Canaletto: Master Etcher

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One of the most important treasures of eighteenth-century art in the Department of Prints is a bound set of brilliant impressions of the etchings of Canaletto, purchased with income from the Rogers Fund in 1918. Unhappily, they remain but little known to the general public. Canaletto’s prints have always been extremely popular in England—our volume still bears the bookplates of the English country house from which it came—but for some reason they have never found the favor they deserve in America. William M. Ivins, Jr., the Museum’s first Curator of Prints, lamented the fact in these pages forty years ago, and it is still true today. Since the Museum is not especially rich in other work by Canaletto we are fortunate to have superb impressions of his prints.

The century that shaped the man who produced these etchings witnessed a great change in the institutional and intellectual framework of Europe. When Louis XIV made his long overdue departure from this world in 1715, the whole continent breathed a sigh of relief and turned to other, lighter matters. The powerful spiritual and political forces of the Counter Reformation were largely spent. The religious wars of the seventeenth century had exhausted people’s attention to the point of indifference, and reason as opposed to dogma had a distinctly new appeal.

The arts naturally reflected these more general changes. Intimacy was the new theme, the general was replaced by the particular, oratory by conversation, and overstatement by what was to become overrefinement. What survived into the new century of the great baroque tradition of art was mainly in the spirit of decoration. This was expressed for the most part by technicians who were masters of refined color, of the arrangement of forms, and of light and shade. The extent of the change is well illustrated by a comparison of the drama and courtliness of Rubens’s Marie de Medici series in the Louvre with the exquisite rococo dalliance of the Boucher room in the Frick Collection.

Private collectors tended to replace the church and state as patrons, and as their tastes became increasingly refined and specialized, so did art. Artists quickly became aware of the change, and catered to their more knowledgeable customers. The academies of art had a heyday, and as the atmosphere of connoisseurship intensified and spread, pictures were publicly exhibited in newly opened museums and endlessly discussed by amateurs and critics.

In England the idea and even the name of the Grand Tour had existed in the seventeenth century, but in the new age it became an absolute “must” in the education of any cultivated youth. The ultimate objective for many if not most of the rich young pilgrims was Venice, and the coffeehouses of the time must have rung with Oxford accents, just as Har vardese is the prevalent dialect in Harry’s New York Bar today. Even early in the century the city played host to as many as thirty thousand British tourists a year. The Venetian Republic had actually long lost its power and was soon to lose its independence forever. Nonetheless, its physical beauty and captivating charm were undiminished—perhaps even enhanced by decay—and the city rose to the occasion, putting on a magnificent show for its affluent visitors. The Grand Canal

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Canaletto:
Landscape by a river

Detail from
The House with
the Portico
was an almost constant theater for festas and regattas during the carnival season—and that now lasted half the year.

The art of the city inevitably absorbed gaiety and pageantry, and the tourists provided a ready and steady market for painted and printed versions of the contemporary scene. Thus a local vedute (or view) school of art prospered, and collections in bleaker countries to the north became dotted with the familiar images of the ephemeral Venetian scene. The idea of such views was not new. Many fifteenth-century artists had used lovingly detailed fragments of the city’s skyline as backgrounds in paintings. In 1500 Jacopo de’ Barbari made the magnificent woodcut Bird’s-eye View of Venice, measuring over four by nine feet, which remains the most important printed view of the city. (Even at that date the commercial value of the vedute was recognized, and a German merchant who lived in Venice immediately obtained a four-year copyright on the woodcut.) Though the city was drawn and painted by many people, particularly northerners, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was not until close to 1700 that a real local vedute school emerged to fill the demand for souvenirs. Its leading figure was Luca Carlevaris, who produced a set of 104 etched postcardlike views of the city’s famous sights. It was first issued in 1703, and was so popular that there were numerous later editions.

Among Carlevaris’s many students and followers was a young man later known as Canaletto, who was to raise the art of the vedute to an entirely new level. Giovanni Antonio Canal was born in Venice three years before the dawn of the eighteenth century. His father owned a workshop that produced scenery for the theatrical events so much in vogue, and here, as a set-painter, young Canaletto received his first artistic training. The sets were largely architectural, and much of his facility with perspective and his predisposition for architectural subjects must have come from his experience during these years. Like many artists before and since, Canaletto was drawn to Rome, but his stay was a short one, and he was back in Venice working as an independent painter by 1720. For the next forty-eight years—or until his death in 1768—he produced little that was not directly related to the city of Venice.

The major exception is the work he did in England during the forties and fifties. The traffic between England and Italy at this time was by no means a one-way affair. Lord Burlington’s Palladian revival was at its height and fashionable English aristocrats were building Venetian country houses as fast as they could. Since their native heirlooms were hardly suitable, they frequently imported Italian artists and craftsmen to decorate the displaced villas. By 1746 when Canaletto decided to go directly to the source of demand, his reputation had been well established in England by many paintings brought back by returning tourists. His stay in England made him a part of English art. The English have always remained loyal to their adopted painter, and the course of landscape painting in England would have been different if he had never painted there.

Canaletto’s initial success in Venice had been great, and as early as 1727 it was said that he had more commissions than he could complete. It was during these years that he formed his relationship with Joseph Smith, an astute English connoisseur who had settled in Venice and made a good business of being the middleman between local artists and eager foreign purchasers. Whether Smith was exploiter or patron has been much debated but is of no concern to us here. What is important is that the constant outlet for Canaletto’s paintings was undoubtedly the major cause of the change from his free and luminous early style to the dry and harsher one of his later years. Very simply, it was to his direct financial advantage to invent quick formulas which his assistants could learn with ease.

At the age of about forty-four, when his paint-
ing style was freezing into an elegant schematism, he turned briefly to the new medium of etching and produced what may be the most genuinely original work of his career—some thirty plates. Three of these were later divided; of the resulting thirty-three prints the Museum lacks only two, one of which is unique, the other known only in two impressions. They were collected and published in the mid-forties, with the artist’s dedication to his friend “Giuseppe Smith” who was by then the British consul. The dedication on the frontispiece of the set (see below) is worth translating: “Views, some taken from nature, some invented, by Antonio Canal, and by him set in perspective, engraved, and dedicated to the most illustrious Joseph Smith, Consul of His Britannic Majesty to the Most Serene Venetian Republic, as a sign of homage and esteem.”

“Some taken from nature, some invented”—but without titles it is often difficult to know which is which. The Venetian mélange of Byzantium and Europe and the dreamlike landscape of the adjoining mainland appear so unreal in any case that the line between fact and fancy is often hard to draw. On close analysis of a given Canaletto print one might decide that the foreground is invented and the buildings real, or vice versa. But the exercise is foolish and unnecessary, except as it reveals the richness of invention in the fantasies. The scholarly arguments that once went on about the actual locale of one of his loveliest inventions (see page 86) seem less than useless. Still, it is possible to sort the etchings roughly: about half are more or less real, the others more or less invented—a division that presages the course of his paintings, for in his later period he turned more and more to architectural fantasies and caprices.

Two characteristics of Canaletto’s etchings immediately strike anyone who has been familiar only with his paintings. One is the almost complete absence of the usual city views. There is not, for instance, a single view of the Grand Canal—one notes it with incredulity and perhaps even a bit of relief! Our set includes twelve large and nineteen small views, of which only

Frontispiece from Canaletto’s Vedute Altre prese da i Luoghi altre ideate
five of the smaller are devoted to the famous Venice. The second striking feature is the extraordinary variety within the less familiar subject matter of the prints. The average gallery-goer may well feel that Canaletto never strayed very far from the Piazza and the Canal, but the etchings range from urban portraits to pure landscapes, and from grand caprices to intimate backyard scenes.

From the evidence it would seem that they were all executed in a period of three or four years beginning about 1740. Why Canaletto never returned to etching during the very productive twenty-five later years of his life remains a mystery. Despite the short span of time and the relatively small number of plates, there is a clearcut development of his etching style within the set. On the basis of this it is possible to study the plates approximately in the order in which they were produced, and in the process gain a better understanding of the nature and significance of his achievement as an etcher.

The style of Ale Porte del Dolo (see above) marks it as among the earliest. It is a literal picture of a bit of the busy water route between Venice and Padua, a chance kind of “shot” rarely recorded by earlier vedutisti. As in all views, the basic composition is dictated by the subject matter, but the artist remains free to pick his vantage point. Canaletto chose one from which the river recedes to the right in a gentle diagonal, thereby giving the otherwise quiet scene a certain liveliness and momentary quality. The counterdiagonal of the pleasure barge leads the eye into the spacious open river where the gondolas and other craft clearly mark the recession into space.

Though the scene is full of carefully observed
minute detail, Canaletto’s graphic vocabulary is quite limited. The most striking thing is his use of close straight parallel lines to fill most of the sky. There is a deliberate ambiguity as to whether the linear portion or the remaining areas of white represent clouds. Avoiding literal representation of things so evanescent and fleeting as clouds contributes much to the realistic quality of the atmosphere in the print. The rest of the scene is rendered in a very straightforward manner: short, roughly parallel lines, varying in proximity, within clear outer contours convey the texture of most of the elements. Finally, tiny rounded strokes create the foliage of the trees and shrubbery. Trees, denied to the artist in his cityscapes, turn up in many of the prints, and he portrays them with obvious relish.

The House of 1741 and The House with the Portico (see pp. 82 and 83) were originally etched on one copper plate which the artist later divided into two independent pictures that show a marked advance in style over the Porte del Dolo. Since this was an invention Canaletto had complete freedom in the arrangement of the forms—in contrast to the Dolo scene where the framework was given—and the result is two much richer and more varied compositions. Planes are less distinct and melt into one another, and the architectural elements, while they appear casual, have been adroitly manipulated to mark a complex recession into space. In The House with the Portico the progression from the sun-drenched pier in the right foreground to the dark side of the house in the center is particularly daring and successful. The dramatic falling away of the foreground draws the eye abruptly down into the picture, and when it rises again it is via the richly articulated façade of the house in the middle distance. Above the house, harmonizing the rich counterpoint of light and dark below, is a vast and shimmering sky.

The repertory of strokes remains small, though it is more varied and used with more skill and bravura than in the Porte del Dolo. The sky is made even more vibrant and convincing by an elaboration of the same system of parallel lines.

*View of the Prison at Venice*
The House of 1741 and The House with the Portico

(See frontispiece for enlarged detail)
In the rest of the picture the range of values of the lines is considerably increased. Contrast, for example, in the enlarged detail shown as frontispiece, the extremely delicate wavering lines on the top of the pier with the heavy dark ones below that have been strengthened by rebiting the plate.

In the View of the Prison (see p. 81) we reach familiar territory, and though the subject may be unimaginative, its light, quick treatment proves that he is now in complete and assured control of the etching needle. The strokes are more delicate and less tightly controlled—observe the sky where the careful parallels have been abandoned for rapid sketchy strokes that vary considerably in value.

The prison view is so well known that it is easy to pass it by quickly, but to do so in this case is a mistake. For Canaletto treated even a hackneyed subject with a sensitivity that distinguishes his work immediately from that of his predecessors and successors. It was to be a hundred years before another print-maker, Charles Meryon, would etch the buildings of a city with anything like Canaletto’s sense of their meaning and character.

The Mountainous Landscape (see below) is from the group of nine small imaginary landscapes which were the last prints he made. Here architecture has been abandoned, and the subject is the romantic and slightly mysterious mood of the scene, rather than the concrete data. The spatial order is deliberately ambiguous, planes merge, distances are uncertain, and proportions are treated subjectively. The graphic technique is the most limited yet. It consists almost exclusively of loose quick parallels, augmented by even more rapid rounded marks for the foliage. Their values are limited in range, and the result is a more uniform, over-all, silvery tonality.

Within these four examples we have seen the evolution of his etching style, from the loving and careful delineation of forms with regular strokes, to the small landscape where details are omitted...
and the whole is treated in a remarkably summary and open manner. A progression from detailed realistic representation to a freer and more impressionistic style is a quite normal course of development. In Canaletto's paintings, however, we have seen that the process was somewhat reversed due to the ever-increasing demand for his work. The etchings cannot have been executed with a purely commercial end in view, for if they had been, the familiar panoply of architectural glories would have been far more to the point. These prints, then, apart from their innate beauty, are valuable in showing a facet of Canaletto's style developing freely without reference to external pressures.

Despite this evolution and their divergent subject matter, all the plates have certain basic qualities in common. From the beginning the artist had a direct and unaffected understanding of the nature and potentialities of etching. All the views are rendered with a telling economy of means and a superb understanding of the permeating milky brilliance that is Venetian light. Canaletto's concern for the quality of light was obsessive, and an almost tangible vibrant daylight fills the void between every two black lines. Even the darkest shadows are luminous and alive, never murky or obscure. His deceptively simple system of clear uncrossed lines was never matched in effectiveness by any imitator, certainly not by Antonio Visentini who reproduced some of Canaletto's paintings, probably under the master's direct supervision. (See the comparative details at the right.) The seemingly simple method of creating a sky with parallel lines—which for Canaletto harmonized a scene and gave it subdued brilliance—has a particularly deadly effect when used by a lesser hand.

Many writers have tried to find the sources of his astonishingly simple technique in the work of various predecessors and contemporaries. Jacques Callot, Marco Ricci, Luca Carlevaris, and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo are those most frequently mentioned. While it is likely that he was subject to some extent to these and other influences, his graphic style should be considered as his own highly individual creation. Had he taken to etching as a youth, one might expect that, initially at least, he would have modeled his style on that of his immediate master or some
other artist whose work he had cause to admire. But that was not the case. When Canaletto began to etch he had been a brilliant painter and draftsman for many years. Nor are the etchings merely a translation of his drawing technique into another medium, as a glance at his drawings will show.

The Venetian school of etching from Marco Ricci to Domenico Tiepolo is the lone consistently brilliant school of etching in the eighteenth century. It was perhaps too sophisticated and too color-conscious an age for the sharp contrasts and direct simplicity of line which are the essence of etching. In the import Canaletto gave to the play of light he was a man of his school, but his light was always a revealing and not a dissolving light, and he never sacrificed structural clarity in creating it.

Nor was the earlier part of the eighteenth century a particularly fertile age for landscape art. It was still looked down upon as a lowly and minor branch of painting, and despite his great success Canaletto was not admitted into the Venetian Academy of Painting until five years before his death. This was not as unjust as it may sound, for most landscapes of the time were little more than a mechanical record of topographical facts. Canaletto's, however, were another matter. He approached his subjects with genuine poetic enthusiasm and portrayed them in the dazzling Venetian light in a new and exciting manner. His prints re-create with wonderful clarity definite moments in time and space—and this is true even of the "inventions."

The prevailing mood of the prints is quite different from the festivity and splendor of regattas. 

*Landscape with a city*
and ambassadorial receptions that one associates with his paintings. In most of the prints there are overtones of nostalgia and sadness. The small figures move in a dreamlike world that clearly shows the ravages of time—Venice without the carnival mask of the eighteenth century. This is especially true of the genre scenes of buildings and landscape (see cover and above). In them Canaletto made another genuinely original contribution. The vedutisti had dealt primarily in cartographic versions of landmarks. Canaletto in these etchings opened a new field to the art by focusing his sensitive attention on out-of-the-way subjects. By virtue of his genius the chance everyday scenes of town and country—the visual facts of life—were raised to a new level of reality and meaning. No other print-maker has surpassed his ability to portray such facts in the strong light of the sun. If he concentrated overmuch on portraits of buildings, it was because he knew so well that only objects animate light and give it variety—highlights and depths, shades and shadows. Canaletto’s love for the facts he chose to portray has been amply rewarded, for thirty-three prints have placed him among the greatest etchers of all time.