assembled a large collection of drawings that, at his death, was divided among his three daughters. The present sheet was inherited by Sophie Campe, who married Karl Ewald Hasse (1810-1902), a distinguished professor of medicine at the University of Göttingen. The drawing then passed to their son-in-law, Ernst Heinrich Ehlers (1835-1925), a professor of zoology and a notable collector of drawings and prints. While many of the drawings in the Ehlers collection were eventually acquired in 1939 by the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, the present sheet – which at the time was thought to be by Canaletto - was sold with a part of the Hasse and Ehlers collections at auction in Leipzig several years earlier, in 1930.

Artist description:

Active in the last quarter of the 18th century, Francesco Tironi was never a member of the Venetian Academy, nor was he admitted into the local city guild of painters, the Fraglia dei Pittori. (Since he was perhaps not a professional artist, it has been suggested that he might be identified with a Venetian priest of the same name, or with a stationer in Venice also named Francesco Tironi, but there is no firm evidence for either supposition.) Very little is known of Tironi's life and career, and he only rarely appears in contemporary documents or the accounts of 19th century art historians. In his Della letteratura veneziana del secolo XVIII fino a' nostri giorni, published in 1806, the Venetian writer Giannantonio Moschini noted in an aside that, 'Here I will add that our Francesco Tironi is to be pitied, who died at too fresh an age some years ago, because the Ports of Venice and the Islands drawn by him, and engraved by our own Antonio Santi [sic], show us how far he would have come.'

Tironi is indeed best known today for his drawn views of the islands of the Venetian lagoon, which were

engraved by the Bellunese printmaker Antonio Sandi and published by Ludovico Furlanetto as Ventiquattro isole della laguna, disegnate da Francesco Tironi, incise da Antonio Sandi in the early 1780s. He also drew a series of four views of the Venetian ports of Chioggia, Malamocco, Sant'Andrea and Murazzi, likewise engraved by Sandi. As a view painter, Tironi developed a style that combined the distinct influences of both Canaletto and Francesco Guardi. Only a handful of oil paintings have been convincingly attributed to him, however, and among the very few signed canvases by the artist is a large View of the Islands of San Michele, San Cristoforo and Murano from the Fondamenta Nuove of c.1775, today in the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe. In 1782 Tironi produced a number of finished drawings commemorating the visit of Pope Pius VI to Venice that year. The artist died some fifteen years later, at the age of around fifty-two.

Fewer than thirty drawings by Tironi are known, almost all of which are preparatory studies for the engravings made by Sandi. These drawings, as one scholar has noted, 'reveal a certain amount of confidence and ease, and indicate that Tironi looked mainly to models by Canaletto, but also to Guardi.' As Charles Beddington has further noted, 'Although certainly not of the first rank, Tironi is an interesting and original figure. While his drawing style and compositional structure recall Canaletto's methods to the point that one wonders if he might have worked in Canaletto's studio, his mannered figures are closer to Francesco Guardi's mature types.' Drawings by Tironi in public collections include six sheets in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and six in the Albertina in Vienna, as well as others in the Wallraf-Richarz Museum in Cologne, the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester, the Pierpont Morgan Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and in a handful of private collections.