CAPRICCIO BY CANALETTO

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Landscape drawings which are complete in themselves and not made as studies for paintings are a pleasant, if minor, form of art. This is especially so when one of the eighteenth-century Venetians like Guardi or Canaletto was the draftsman. In 1937 the Museum acquired nineteen Guardis, but until recently had none of the rarer and highly prized Canaletto landscapes. The sheet here illustrated is doubly interesting in having a finished drawing of an imaginary scene on one side and on the other a preparatory drawing in pencil of an actual canal worked out in extraordinary detail.

The name Capriccio is given in Italy to artistic fantasies in architecture and landscape. In the drawing above Canaletto has composed a scene of mild activity among canal barges beside a workman’s vine-draped house and a battered church. In the distance at the left a stone bridge connects two free-standing columns on the mainland with a small castle. The outlines are drawn with pen and bister ink and shaded in with washes of India ink, the gray making an effective contrast to the brown ink. Under some of the ink lines are structural guiding lines drawn lightly in pencil.

A good many of Canaletto’s drawings have this pencil groundwork, but it is rare to find a sketch done only in pencil and so completely laid out as the one on the reverse of this sheet. The carrying out of details was usually left to the inking process. In this case the artist was obviously interested in the scene before him, and very likely he intended to finish it in more permanent form. Possibly he laid it aside and inadvertently started a new drawing on the other side of the paper. To draw the canal he sat in a window two stories up, and, with a straight edge, set down every ornamented window, cornice, and molding on the houses.
down both sides. A woman hangs over a balcony rail just beyond his vantage point and looks down on two boatloads of wood. Two low buildings across the way adjoin a handsome palazzo with its awning swung out. A low bridge connects the two banks and cuts across the curving end of the canal. The scene has been tentatively identified by W. G. Constable as the Rio San Barnaba, which runs west from the Grand Canal and turns south beyond a small bridge. Coming from the Grand Canal one would pass the church of San Barnaba before reaching this spot. The drawing has the convincing air of an actual place.

We know of four past owners of our drawing—Baron Vivant-Denon, Lady Sybil Grant, Miss Lucy Cohen, and the Earl of Rosebery. The first of these had a remarkable career, whose peaceful conclusion might well be envied by certain notorious characters of our day. Dominique Vivant-Denon, a writer and artist, began his public life by favor of Louis XV and continued to prosper till the fall of Napoleon. From 1772 to 1787 he was attached to several embassies from St. Petersburg to the court of Naples, and he made use of his opportunities to form a notable collection of paintings, prints, and drawings. While in southern Italy he visited Sicily and bought a number of Greek vases which he sold in 1788 to Louis XVI. The funds thus obtained enabled him to return to Italy to study art, this time in Venice. It is probable that our drawing was acquired then. He returned to Paris in 1793 in spite of the Terror, and through his friend David gained an introduction to Napoleon. Accompanying the army into Egypt, Denon made notes and sketches of the monuments (published 1802-1813). In the subsequent campaigns in Austria, Spain, and Poland he advised Napoleon in his confiscation of works of art and as director of museums installed the stolen treasures in the Louvre. After Napoleon’s fall Denon supervised their return or exchange, and then retired to private life to write a history of art and to enjoy his great collection.