

"THE GRAND CANAL FROM THE CAMPO SAN VIO"

GIOVANNI ANTONIO CANAL, «IL CANALETTO»

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ONE OF CANALETTO'S most recent biographers, Alessandro Bettagno, concluded, somewhat forsakenly, that "the life of Antonio Canal, known as il Canaletto, is not rich with biographical events and is deprived of significant episodes; in any case, it is certainly poor in news. Antonio appears to have been a man dedicated solely to his work, immersed so to speak in his work". In reality, the impoverished documentary about his life can be countered with a vast body of work, in which he repeatedly returned to the same scenes of his native Venice, exploring different technical processes, diverse light effects and distinct environments of urban hustle and bustle and the commotion of work in the Grand Canal.

Giovanni Antonio Canal was born in Venice on October 17, 1697 (some ancient biographers point to the 28th or 18th), son of Bernardo Canal, a scenic painter, and brother of Cristoforo da Canal, also a painter of canvases for operas and theatres. It was in this art that Canaletto also started and in which he certainly developed his knowledge of perspective and practiced the speed of execution and freedom of brushstroke. In 1719, he spent time in Rome, accompanied by his father, with whom he still collaborated

Giovanni Antonio Canal,
il Canaletto (1697-1768)
***The Grand Canal from
the Campo San Vio***

1723

Oil on canvas

Provenance: Jean-Pierre Pescatore
CollectionVilla Vauban, Musée d'Art
de la Ville de Luxembourg, inv. 60

in theatres decorations. The programmes of two of Scarlatti's operas (*Tito Sempronio Gracco* and *Turno Aricino*), first performed in the Capranica Theater during the 1720 Carnival, indicate that the sceneries were the responsibility of "Bernardo Canale and Antonio his son, Venetians". However, while in Rome he was most interested

in the representations of the city and its monuments from the classical era.

He was clearly attracted to paintings by Gaspar van Wittel (Utrecht, 1653-Rome, 1736), the great reformer of the painting of urban views (*vedute*) in the Baroque period. Van Wittel developed the composition of wide panoramic vistas, using optical devices and the camera obscura for the correction of perspectives and making use of his experience in topographic measurements. The Dutchman's paintings were not unknown to the Canals since van Wittel had been painting in Venice in 1695, producing views of the Grand Canal and St. Mark's Square. However, the paintings that remain from Canaletto's Roman period testify above all to the influence of Panini (Piacenza, 1691-Rome, 1765), a painter of "caprices", imaginary landscapes to which monuments and ruins from classical antiquity were associated. Nevertheless, it is with van Wittel that Canaletto, even in his youthful work, is compared. The learned French art dealer J. P. Mariette then wrote that "he worked in Wittel's manner but I believe he is superior".

Canaletto did not linger in Rome. In 1723, he was once again in Venice, painting views of the canal in the manner in which he would establish his work. He repeated the same scenes exhaustively while altering the light and details of the urban activity. He combined the scrupulous precision of his representations of the city, which he achieved with the aid of the camera obscura (one of these instruments at Museo Correr in Venice is believed to be his), with the freedom of a quick lively brushstroke, full of impastos; at times creating deep shadows and at others a warm colouring or an enormous clarity of light in the lighter areas. Rapid commercial success resulted from the novelty of these characteristics and the very early creation of a clearly recognisable personal style. Foreign art collectors and merchants, mostly English, competed for his works. At that time, Venice was experiencing a period of intense cultural production with an important group of painters (Ricci, Carriera, Tiepolo, etc.) but also composers like Vivaldi and playwrights such as Goldoni. However, the economic vigour of the city was long gone and the artists' careers depended greatly on the success they had with the foreigners who visited the city to enjoy its social and cultural environment, the particular beauty of the canals, the fantastic monuments and palaces. Canaletto relied on the collaboration of British art dealers established in Venice, such as the former theatrical impresario McSwiney and, above all, the English consul Joseph Smith, an important dealer and collector who opened the doors of the great English collections to him. In 1739, the French writer Charles de Brosses, who "admired the luminous, cheerful, transparent and admirably meticulous manner" of Canaletto, complained that it was impossible to buy one of his paintings because the English, who loved him so much, always tripled the offer of any other buyer. Canaletto himself tried his luck in England, where he lived from 1746 to 1755, painting London landscapes but even there he continued to produce Venetian subjects for his clients. He returned to Venice during that final year, painting until his death on April 19, 1768. He was 70 years old.



Giovanni Antonio Canal, *il Canaletto* (1697-1768)
The Grand Canal from Campo San Vio, ca. 1730-1800
 London, The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle

The Grand Canal from Campo San Vio, from the Villa Vauban, Musée d'Art de la Ville de Luxembourg, belonged to the main collection that formed the basis of the museum, that of the tobacco merchant Jean-Pierre Pescatore (1793-1855). It forms a pair with another painting of the same dimensions which represents the Square of Saints Giovanni and Paolo. This production, in pairs, or in sets of four, resulted from Canaletto's commercial strategy. The painter had a particular eye for business and several letters from collectors and intermediaries that complain about the speculation he carried out with his works are known. In 1735, he even made a series of drawings of his most famous paintings to be engraved by Antonio Visentini (1688-1782) in a form of catalogue aimed at new buyers. One of the included views was precisely the one taken east of the Grand Canal from Campo San Vio, which explains the existence of more than a dozen painted versions of this subject, with small variations in the framing, characters and boats. In this version, probably framed from a window or from the balcony over the river in Loredan Palace, one can see, on the right bank, the lateral façade of the Barbarigo Palace, the dome of Santa Maria della Salute Basilica and, in the background, Punta della Dogana, crowned with its golden ball. On the opposite bank, the imposing facade of Corner Palace stands out in the foreground and in the background, between the dispersed rows of houses of the Arsenale, the churches of San Gregorio, San Zaccaria and San Martino can be seen. The movement of the city is not particularly tumultuous here but the texture of the paint in the shaded area is elegant and the atmosphere breathes Canaletto's extraordinary clarity of light.

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