“Canaletti Painting”: On Turner, Canaletto, and Venice

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For E. H. L.

On a haphazard arrangement of planks floating above the watery depths of the Venice harbor basin stands a robed figure with a palette (Figure 1), the eighteenth-century Venetian view painter Giovanni Antonio Canal (Canaletto, 1697–1768), whom J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) called “Canaletti.” His back to the spectator, Canaletto is engulfed in the deep shadow cast by the buildings adjoining the Dogana da Mar, or Customs House. He stands before a square canvas that is already displayed in an elaborately carved and gilt nineteenth-century frame supported on an easel. Unfolding to his right is the famous panorama the city affords, that of the waterfront from the Zecca, or Mint, to the Palazzo Dandolo, now the Hotel Daniéli. The title Turner gave to the picture, one of two Venetian subjects that he exhibited in 1830 at the Royal Academy in London, was Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace, and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti Painting.1 At the same exhibition, Turner displayed a larger seascape titled Van Goyen: Looking Out for a Subject (The Frick Collection, New York).2 It is my contention that the impact of the Dutch artist Jan van Goyen (1596–1656) on Turner’s magisterial sea pieces was greater than that of the Venetian, modern published opinion concerning the connection between Canaletto and Turner notwithstanding.3 Turner and Van Goyen shared a fascination with the power of the sea that is reflected in the work of the most gifted artists of maritime nations. In its past, Venice had been a major maritime power, but in the eighteenth century the city was reduced to receiving, rather than conquering, foreign nationals, most of whom came for the purpose of entertaining themselves. By contrast with Van Goyen, and indeed also with Turner, Canaletto was a painter of what Michael Levey has called the urban Venetian scene.4 He was inspired by the busy social and mercantile life, by the intricate topography, and, occasionally, by the arcane traditions of his native city. To this end, and unlike Turner, Canaletto was interested in clarifying, rather than obscuring, the particular, and in making everything look (sometimes deceptively) real. This paper will explore which of Canaletto’s images Turner may actually have seen in the course of his travels in England and on the continent.

Canaletto spent sixty of his seventy years in Venice.5 During much of the decade beginning in 1746, he lived principally in London. A prolific painter and draftsman, he also made a number of etchings, primarily of imaginary lagoon and mainland subjects. Through the agency of the dealer and collector Joseph Smith and as a form of advertisement, especially for the benefit of those who had not had occasion to see Canaletto’s Venetian work in the original, engravings by Antonio Visentini (1688–1782) after Canaletto’s topographical views were widely distributed.6 Editions of Visentini’s prints were published in Venice in 1732, 1742, and 1751; prints from reengraved plates were issued there in 1833 and 1836. Smith, who resided in Venice for decades and from 1744 until 1760 was the British Consul, not only sold Canaletto’s work to English visitors to the city but also placed his pictures with English collectors at home. The ultimate and principal beneficiary of Smith’s endeavors was George III, who in 1762 bought Smith’s personal collection. Perhaps in part because Canaletto’s work was an object of such fascination to eighteenth-century Grand Tourists, his name, inextricably linked with Venice, continued to resonate in England well into the nineteenth century.

Turner’s visits to Venice are now documented to the late summers of the years 1819, 1833, and 1840, when, as part of the Austrian Empire, the city and its territories were suffering a period of cruel poverty and romantic decline.7 In 1819, Turner stopped in Venice on September 8, staying five days; he visited the city again, for a week to ten days, beginning September 9, 1833. Seven years later he returned, taking up residence at the Hotel Europa on the Grand Canal from August 20 until September 3, 1840. In all, he spent roughly a month there. To what extent, if any, is Canaletto’s work reflected in that of Turner?

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It is possible to identify a number of Canalettos that Turner must have known. Beginning in 1828, “The Stonemason’s Yard” (Figure 2), arguably a unique view and greatly admired from that time on, was exhibited in London at the new National Gallery, which was open to the public daily. In anticipation of that event, in 1823 Sir George Beaumont had deposited the canvas on loan for display at the British Museum. The national collection was small then, but much visited, and it is unimaginable that Turner had not seen this distinctive picture of Santa Maria della Carità from Campo San Vidal. The same is true for The Upper Reaches of the Grand Canal with San Simeone Piccolo (Figure 3), which Lord Farnborough lent to the British Institution in 1832 and bequeathed to the National Gallery in 1838. The Farnborough canvas, with its sharp light and silvery palette, is memorable not least because it measures two meters in width, as does a colorful festival picture, Venice: A Regatta on the Grand Canal, now also in the National Gallery, which featured in the estate sale of Lord Northwick at Thirlestane House, London, on May 25, 1838.

Turner often stayed at the country houses of patrons and friends and in 1799 visited for the first time William Beckford’s Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire. He may also have been to Beckford’s tower on the outskirts of Bath, where, years later, the art historian G. F. Waagen recalled “many choice pictures by Canaletto, among which a view from the courtyard of the Doge’s palace.” Beckford also owned, and in 1807 sent to auction at Phillips, where it was acquired by Sir John Soane, the splendid panorama the Riva degli Schiavone: Looking West (Sir John Soane’s Museum, London). In 1823, Beckford sold a pair of small Canalettos whose subjects were notionally described as “Buildings,” possibly views of Campo Santa Maria Formosa and the Scuola di San Rocco; he may also have owned a view of the Campo di Rialto. Waagen called Beckford’s Canalettos choice; one at least, the Riva degli Schiavone: Looking West, was large, lavishly detailed, and of the very highest quality.

Before the turn of the century, Turner also visited Stourhead, in Wiltshire. There, Sir Richard Colt Hoare displayed above the chimneypiece in his library Canaletto’s finest set of highly finished views of Venice in ink and wash: the ceremonies and festivals celebrating the election of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo in
1763. The ten subjects include The Doge in the Bucintoro Departing for the Porto di Lido and ample views of the basin of San Marco, as well as The Doge Attending the Giovedi Grasso Festival and The Annual Visit of the Doge to Santa Maria della Salute. An engraving by Giovanni Battista Brustolon (1712–1796) after Canaletto’s drawing of the Salute is illustrated here (Figure 4). Baldassare Longhena’s church would fascinate Turner, who in 1840 stayed on the opposite side of the Grand Canal at the Europa, though none of his paintings or watercolors reflect this composition, with its crowds of spectators and boat traffic.

In the summer of 1802, Turner first went to France, and while staying in Paris made notes and sketches after pictures in the Louvre. He was in Paris again in 1821, 1828, 1829, and 1832. Canaletto is not well represented in French public collections, but an important large canvas, The Entrance to the Grand Canal and the Church of Santa Maria della Salute (Figure 5), entered the Louvre as his work in 1818 (it is now attributed to Michele Marieschi [1710–1743]). Turner painted roughly the same view, but without the distorted perspective that is the defining feature of the Louvre picture and with less attention to the church, of which he shows just a slice of a portico at the right (Figure 6). He exhibited the canvas, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum, at the Royal Academy in 1835.

The Venetian Francesco Guardi (1712–1793) is not usually held to have influenced English or other non-Italian landscape painters. However, eight canvases by Guardi of ceremonies and festivals, based on Brustolon’s engravings (see Figure 4) after the Canaletto drawings from the series that later belonged to Colt Hoare, had been seized during the French Revolution and were in the Louvre by the time Turner was in the city. If Turner knew both the Canaletto drawings and the Guardi paintings—and this seems likely in spite of the absence of firm evidence—his recollection of the former would have been reinforced by looking at the latter.

Turner stopped in Berlin and Dresden in the course of his northern European travels in autumn 1833, and may conceivably have seen a number of Canalettos. An important set of four late paintings, including the

artist’s only two nocturnes, had been given in 1763 by Sigismund Streit to his Berlin school, the Gymnasium zum Grauen Kloster (they are now in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin). One of two night scenes represents San Pietro di Castello, which Turner did not paint, but the other, Festival on the Eve of Santa Marta, is a subject that, to judge from his latest views of Venice, would have interested him. The Saxon electoral collections in Dresden also included major early works showing the churches of San Giacomo di Rialto and SS. Giovanni e Paolo, as well as the Grand Canal looking northeast from the Palazzo Corner-Spinelli toward the Rialto Bridge.

One city without any view paintings by Canaletto was Venice, where in the nineteenth century visitors would have found only the Capriccio (Accademia, Venice), which was presented by the artist to the local academy in 1763 as his reception piece. On the other hand, the city had long been a center of the print and book trade. Canaletto’s own prints and
Visentini’s after Canaletto (Figure 7) were perhaps still available in the nineteenth century, while prints from the reengraved Visentini plates were marketed in the 1830s. Probably also available were engravings by Luca Carlevaris (1663–1730), whose Fabrice, e Vedute di Venetia first appeared in 1703; engravings published by Domenico Lovisa, from the second volume of Il Gran Teatro di Venezia, which appeared in 1720; by Marieschi, in the Prospettiva di Venezia of 1741; and by Brustolon, referred to above, including a print from the Streit Eve of Santa Marta.22

Ian Warrell has drawn attention to three works by Turner that he believes betray the direct influence of Canaletto: a tiny pencil sketch of 1833, perhaps after Canaletto’s La Piera del Bando; an 1840 watercolor, The Upper End of the Grand Canal, with San Simeone Piccolo; and a watercolor of the same date, The Accademia from the Grand Canal (Figure 8).23 The subject of the first, the Piazzetta with the Doge’s Palace to the left and San Giorgio Maggiore in the distance, was one of Canaletto’s favorites, but is so much a part of any visitor’s experience of Venice that Turner need not have required a source other than the view he himself had seen. That he was thinking of Canaletto there can be no doubt, as he wrote the eighteenth-century artist’s name on the page above the sketch, though he omitted from his own drawing the last bay of the porch of San Marco at the left, which Canaletto showed in the

Piazza del Bando, and he included the darkened facade of the Sansovino library at right, which Canaletto had left out. The second, a less popular subject, shows a principal reach of the Grand Canal and differs somewhat in its topography from Lord Farnborough’s Canaletto. The third represents the museum of the Accademia, one of the few places that had changed dramatically in its appearance and purpose since Canaletto’s time. Turner’s watercolor is fundamentally unlike “The Stonemason’s Yard” (Figure 2). The famous painting shows, on the far side of the canal, two small houses, the campanile, church, and convent of Santa Maria della Carità, and an adjoining building. The bell tower toppled in the 1740s, crushing the houses, while the entrance to the convent (now the Accademia) was replaced later in the eighteenth century, when the building that had been attached to it was torn down. Canaletto’s is a bird’s-eye view; Turner evokes the campo in front of the museum as if seen from a gondola. The palaces and the Campo San Vidal are not visible in the watercolor, while the water, which is barely noticeable in Canaletto’s painting, occupies more than a third of the surface of Turner’s sheet and contributes significantly to its effect.

Graham Reynolds suggested that Turner was perhaps inspired to take up Venice as a subject after having seen paintings of the city by the precocious and successful Richard Parkes Bonington, who had died at the age of twenty-five in 1828 and was much admired in the early 1830s. Bonington had exhibited views of Venice at the British Institution and the Royal Academy in 1828; in the year after his death, his father organized a successful London estate sale. A watercolor that Samuel Prout (1783–1852) showed at the Royal Academy in 1826 (Figure 9) anticipates Canaletti Painting; the watercolor was engraved in 1831. At the 1833 Royal Academy show, Clarkson Stanfield (1793–1867) exhibited a picture titled Venice from the Dogana that is not dissimilar to Turner’s, although it is more accurate. Lord Lansdowne, a patron of the arts and a collector of Bonington, bought Stanfield’s canvas, but Turner received the lion’s share of raves for Canaletti Painting. The panel was the only one of his 1833 exhibits to sell, so it was something of an affectation on his part to have referred to it as a “scrap,” though it is relatively small. Turner needed business, and perhaps his title could be read as a reference not only to Canaletto but also to the tradition of bespoke views of Venice that (even if regarded by some as hackwork) had profited so many painters of various nationalities from Carlevaris to Bonington.

Had Turner required source material for his Venice work—though as he had his own sketchbooks and watercolors, probably he did not—a wealth of eighteenth-century material was available to him and none more accessible than compositions by Canaletto. Yet he seems to have consulted them infrequently. Among the earliest Turners of Venice intended for a wide public was a watercolor rendered as a print (Figure 10) illustrating a new edition of Samuel Rogers’s book Italy, A Poem, published in 1830. Watercolor and print owe little to the Venetian. Turner extends the quay facade of Sansovino’s Biblioteca Marciana to seven bays, suggesting a square building, whereas the side of the library that faces the water is three bays wide. He narrows the Piazzetta, the wide public space between the library and the palace, and introduces,
from his imagination, a flight of stairs descending to the water’s edge. He renders San Marco and the clock tower in the bleached white of sugar, a practice to which he would remain faithful when painting the city in oils.

Only in the case of the doge’s ceremonial barge, destroyed years before, might Turner have looked to Visentini (see Figure 7) for his watercolor. However, Turner’s vessel is transformed—the oarsmen in the prow, the passengers in the elevated stern, and the midsection missing completely—indicating that he did not follow the Canaletto/Visentini design. The wide facade of the library, the stairs, and the heightened domes of San Marco give Turner’s composition a centrality suitable to a vignette. The changes, appropriate to his pictorial purpose, are at odds with Canaletto’s way of seeing. A Canaletto image was a carefully adjusted simulacrum that the viewer read as an accurate transcription. Turner’s illustration served another, more imaginative purpose. Turner’s slightly later vignette of the Rialto Bridge is taken from the same angle as Visentini’s seventh plate after Canaletto, but many other painters, including Francesco Guardi and Samuel Prout, chose the identical viewpoint. The practical reason for this is that there were three adjacent locations (now there is a single calle) at San Giovanni Crisostomo, by the water and at the required distance, from which one could make drawings of the view.

The works by Prout and Stanfield referred to above are more accurate than Turner’s Canaletti Painting and therefore correspondingly closer to Visentini’s print (Figure 7). There is also a Marieschi engraving that could have served as a source had not the artists themselves sketched the waterfront from a boat or from San Giorgio Maggiore (practically every artist did). Turner’s angle is closer than Canaletto’s to the view from San Giorgio, but Turner replaced the church with an inaccurately monumental rendering of the Dogana, turned ninety degrees and distanced from its real location. This afforded him the possibility of centering the campanile and drawing attention to the Ponte della Paglia and the Bridge of Sighs, which hover above the fork of a gondola entering at lower right. The latter bridge bore the weight of literary significance, and the lines from Byron’s Childe Harold that Turner appended to another painting—“I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs / A palace and a prison on each hand”—may also have been in his mind when he titled this one. The artist’s contemporaries admired Canaletti Painting as an accurate description (which by comparison with Turner’s later pictures of Venice it certainly is), but eighteenth-century viewers would not have seen it as such.

Baldassare Longhena’s Santa Maria della Salute is a muscular, three-dimensional Baroque building favored with a beautiful location near the opening of the Grand Canal. It is possible to sketch the church from directly opposite; from Campo San Vio or Santa Maria del Giglio looking east (in effect, the Accademia Bridge offers much the same outlook); and from the Piazzetta, the balcony of the Palazzo Ducale, and the Riva degli Schiavone looking west. In the print medium, Carlevaris, Marieschi, and Brustolon (Figure 4) opted to show the church from the opposite bank, a centralized composition that was not taken up in the nineteenth century. Practically every artist of note essayed the view of the church and basin from the east; for typical eighteenth-century prints see Lovisa, and Visentini after Canaletto; and, in the nineteenth century, Bonington among professional painters who visited the city and Lady Susan Percy (1782–1847) among amateurs. The church and the Grand Canal from the west was also a popular view with, for example, James Hakewill (1778–1843) and James Duffield Harding (1797/8–1863). Turner and Canaletto painted and drew the church from both directions.

Canaletto’s influence has been identified in Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute (Figure 6). The most important view by Canaletto of this subject was in the Royal Collection, to which Turner would not have had access, but there were both variants and prints. He seems not to have used any of them, nor did he follow the distorted perspective of the canvas then attributed to Canaletto that he may have seen in the Louvre (Figure 5). Turner’s Salute is no closer to Visentini’s print (Figure 11) than to Carlevaris’s (Figure 12). The
11. Antonio Maria Visentini, after Canaletto. *Es Aede Salatis, usque ad caput Canalis (The Salute and the Entrance to the Grand Canal), 1742. From Prospectus magni canalis venetiarum, no. v, first published in 1735. Etching, plate: 27.2 x 43 cm, sheet: 37.2 x 47.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Elisha Whittelsey Fund, 1949 (49.45)


English artist depicts the entrance portal of the church and one volute above, introducing a nonexistent balcony between. There is no correspondence between the buildings on the opposite bank in the work of the two artists. Visentini’s print after Canaletto omits the palaces opposite, showing the Mint at the left, nearer than it is in fact, and much of the Riva degli Schiavoni. By contrast, among Turner’s many palaces, several exceed four stories (the statutory height). It is also worth noting that for Canaletto, Santa Maria della Salute was one subject among many, while for Turner, the church played a central role in his Venetian output.

Few artists painted the Giudecca Canal, then as now of only peripheral interest. Turner, however, did so often; he also showed Santa Maria della Salute from the back. The church is atypically large for Venice, as Carlevaris—unlike Canaletto—suggests (Figure 13). Nineteenth-century painters endowed it with towering scale and a brooding quality appropriate to a romantic image. A case in point is a watercolor by Stanfield of the Dogana and the church of Santa Maria della Salute.39 One might postulate the influence of a Venetian print on both Stanfield and Turner, but if this were the case, it would not have been a print by Canaletto, as both nineteenth-century artists emphasize the slightly elongated, melonlike shape of the dome. Turner also focuses on the slender bell towers seen from beside and behind, and paints the whole church in an unreal, dazzling white.

Canaletto’s Venice was a city that was widely advertised: a gay, lively, and welcoming metropolitan environment (see Figures 4, 7) in which the visitor could envision pleasurably inserting himself. Turner was little interested in depicting either Venetians or travelers, whom Canaletto observed with scrupulous attention to costume, posture, and gesture. The English artist was also unconcerned with the exacting architectural detail that Canaletto drew so lovingly: instead he deploys transparent color to conjure up his silent, “evanescent” vision.37 Canaletto showed the out-of-the-way places that are sometimes referred to affectionately as “Venezia minore.” Turner rarely painted anything other than San Marco, the Salute, the nearest reaches of the two principal canals, and the Rialto Bridge. Leaving aside the bell towers (which, on account of their height and artificial footings, often collapsed), Venetian topography dictates relatively low buildings, and Canaletto’s is a horizontal city. Turner’s, on the other hand, is a vertical one. Turner’s Venice is a dewy universe, while Canaletto transcribed brickwork with the precision of an engineer. The Venetian neatly separated the land from the sea, developing for purposes of describing water a rather conventional notation of squiggles and wavelike crests. Turner merges the two elements with the architecture in the wholeness of his vision and apprehension.

If Turner had recourse to Canaletto, it must have been because he was aware of the Venetian painter’s popularity in England, as well as mindful of the successes of those of his contemporaries who had taken up Venice as a subject. It diminishes neither to say that there can have been few painters who treated the same views more differently. A condition of life in Venice is that if one is not on the water, one can draw or paint the sights from only a limited number of established locations: San Giorgio Maggiore (for the Palazzo Ducale and the waterfront), Campo San Vio and Santa Maria della Salute (for the palaces on the opposite site and the mouth of the canal), and the Riva del Carbon (for the Rialto Bridge). Perceived similarities between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century paintings, drawings, and prints of Venice, and between Canaletto and Turner, often simply reflect the realities of the local topography.
NOTES


7. For the dates see Warrell, Turner and Venice, pp. 16–17, 19, 24, 260 n. 49.


10. Levey, Eighteenth Century Italian Schools, p. 19, and Constable and Links, Canaletto, vol. 2, p. 396, no. 348(a). Bought in, the painting remained at Thirlestane House until the sale of 1859 and eventually reached the National Gallery with the Wynn Ellis Bequest of 1876.


25. Stainton, Turner’s Venice, pp. 18–19, fig. 6.


27. Ibid., colorpl. 64.

28. Ibid., colorplss. 67, 98; Links, Views of Venice, part 1, no. 6; Antonio Morassi, Guardi: Antonio e Francesco Guardi, 2 vols. (Venice, [1973]), vol. 2, figs. 529, 530. The location of the campanile of San Bartolomeo with respect to the bridge indicates that Warrell’s pls. 29, 31, and colorpl. 30 are taken from the Riva del Carbon.

29. Succi, Da Caravaggio ai Tiepolo, p. 244, fig. 288. Turner also had his 1819 pencil and watercolor sketch (Warrell, Turner and Venice, colorpl. 78): while freely colored, it is topographically accurate.


31. Succi, Da Caravaggio ai Tiepolo, pp. 92, fig. 65, 253, fig. 304, and Fabio Fiorani, ed., Luca Carlevaris: Vedute di Venezia alla fine dell’800 (Rome, n.d.), fig. 4.

32. For Visentini, see links, Views of Venice, part 1, no. 6, part 2, no. 12: for Lovisa, the print that is the cover of Umberto Franzoi et al., Venezia 1717–1993: Immagini a confronto, exh. cat., Palazzo Ducale, Venice (Milan, 1993); and for Bonington and Lady Susan Percy, Warrell, Turner and Venice, pls. 18, 19, colorplss. 99, 85.

33. Warrell, Turner and Venice, pl. 32, colorpl. 100.


35. Warrell, Turner and Venice, p. 106.
