

At the Queen's Gallery – Canaletto



Canaletto, The Bacino di S. Marco on Ascension Day c.1733-34 ©2018 The Royal Collection

Did you know Canaletto was not the artist's real name? The 18th century artist Giovanni Antonio Canal became known as Canaletto, an apt title given that he often drew or painted the Grand Canal in Venice.

At The Queen's Gallery in May you will see over 100 paintings, drawings and prints from the Royal Collection's amazing holding. This is the work of the man regarded as Venice's most famous painter along with others who were his contemporaries during the 18th century. The artists including Sebastian and Marco Ricci, Francesco Zuccarelli, Giovanni Battista Piazzetta and Pietro Longhi captured the views of Venice which will hold an allure even today. This will be the largest showing of Canaletto in Scotland.

The paintings were bought by George III from Joseph Smith in 1762. Smith was the greatest patron of art in Venice and King George bought almost his entire collection. He was a merchant and then British Consul in Venice and built up the extensive

collection over decades, becoming Canaletto's principal agent. In his palazzo on the Grand Canal many collectors, tourists and patrons would meet to admire his paintings and commission some for themselves.

Trade and tourism in mid-18th-century Venice was affected by the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War, which in turn disrupted several of Consul Smith's business ventures. Aged nearly 80, Joseph Smith made plans to sell his exceptional library of books, drawings and prints, and his collection of paintings. The 'Bibliotheca Smithiana', a volume of the contents of his library produced by the Pasquali press which Smith had founded, acted as a sale catalogue for potential buyers. Advisors to George III began negotiations in the 1750s and in 1762 the sale of Smith's library and paintings collection to the King was agreed for the sum of £20,000.

Canaletto and Marco Ricci's paintings were among the genre of capriccio which is a mix of scenery with real and imagined architecture. These were often painted to create poetically evocative works with invented surroundings. The ruins of ancient Rome in Ricci's *Caprice View with Roman Ruins*, c.1729, and of Padua in Canaletto's *A Capriccio View with Ruins*, c.1742-4, convey a sense of the irrevocable loss of a great age.

One of the most important of Smith's commissions from Canaletto was the series of 12 paintings of the Grand Canal, which together create a near complete journey down the waterway. Canaletto's sharp-eyed precision makes these views seem powerfully real, yet he rearranged and altered elements of each composition to create ideal impressions of the city. Two larger paintings are of festivals, including the 'Sposalizio del Mar', or 'Wedding of the Sea', which took place on Ascension Day and attracted crowds of British visitors. The Grand Canal was a subject frequently captured by Canaletto, including in a series of six drawings, among

them *The central stretch of the Grand Canal, c.1734*. Intended as works of art in their own right, rather than as preparatory studies for paintings, the drawings are carefully constructed and rich in tone and detail.

Alongside the grand public entertainments, Venice boasted a thriving opera and theatre scene, especially during carnival season. The need to create stage sets within a very short period of time provided plentiful employment for Venetian artists. Both Marco Ricci and Canaletto worked for the theatre, where they learned how to manipulate perspective to heighten drama. The exhibition includes one of Ricci's designs for the Venetian stage, *Room with a balcony supported by Atlantes, c.1726*. Marco Ricci also produced caricatures of opera singers, such as the drawing of the internationally famed castrato Farinelli, which were circulated among Joseph Smith and his fellow Venetian collectors and opera aficionados.

Two chalk drawings on blue paper by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta are engaging representations of Venetian character types, including a boy holding a small dog. Piazzetta's 'character heads' were highly sought after by collectors. Joseph Smith displayed his large collection of Piazzetta drawings in frames on the walls of his Venetian residence. Exposure to daylight has resulted in the blue paper fading to brown, but the subtlety of Piazzetta's draughtsmanship is undiminished and they remain some of the most beautiful drawings produced in 18th-century Venice.

***Canaletto & the Art of Venice* is at The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, 11 May – 21 October 2018.**

The accompanying publication, *Canaletto & the Art of Venice*, is published by Royal Collection Trust, price £29.95.

Visitor information and tickets for The Queen's Gallery,

Palace of Holyroodhouse: www.royalcollection.org.uk, T.
+44 0303 123 7306.