

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Giovanni Antonio Canal, CANALETTO (Venice 1697 - Venice 1768)**

**A Capriccio of a Colonnade Opening onto a Courtyard of a Palace**

Pen and brown ink and brown and grey wash, with touches of watercolour, with double framing lines in black ink.

Laid down.

Inscribed Anto Canale in pencil in the lower right margin.

364 x 287 mm. (14 3/8 x 11 1/4 in.) [image]

379 x 302 mm. (14 7/8 x 11 7/8 in.) [sheet]

Long famous throughout Europe, Canaletto was elected on 11 September 1763 to the Venetian Accademia di Pittura, Scultura e Architettura, which had been founded in 1750. Required to provide a morceau de reception, the artist must have been aware that the resultant painting would be his legacy to his native city. Signed and dated 1765, the painting which served as his reception piece is now in the Galleria dell'Accademia in Venice. Exhibited in the Piazza San Marco in Canaletto's honour during the Festa della Sensa in 1777, the painting was to remain for more than two centuries the only painting by the artist readily accessible in his native city, and it rapidly became his most celebrated work. Countless copies are known, derivative versions regularly being claimed to be autograph replicas<sup>5</sup>. Even Francesco Guardi used it as the basis for two drawings in pen and ink and wash, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, while elements of the composition also recur in a third capriccio drawing by Guardi in the collection of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice.

The only other version in oil generally accepted as Canaletto's work is that which is first recorded in a sale at Sotheby's in London in 1981 and which has since been in the collection of Carmen Thyssen-

Bornemisza. At 42 x 32.5 cm., that painting is only slightly larger than the present sheet and has a pendant canvas showing the Scuola di San Marco. The Thyssen version corresponds with that in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in its general composition, but there are numerous variations, particularly in the courtyard area, where the lower flight of stairs and the oeil-de-boeuf window are omitted and the door is moved to the garden wall, where a statue replaces the urn. The armorial achievement on the right wall is also lowered significantly.

It has been suggested that the composition of the Accademia canvas was inspired by the courtyard of the Venetian palazzo on the Grand Canal known as the Ca' d'Oro, and this has been argued forcefully by André Corboz. While there are similarities in the disposition of the elements, those elements – the long flight of steps giving access to the upper storey, the covered loggia to one side, and the view seen at the far end of the portico – are ubiquitous architectural features in Venice. View painters were required to submit as their *morceau de reception* to the Venetian Academy a work of the imagination. Canaletto had a lifetime of experience in disguising his sources and, as Terisio Pignatti has observed, 'with splendid disregard for facts, Canaletto's capricci often combine the real with the fantastic.' A sketch by Canaletto, inscribed by the artist 'per la cademia', is one of four architectural studies on a drawing in the Museo Correr, Venice. If its identification as connected with the 1765 painting is correct, it must represent a very early stage in the development of the composition, and has indeed been dated by Corboz significantly earlier. It shows, if anything, less similarity with the Ca' d'Oro than the painting does. Thus the present sheet is the only one known which is unquestionably related to the Accademia painting.

This large and highly finished drawing is first recorded in 1919, when it was exhibited at the Petit Palais in Paris, alongside the related canvas. It was subsequently published by Ettore Modigliani, the director of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan between 1908 and 1934. Untraced for eighty years, the drawing has often been described as preparatory for the 1765 painting. Now that it has re-emerged, however, it is clear that it follows the painting, and was executed as a finished work of art in its own right. There are, however, numerous small variations from the oil, an almost infinite number of slight shifts of proportion and adjustments, that make it anything but a slavish copy. Thus, for instance, here the pendant lantern on the left hangs lower, as does the tassel hanging to the left of the velvet curtain thrown over the interior balustrade. Whereas in the painting the arch through which the upper storey is seen touches the nearer of the two pilasters beyond the windows, in the drawing there is a considerable gap, while the large armorial at the right is shorter and slightly higher up. In applying darker wash over the lighter, no attempt is made to replicate similar patterns in the painting, whether it be in the cloud patterns, on the underside of the wooden planks of the floor of the upper storey, the underside of the architrave supported by the columns, or the walls of the garden or the exterior of the palace. All areas of foliage differ noticeably, including at the lower left, the trees beyond the garden wall, and those seen through the distant arch, while the leaves in the urn on the garden wall are significantly increased in size (and also in number), making it more of a focal point. The present sheet being a work on a much smaller scale, a number of features of the painting are omitted here: the long stick held by the man leaning over the balustrade on the left, the basket on the ground between the running boy and the prominent gentleman wearing a blue cloak, the sticks next to the man seated by the next column, the tricorne hat of the man standing beyond and the nearby dog, and the second figure on the upper flight of stairs. Among other minor changes, a scallop shell replaces a sculpted bust above the doorway on the stairs.

As Lionello Puppi has written of Canaletto's mature pen and wash drawings, 'These were clearly intended for collectors of pure graphic work. He used a wide range of techniques in these finished products, some of them experimental. It is also obvious that they were not simply exercises demonstrating the drawing skills of a virtuoso performer. On the contrary, the artist was clearly trying new techniques here because he was looking for ways of expressing his ideas. He was traditional in his use of chalk or in working with black, and less commonly with red, pencil, but he often replaced these materials - or more usually heightened their effect - either by brushwork or more often by inking these

finished drawings with a pen... Canaletto experimented with various kinds of pen, including quills, reeds and metal nibs, in search of the different effects that could be obtained with them. His use of techniques and implements was constantly developing, always complex. He used a variety of closely integrated techniques to produce a harmonious whole in the finished composition. He sometimes restricted himself to working simply with a pen or a pencil, which he carried to the very limit of its possibilities; he habitually used black pencil or sanguine only for his initial notation. After this first and provisional stage in the process of defining the image, he usually abandoned these materials in favour of the pen or occasionally the brush.'

The present sheet was previously only known from an old black and white photograph. Its re-emergence reveals that, while it has hitherto been recorded as monochrome, it is, in fact, embellished with small touches of watercolour, introduced with great restraint and evidently coeval with its execution. This is the only instance of the painter's use of the watercolour medium that has been identified. The Venetian connoisseur Francesco Algarotti is recorded as having owned '9 Vedute ad acquerello e penna' by Canaletto which were estimated highly in the posthumous inventory of his brother Bonomo, but it is not known for sure that they were true watercolours rather than wash drawings. It should come as no surprise that Canaletto worked in watercolour, however, for, as Puppi has pointed out, he showed an inexhaustible interest in technical experimentation. While the majority of his paintings are executed in oil on canvas, he also used as support, on occasion, copper plates, canvas laid on panel and mahogany panels. Apart from painting in oil, he also made finished drawings and etchings. Watercolour must have been very familiar to him as a medium from his nine years in England, between 1746 and 1755, where it was particularly popular.

Roberto Contini states that an etching of the composition by the 18th century German printmaker Joseph Wagner, published in 1779 with an inscription describing it as after the Accademia painting, is in fact after the present sheet<sup>18</sup>. While that is incorrect, it does correspond with the present watercolour in the relationship of the arch opening onto the upper storey with the windows and pilasters (as discussed above), in the man on the courtyard stairs being without a staff and in the standing man in the middle distance under the portico not wearing a tricorne hat.

The first owner of this drawing by Canaletto, Cavaliere Antonio Grandi (1857-1923), was an important figure in Milanese commercial and industrial circles, as well as a perceptive collector. He was a judge in the Commercial Court and for a long time a member of the administrative Council of the Banca Lombarda. He was several times President of the Upper Council of the Banca d'Italia in Rome and subsequently presided over the Regency Council of the Milan branch of the bank. Grandi lent the present sheet to the exhibition of 18th and 19th century Venetian art held at the Petit Palais in Paris in 1919, the only time it has previously been exhibited. Grandi also lent a handful of other works to the same exhibition, including a drawing by Francesco Guardi and a portrait painting by Sebastiano Ricci.

Senator Luigi Albertini (1871-1941), who may have acquired this drawing directly from Grandi, is known above all as the editor of the Milanese newspaper *Corriere della Sera* from 1900 until his removal in 1925 for his opposition to the Fascist government. Albertini also owned the magnificent pair of Venetian views by Canaletto of *The Molo looking West* and *The Riva degli Schiavoni looking East*, acquired in 1995 for the Museo d'Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco in Milan, and a signed *Capriccio of Classical and Renaissance Buildings*, which entered the collection of the Banca Nazionale del Lavoro in Rome in 1985. Among Albertini's other Venetian paintings were a pair of capricci by Francesco Guardi and a version of *The Confession* by Pietro Longhi. Albertini's enthusiasm for collecting paintings by Canaletto anticipates that of his employer until 1925, the senator and industrialist Mario Crespi (1879-1962), who was the foremost Italian collector of Canaletto's work in the 20th century.

### Exhibitions

Paris, Petit Palais, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Venise aux XVIIIe – XIXe siècles / Venezia nei secoli XVIII e XIX, April – May 1919, no.11 (Atrio e Scalone di un Palazzo veneziano / Péristyle et Escalier d'un Palais vénitien. Dessin pour le tableau de la Galerie de Venise...(Proprieta del Cav. Antonio Grandi – Milano)).

### Literature:

Ettore Modigliani, Capolavori veneziani del '700 ritornati in Italia, Dedalo, 1924-1925, p.343; Ettore Modigliani, La collezione di Luigi Albertini, Rome, 1942, pl.XXV; Terisio Pignatti, Il Museo Correr di Venezia: Dipinti del XVII e XVIII Secolo, Venice, 1960, p.35; W. G. Constable, Canaletto. Giovanni Antonio Canal 1697-1768, Oxford, 1962, Vol.1, pl.155, Vol.II, no.822 and under no.509; Lionello Puppi, L'opera completa del Canaletto, Milan, 1968, p.121, under no.355A; Terisio Pignatti, Antonio Canal detto Il Canaletto, Florence, 1976, p.208, note to pl.138; Alessandro Bettagno, ed., Canaletto: Disegni – dipinti – incisioni, exhibition catalogue, Venice, 1982, p.88, under no.116 (entry by Giovanna Nepi Scirè); W. G. Constable and J. G. Links, Canaletto. Giovanni Antonio Canal 1697-1768, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1976, Vol.I, p.151, pl.155, no.822, Vol.II, p.466, under no.509, pp.607-608, no.822; André Corboz, Canaletto: Una Venezia immaginaria, Milan, 1985, Vol.II, pp.768-769, no.D233; Dario Succi, Capricci Veneziani del Settecento, exhibition catalogue, Gorizia, 1988, pp.428-429; Katherine Baetjer and J. G. Links, Canaletto, exhibition catalogue, New York, 1989-1990, p.276, under no.85; Jane Martineau and Andrew Robison, ed., The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century, exhibition catalogue, London and Washington, D.C., 1994-1995, p.439, under no.148 (entry by Ruth Bromberg); Tomàs Llorens Serra et al, El Viatge a Itàlia: Vedute Italianes del Segle XVIII de la Col·lecció Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza, exhibition catalogue, Barcelona, 1997-1998, p.66 (entry by Roberto Contini); Roberto Contini, The Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection: Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Italian Painting, London, 2002, p.283, fig.2; Bożena Anna Kowalczyk, ed., Canaletto Guardi: Les deux maîtres de Venise, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 2012-2013, p.180, under no.48; Giovanna Nepi Scirè, The Accademia Galleries in Venice, Milan, 2015, p.157, under no.10; Bożena Anna Kowalczyk, Canaletto 1697-1768, exhibition catalogue, Rome, 2018, p.204, under no.63.

### Artist description:

A pupil of his father Bernardo, a theatrical designer, Canaletto began his career as a scenographic painter before turning his hand to view painting following a year spent in Rome between 1719 and 1720. He is first noted in the records of the guild of Venetian painters in 1720, and his earliest independent works date from later in that decade. Canaletto's resplendent paintings of Venetian views soon found a ready market among visitors to Venice, in particular English noblemen on the Grand Tour.

Early in his career he met Joseph Smith, an Englishman resident in Venice, who established a profitable business relationship with the young painter. The British Consul in Venice between 1744 and 1760, Smith arranged the sale of Canaletto's paintings to many of his countrymen, and most of the artist's work eventually passed through his hands. His success in promoting the painter meant that Canaletto soon enjoyed an unrivalled reputation as a vedutista, or view painter. Encouraged by Smith, Canaletto paid two long visits to England, once in the late 1740s and again in the early 1750s, remaining in the country for a total of nine years. Elected to the recently established Accademia Veneziana in 1763, he died in April 1768, two years before his patron Smith.

A talented and prolific draughtsman, Canaletto produced both rapidly drawn compositional sketches (which he called scaraboti), and elaborate, highly finished drawings, many of which were conceived and sold as independent works of art. Many of Canaletto's finished drawings were acquired by Consul Smith for his own collection, while others were purchased by such English collectors as the Earl of

Warwick and Sir Richard Payne Knight. Smith's remarkable collection of drawings, purchased from him by King George III in 1762 and now in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle, is today the largest single surviving group of drawings by Canaletto.