

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Francesco GUARDI (Venice 1712 - Venice 1793)**

**The Piazzetta, the Doge's Palace, the Molo and the Riva degli Schiavoni, seen from the Bacino di San Marco**

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

Inscribed *la forte*, upside down, at the left of centre.

The buildings in the background identified with the letters B to V, faintly inscribed in brown ink.

469 x 800 mm. (18 1/2 x 31 1/2 in.)

This exceptionally large and important drawing is a highly significant example of Francesco Guardi's draughtsmanship in the early part of his career as a vedutista, or view painter. This pair of drawings may be included among what James Byam Shaw has described as 'a clearly defined group of large views of Venice which I believe were done by Francesco between 1755 and 1765, at the beginning of his career as a Vedutista, when he may even have learned directly from Canaletto. They are much more Canalettesque in style than the drawings of his later period, and topographically much more accurate.' Characterized by sheets of considerable dimensions, this group of early vedute drawings by Guardi are populated with figures reminiscent of those of Canaletto, and have at times borne attributions to the elder artist. Certainly, Canaletto's early view paintings of the 1730s served as a particular inspiration for Guardi when he began painting vedute of his own some twenty years later, and this is also true of his Venetian drawings. Nevertheless, as Byam Shaw has pointed out, 'Guardi himself loved to suggest (with a vision and touch that Canaletto never achieved) the ethereal instability of the Venetian palaces, quivering in light over their reflections in the waters of the Canal... But he was less literal-minded than Canaletto. Perspectives left him cold; he saw the air, the light, the strange irregularities of the Venetian architecture, and these were the things he wishes to convey; to this extent his vision was the vision of the Impressionist.' Guardi's topographical drawings of Venice included views of the Grand Canal, the Bacino di San Marco and the principal sights of the city, as well as elaborate depictions of regattas, ceremonial occasions and festivals, and several seem to have been drawn as autonomous works of art for sale to tourists or collectors. Indeed, many drawn views of Venice were eagerly acquired as souvenirs from Guardi and his heirs by foreign visitors to the city, particularly from England and France, in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The present pair of Venetian views are among the largest known drawings by Francesco Guardi. They may be compared with a number of stylistically similar drawings by the artist, such as an extensive view of The Rialto Seen from the Fondamente del Carbon in the Louvre, a drawing of The Grand Canal Above the Rialto in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and a view of The Grand Canal with the Palazzo Bembo and the Church of San Geremia in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Each of

these drawings, like the present pair, are of impressive dimensions, and may be dated to between 1755 and 1765, at the outset of Guardi's career as a view painter, when the influence of Canaletto was at its height<sup>6</sup>.

Most of these large, early vedute drawings by Guardi are associated with paintings by the artist, and this and the following sheet are no exception. Both drawings are, in fact, closely related to the largest and most important of Guardi's view paintings; a pair of canvases now in the James A. de Rothschild Collection (The National Trust) at Waddesdon Manor in Aylesbury, Berkshire<sup>7</sup>. Signed in full and each measuring almost three metres by four, the Waddesdon pictures rank among Guardi's finest achievements as a painter. As one modern scholar has noted of them, 'These absolute masterpieces... mark a magical moment in Guardi's output and the point of maximum separation from the Canalettian cliché of eternally serene skies: the flowing brushstrokes coagulate into dense browns, the liquid surface darkens, leaden clouds agitate the skies while a sirocco-like air seems to weigh down the atmosphere.'

Of superb quality, the paintings at Waddesdon have been variously dated to between 1755 and 1760 (by Ellis Waterhouse), about 1760 (by Byam Shaw), between 1760 and 1763 (by F. J. B. Watson and Michael Levey) and between 1767 and 1768 (by Dario Succi). That the pair of paintings at Waddesdon, as well as the related drawings here exhibited, must certainly date from after 1755 is indicated by the fact that, in both the present sheet and the related painting of *The Bacino di San Marco with the Molo and the Doge's Palace at Waddesdon*<sup>9</sup>, the clock tower known as the *Torre dell'Orologio* is shown with two storeys added to its wings at the left and right; work which was only completed in 1755.

This sizeable drawing depicts a view of Venice and the Bacino di San Marco as it would have been seen by a visitor to the city arriving by sea, or approximately from the church and island of San Giorgio Maggiore. The buildings depicted along the waterfront include, from left to right, the Fondaco del Grano, the Molo with the Libreria and the Campanile behind it, the Piazzetta, the Doge's Palace and the Stinche (prisons), followed by the long expanse of the Riva degli Schiavoni to a point well beyond the church of Santa Maria della Pietà. The foreground of the composition is, as Byam Shaw noted of the related painting at Waddesdon, 'filled with trading barges at anchor, their tall masts cutting the horizon, their furled sails catching the breeze, and gondolas and sandolos, full of busy merchants, passing to and fro between them.'

It is interesting to note that the church of Santa Maria della Pietà – seen just to the left of the large and most prominent sail at the right centre of the composition - is depicted in this drawing, as it is in the related Waddesdon painting, with its façade in a completed state, although construction was halted, with the façade left unfinished, not long after the church was dedicated in 1760. (The façade was, in fact, eventually completed only in 1906.) Given the topographical accuracy characteristic of Guardi's paintings and drawings of this period, the decision to depict the façade of the church as finished, rather than still under construction, is unusual, and may reflect the wishes of the patron who commissioned the paintings. Guardi may have based his depiction of the projected, finished appearance of the façade on the drawings of the architect responsible, Giorgio Massari. This would suggest a date for both the present drawing and the Waddesdon painting closer to 1760, by which point the construction would have been underway, but before the decision had been taken to abandon the work. Subsequent variants of the same view by Guardi, dating from later in the 1760s after construction of the church was suspended, show the façade as unfinished.

A smaller drawn variant of this same view by Guardi, with several significant differences in the shipping

in the foreground, is in a private collection, while a pen and wash drawing of the same composition is known through an old photograph.

### **Exhibitions**

Paris, Galerie Charpentier, Paysages d'Italie, 1947, no.202 ('Le Grand Canal vu de la Dogana', as by Antonio Guardi); London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, 2005, no.28.

### **Literature:**

New York and London, Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., Master Drawings and Oil Sketches, exhibition catalogue, 2005, unpaginated, no.28.

### **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.'<sup>1</sup> 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.