

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Francesco GUARDI (Venice 1712 - Venice 1793)

The Bacino di San Marco with San Giorgio Maggiore, the Punta di Dogana and Santa Maria della Salute

Pen and brown ink and brown wash, over an underdrawing in black chalk, on two joined sheets of paper.

The buildings in the background identified with the letters A to I, faintly inscribed in brown ink.

473 x 802 mm. (18 5/8 x 31 5/8 in.)

As James Byam Shaw has noted of Francesco Guardi, 'Undoubtedly it was the success of Canaletto's Vedute that inspired him to try his hand at the type of painting in which his great natural gifts found a perfect medium of expression...But while Canaletto looked at Venice through the camera obscura, and corrected perspectives by rule and lines and angles by ruler, Guardi painted his immediate impression, the quivering air and the glittering lagoon, the palaces leaning and trembling over the canal, and caught exactly the sense of instability, of unsubstantial magic, that the atmosphere of Venice always conveys.'¹

This drawing depicts the opposite view from the previous sheet, looking across the Bacino di San Marco from the Piazzetta, with the church of San Giorgio Maggiore at the left, the Dogana and the church of Santa Maria della Salute at the right, and in the central distance part of the Giudecca with the church of Le Zitelle. As in its pendant, the foreground is taken up with shipping, including not only the typical gondolas but also several of the large sailing barges known as bragozzi. As Byam Shaw wrote of the related painting at Waddesdon Manor², 'There are Bragozzi in the foreground...and gliding out from the Dogana in the direction of the Lido is a cortège of Ambassadorial gondolas, a thread of blue and gold catching the eye in the centre of the composition.'

The pair of immense canvases at Waddesdon Manor, as Byam Shaw further notes, 'are painted on a dark reddish-brown ground, showing through in many places, especially in the foregrounds, which have a rather muddy effect; and both have splendid skies...These must surely be the largest views of Venice that Guardi ever painted – the figures in the foreground are six to eight inches high.' Though nothing is known of the patron who commissioned this monumental pair of views from the artist, the paintings, given their sheer scale, must have been intended for a grand room in a Venetian palace. They were in a French collection in the late 18th century, from whom they were bought in 1859 by the London dealer Martin Colnaghi. Sometime after 1876, the two paintings were acquired from Colnaghi by Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild for Waddesdon Manor, which was then under construction. They were placed in the East Gallery, which was designed to accommodate them, and where they remain today.

Drawings such as this and the preceding sheet, done at the beginning of Francesco Guardi's career as a vedutista, differ from his later drawings and capricci in exhibiting a greater interest in topographical exactitude. Byam Shaw has pointed out that, 'Unlike many of Guardi's later drawings, these were drawn on the spot, as is shown by indications of colour and tone, and by the accuracy of their topography, wherever it can be checked today. Venice has changed, between then and now, less than any other great city of Europe. It is possible, I believe, in the case of every drawing of this type, to establish the exact spot from which the view was taken – whether at the window of a patron's palace, or at some humbler point of vantage, or in a boat on the waterway; and the buildings depicted, so far as they still exist, will be found to be rendered with surprising fidelity. In such drawings, the tricks of penmanship which we particularly associate with Guardi, especially in the little figures, are not yet fully developed.' He added that these early view drawings by Guardi would have had great appeal for foreign visitors to the city, since 'they were true pictures of the most famous views in Venice, and were prized for a topographical accuracy to which the artist himself was later to attach less importance.'

The presence of letters corresponding to the different buildings and landmarks of the view depicted would suggest that this pair of drawings may have been intended to have been engraved, although no prints of these particular views have survived. Certainly, as these drawings are quite possibly the largest surviving sheets by Guardi, and are in turn closely related to his grandest Venetian view paintings, it might be expected that the artist would have wished to have the compositions reproduced and disseminated as printed images.

A number of large etchings after just this type of view by Guardi were produced by Dionigi Valesi (or Valesio), a printmaker from Parma active between 1730 and 1777. Valesi was particularly adept at translating the spirited handling of Guardi's technique, as well as the play of light on water and sky typical of his view paintings, into the etching medium. In August 1777 the bookseller Marchiò Gabrieli applied for a privilegio to publish a series of etchings, mostly to be executed by Valesi, of 'molte vedute della Dominante del celebre Francesco Guardi, e varj capricci pittoreschi di architettura.' Only four or five etchings by Valesi after early views by Guardi are known today, but they give some indication of the type of print for which the present pair of drawings may have served as models. For example, two sizeable etchings by Valesi of The Grand Canal with the Palazzo Bembo and San Giorgio Maggiore with the Giudecca, in the collection of the Museo Correr in Venice, are based respectively on two large vedute drawings of this type by Guardi, one in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the other in a private collection, both of which may be dated to the same period as this impressive pair of drawings.

Exhibitions

Paris, Galerie Charpentier, Paysages d'Italie, 1947, no.201 (L'Entrée du Grand Canal, à Venise, vue du Palais des Doges, as by Antonio Guardi); New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, 2005, no.29.

Literature:

New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, exhibition catalogue, 2005, unpaginated, no.29.

Artist description:

Francesco Guardi is thought to have trained in the studio of his brother-in-law, Giovanni Battista

Tiepolo. Unlike Canaletto or the Tiepolos, however, he never seems to have sought fame abroad, preferring instead to remain almost exclusively in and around his native Venice. For much of his early career Guardi worked as a history painter, often in collaboration with his elder brother Gian Antonio, and it was not until quite late in his life - indeed, already in middle age - that he took up the vedute painting for which he is best known today. He may even have been an assistant in the studio of Canaletto in the late 1750s or early 1760s, to judge from a contemporary description of him in 1764 as 'a good pupil of the celebrated Canaletto', although this is by no means certain. Guardi did, nevertheless, borrow liberally from Canaletto's compositions throughout his career.

By 1761 Guardi had joined the painter's guild in Venice, and soon established a reputation as a painter of Venetian views and imaginary landscapes, or capricci. He enjoyed a market for his views of Venice, painted with loose, spirited brushwork and transparent washes which allowed the artist the freedom to explore atmospheric effects. While he was fairly successful as a view painter, Guardi never achieved the level of fame enjoyed by Canaletto, particularly among foreign visitors to Venice. Nevertheless, his work was popular with British tourists to the city, and among his patrons was the English diplomat John Strange, the British resident in Venice between 1773 and 1790, who commissioned a series of view paintings of country villas on the terraferma. It was not until 1784, at the age of seventy-one, that Guardi was admitted to the Accademia in Venice, as a 'pittore prospettico'. His son Giacomo was also an artist, and continued the family studio well into the 19th century.

As Rudolf Wittkower has written, 'Francesco Guardi's art has often been compared with the music of Mozart. Despite his modernity, Guardi was a man of his century and, more specifically, a man of the Rococo. He continued creating his spirited capriccios and limpid visions of Venice long after the spectre of a new heroic age had broken in on Europe. When he died in the fourth year of the French Revolution, few may have known or cared that the reactionary backwater of Venice...had harboured a great revolutionary of the brush.'

A gifted draughtsman, Guardi was a prolific and spirited master of the pen. (Antonio Morassi listed over 650 drawings by the artist in his catalogue raisonné of 1984.) As has been noted, 'There was something of Watteau in his make-up; he was seldom without a sketchbook at hand in which to jot down anything that took his fancy whether or not it was used in a painting later on.'¹ Guardi's drawings include sheets of studies of figures and boats, architectural scenes, designs for wall and ceiling decorations, landscape capricci and topographical Venetian views. 'By 1765 or so', as another scholar has written, 'Guardi had developed his personal style, in which a nervous, flickering line and subtly and richly varied washes give an atmospheric brilliance and luminosity that transform the subject into pictorial enchantment.' A large and varied collection of drawings by the artist is today in the Museo Correr in Venice, acquired by Count Teodoro Correr from Giacomo Guardi. These are, however, mostly sketches and quick studies for pictures, rather than large-scale, finished sheets, and as such represent the typical contents of an artist's workshop. Smaller but significant collections of drawings by Guardi are today in the British Museum and the Courtauld Gallery in London, the Pierpont Morgan Library and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Louvre in Paris.