



Canaletto: Grand Designs

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On June 3rd, 1747 an engraving was published in London. It showed, as a contemporary advertisement put it, "A Most beautiful view of the City of London, taken through one of the Centers of the Arches of the New Bridge at Westminster". The painting on which the print was based is indeed a remarkable one, we are looking at it now. It puts you, the viewer, on the Thames in the mid-18th century.

Here we are bobbing up and down on the Thames in the first part of the year 1747. We are underneath one of the arches of the new Westminster Bridge, probably the fourth from the Lambeth bank of the river which retained its centring until April 1747. Over our heads is that massive wooden scaffolding - or centring - used to construct each arch of the new bridge, and above that the stone vault itself.

Ahead, at eye level, is the teeming life of the river. Beyond that rises the bulk of St Paul's in the distance, the spires of the Wren Churches, and a mass of brick buildings, all vanished, along the banks. This is Georgian London seen by a great painter: Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697-1768), better known as Canaletto. It is a wonderfully specific image.

There are many others. The best of them give you the feeling that you've opened the window and looked out to see St James Park, Whitehall, or Somerset House just as they were 250 years ago.

No one, with the possible exception of Hogarth takes us in the same way into the streets of mid Georgian London as Canaletto does in this wonderful and celebrated picture from 1752 of old Northumberland House at the junction of the Strand and Whitehall. Or here takes us for a walk among the vanished pleasures of Vauxhall Gardens or the interior of the Rotonda at Ranelagh in Chelsea, which was a sort of indoor Vauxhall where polite society could mingle and enjoy entertainments in all weathers. About a decade after this was painted in 1754, by the way, the young Mozart played that organ on the right. Or here we are in St James Park, before the new Horse Guards building went up.

Westminster Abbey, on the other hand has changed scarcely at all - either inside, in this view of Henry VII's chapel, or out. Though its worth noting that the building had only just attained its familiar appearance. This picture was probably commissioned by the Dean, Joseph Wilcocks who we see processing very grandly behind all the knights of the order of the Bath on the 26th of June, 1749. The point of the picture though, may well have been to mark the completion of Hawksmoor's towers, which after decades of delay were finally finished around 1745.

But on the whole one of the pleasures of Canaletto's London is that it is - almost - an unknown city. His paintings of Venice represent one of the urban places on the face of the earth that has changed least in the last three centuries. That is not true of London. As JG Links pointed out, "Between Lambeth Palace and Greenwich Hospital, which still stand, not a building on the banks of the Thames remains as it was in Canaletto's day" Here's Canaletto's Greenwich, we'll see Lambeth Palace a little later.

Canaletto spent nine years of his life in Britain, with the exception of an eight month trip back to his native city in 1750 to 51. He was almost fifty when he arrived here in 1746, almost 60 when he finally left in 1755 (he is recorded as back in Venice in December of that year). That is nearing a decade, a big chunk out of any artistic career. Canaletto was in London quite long enough to qualify as British by adoption - like Handel or Fuseli. But he was here quite long enough for England to make a mark on him and for his art to leave a lasting trace on British painting. Both of those exchanges occurred as I'll be explaining. And Canaletto's London work is at it's best as splendid as any he ever did - and, in my view still to this day undervalued.

But all this raises a question, what on earth was Canaletto doing sketching in a boat on the choppy waters of the River Thames or sketching on the Strand. After all, he is - of all the painters who ever lived - one of those most identified with a particular place and a specific set of views: not Westminster and Whitehall, but San Marco, the Rialto, Santa Maria della Salute and San Giorgio Maggiore.

To answer that, we need to go back several decades and ask who was Giovanni Antonio Canal, what was so special about his painting, and why was it so appealing to the British.

He was the son of one Bernardo Canal, a man who is known to have been a specialist in designing and painting stage scenery. That is to say, he worked in a thriving late baroque Italian tradition of which the leading representatives were the Galli-Bibiena several generations of whom dominated theatre design throughout Italy and Central Europe. They specialised, in this example, in dizzyingly complex architectural fantasies, using every trick of tromp l'oeil illusion that Italian artists had developed since the 15th century.

Canaletto started to following his father's line of work (hence his tremendously but accidentally appropriate nickname, Canaletto - 'Little Canal'). In 1720 a Scarlatti opera performed in Rome in 1720 with scenery by Bernardo and his son Antonio. But according to Anton Marco Zanetti, a connoisseur and writer on art of the time, he grew tired of the theatre, which he 'solemnly renounced' and instead 'devoted himself entirely to painting views after nature'.

What did that mean? The urban view was not an Italian speciality but a northern, and particularly Dutch genre. Here's perhaps the greatest, certainly the most famous example: Vermeer's View of Delft of around 1660.

Now the painting of views, or in Italian, vedute, had been brought to Venice originally by a travelling Dutch painter, Gaspar van Wittel - Vanvitelli as he was called south of the Alps. He painted all over the place, but also in Venice - where this was done about the time that Canaletto was born. Van Wittel had a Venetian follower, Luca Carlevaris, who was of Canaletto's father's generation. He was pretty good in his way, but not as outstanding, connoisseurs apparently agreed as this new young man who came along in the 1720s, Sig Antonio Canal, Canaletto.

His work was astounding. In a letter to a collector who collected the older artist's work there is this brief account of why Canaletto was so good. His work, "is like that of Carlevaris, but you can see the sun shining in it". It was the effect of outdoor naturalistic light that first impressed people. So how did he get it?

Canaletto was highly secretive about his working methods, George Vertue, an engraver and antiquarian who kept diaries of the Georgian art world noted, his "reservedness & shyness in being seen at work, at any time, or anywhere". This was one of the reasons, as we shall see why Vertue and others became suspicious that the Canaletto who had arrived and set up business in London wasn't the real, famous one at all, but an imposter - more about that later. But secretiveness suggests he had secrets. And I think it's pretty clear what one of them was: this is it, the camera obscura.

It's extremely likely that Vermeer and other used one of these, but there isn't documentary evidence in his case. In Canaletto's, there is. The same Zanetti wrote that he not only used it, but also knew how to correct the 'errors that occur in the picture when the artist follows too closely the lines of the perspective' - that is the sort of zooming effect that a lens can create. A camera obscura is effectively like an ordinary, pre-digital camera - but without the film. There is one in the Correr Museum with Canaletto's name on it.

The image can be focused instead of on sensitive film, on a piece of paper, where the artist can quickly trace the crucial lines. And that's exactly what Canaletto is doing here in these drawings of the church of San Giovanni and Paolo (very similar drawings exist of the Banqueting House and Old Horse Guards in London). By using the camera obscura, Canaletto could create rapid and precise images of the urban scene, and - just as important - observe the natural, outdoor light effects.

Art historians have traditionally been very protective of the artists they study when the camera obscura is mentioned, feeling no doubt that it is a disreputable form of cheating. That is nonsense, I think. Using it is the way that Canaletto did was tremendously skillful and innovative, and no more disreputable than later artists such as Sickert and Bacon using real photographs. We have to remember too that it was only half his bag of tricks.

Looking at a picture such as this splendid one from the National Gallery of the annual parade on August 16th when the Doge and retinue visited the Church of San Rocco, you might well think you are looking at something like a sumptuous, hand-painted 18th century colour photograph. And, up to a point you are. But you are also looking at a tremendous feat of mental and imaginative adjustment. Because the place from

which we are apparently witnessing this scene doesn't exist - or rather - it is somewhere in the chancel of the church of the Frari. As JG Links - the leading expert on the artist - emphasised, there is scarcely a picture which does not involve a mixing of view-points and moving of buildings to produce the most impressive spectacle.

Canaletto, while maintaining great topographical accuracy in some ways, was very insouciant about the facts in others if he thought he could improve a picture by redesigning a place. He was also a great master of architectural fantasy much like his stage-designing father. Here's his idea of what the Rialto bridge would have looked like if the plans of the great architect Andrea Palladio had actually been built. This so-called capriccio is actually just as much a part of the work he did in London as the views of Westminster Bridge and the Strand. It's one of three, all three commissioned c. 1753-5 by Edward Howard, 9th Duke of Norfolk for Norfolk House on east side of St James Sq. Of which Horace Walpole remarked, "you never saw a scene of such magnificence and taste"

So in the 1720s, 30s, and early '40s, Canaletto did well out of painting views, and particularly out of selling them to the English. The love affair between Venice and the English really got going in the 1700s. French and Germans gentry were also inclined to go on the Grand tour, as it was called, south to Italy. But the British were especially enthusiastic, and Venice was a mandatory destination. In contrast to Rome - the other obligatory stop - it was a city of pleasure, of carnivals, masked balls, and music. That was perhaps one reason why it became fashionable to buy a view or set of views to recall this delightful place. I also suspect that the novel, almost scientific precision of Canaletto's work appeal to the 18th century English eye.

There was a convenient agent for buying your Canalettos. In fact there were two,. Owen McSwiney, described by the late J G Links as 'an engaging Irishman with a taste for art and theatre and a proneness to financial disasters' who in 1727 had the idea of selling Canaletto's views to an English nobleman, the Duke of Richmond. And an Italianised Englishman named Joseph Smith - later the consul in Venice who was ready to negotiate a price with the artist, make sure he delivered, pack up the pictures and dispatch them to Britain. Smith also bought Canaletto's work himself, so prolifically that when he finally sold his collection to George III it contained 53 paintings and 140 drawings by that artist - the greatest array of Canaletto's work in the world. Joseph Smith, richer, more efficient and better-connected, also saw the opportunity and did the same. Over the next decade, mainly through Smith English aristocrats bought Canaletto in amazing quantities - almost wholesale. The painter produced 20 views for the Duke of Bedford, another 20 for Sir Robert Hervey, and seventeen for the Earl of Carlisle.

Then, in the early 1740s, the flow of visitors on the Grand Tour began to dry up because of the hostilities of the Austrian War of Succession, one of those long complicated conflicts that make 18th century history hard to follow. Virtually all the states in Europe took part on one side or the other, and by the 1740s it had spread to the Alps and Italy making the Grand Tour awkward. Vertue noted, 'of late few persons travel to Italy from hence during the wars'

So Canaletto decided to follow his customers home. It's wouldn't seem a strange thing to do if Canaletto weren't so closely associated in our minds with the topography of Venice. There had been expatriate Italian painters in England for decades. One of them, Jacopo Amigoni apparently advised Canaletto to make the trip. Amigoni had done well in England during the 1730s, here's a painting he did at Moor Park, near Rickmansworth. Towards the end of May 1746, Vertue jotted down that there had arrived, 'from Venice the famous painter of Views Canaletti of Venice the multitude of his works done abroad for English noblemen and Gentlemen has procured a great reputation & his great merit and excellence in that way, he is much esteemed and no doubt but that his views and works he doth here will give the same satisfaction' He added though a note of doubt - - tho' many persons already have his pictures.'

The question was, what could Canaletto supply that was new? One answer - maybe another reason why he came just then, was the opening of Westminster Bridge. This new river crossing, as tends to be the case with big transport projects in London, had been the subject of a marathon controversy. The watermen, who ran a sort of taxi service, said it would ruin their trade. It was complained that it would cause a sewage build-up, the Thames would silt, and that consequently it would be impossible to provide London with water. There were fears that St Thomas's Hospital would be flooded and 5,000 drowned. When the structure was finished, one of the arches started to subside and - just like the Millennium. This drawing shows it in that condition as it was in April and May 1749.

Certainly, Canaletto painted the bridge repeatedly, and in different guises. The view through the arch which we began was painted for Sir Hugh Smithson, but, who later became the Duke of Northumberland, and was one of the commissioners of the controversial bridge, so naturally took an interest in it. This rather beautiful view was for a young central European nobleman Prince Lobkowitz, 'a travelling boy of 20' who was on his own grand tour in England. That may be why, of all Canaletto's Thames pictures it seems most convincingly London-y. You believe the 18th century river looked like this.

But something odd begins to happen in for example this picture of the Bridge as it appeared on Lord Mayor's Day, 29th October 1746. That is London seems to turn into Venice St Paul's into St Mark's and the Thames into the Grand Canal. He seems to revel in opportunities to represent the pageantry of the water, with the stage barges of the mayor and the royal family standing for the gondolas and Doge's state barge the Bucintoro. It's true too of this magnificent view of the Thames and the City of London on Lord Mayor's Day. In the past, that effect was one of the reasons that Canaletto's London works were looked down on.

It may, to some extent though, have been exactly what his clients wanted. It has been suggested that his Whig clients actually requested this implied comparison between their metropolis and mercantile, oligarchic Venice- Venice was in fact a predecessor of Britain with a carefully curtailed constitutional monarchy and a sea-borne trading empire. In the mid 18th century, also, the English aristocracy were in the process of rebuilding the country after the style of Palladio, that quintessentially Venetian architect. So, in rearranging London to look more Venetian, Canaletto was actually following a cultural trend.

Perhaps that was what he was doing in this drawing of the river as seen from the terrace of old Somerset House, and this splendid prospect of the Thames, painted from the Duke of Richmond's house in Whitehall. This painting also gives us an insight into how he set about gaining clients in London. He did so, to start with, by using his old agent Owen McSwiney - described by Links as "an engaging Irishman with a taste for art and theatre and a proneness to financial disasters" - to approach the Duke who already owned a number of Venetian Canalettos.

McSwiney met the Duke's old tutor Thomas Hill at dinner on May 20, 1746, - where apparently McSwiney got "almost drunk - and Hill wrote immediately to the Duke. "I told him the best service I thought you could do for him that is, Canaletto] wd be to let him a view of the river from yr dining room, which in my opinion would give him as much reputation as any of his Venetian prospects".

It took some time before Canaletto got the commission, but here's that very picture: very probably actually painted in the dining room of Richmond House. And here's its pair - the view from the other side of Richmond House, looking towards Whitehall. We see the Duke's stables in the foreground and next to that Montagu House - where McSwiney and Hill had had that bibulous dinner. In the background to the left the Holbein Gate - a 16th century structure soon to be demolished and the only building still standing in the whole vista, Inigo Jones' Banqueting House.

Canaletto also experimented in acting as his own agent, even mounting mini-exhibitions in his studio. On 25 July, 1749 he placed an notice in the Daily Advertiser, "any gentleman that will be pleased to come to his house to see a picture done by him being a view of St James' Park" could attend for the next 15 days between 9 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon and 4 until 7 in the evening (which gives us a pretty precise timing for Canaletto's meal time). Canaletto, we know from this lived with a cabinet-maker called Wiggins on what was then Silver Street, but is now 41 Beak street.

This stratagem worked. He may have hoped to sell it to Sir Watkin Williams Wynn MP, whose house is prominent in the right foreground, with servants cleaning a large carpet for the London season. Unfortunately, Sir Watkin died just about then of a fall from his horse, but Canaletto succeeded in selling it to the Earl of Radnor, who was very pleased. With his buy describing it as "the most capital picture I ever saw of that master" (it now belongs to Sir Andrew Lloyd-Webber).

But by that time, Canaletto's presence in London had begun to cause some resentment among local, English artists. Or so you might deduce from some rather bitchy remarks jotted down by Vertue. "On the whole of him something is strange or obscure. He does not produce works so well done as those of Venice.. especially his figures .. which are much inferior to those done abroad", there was even a rumour that this man living in Soho He is not the veritable Canaletti of Venice". He was in fact, an imposter.

Next month, Vertue withdrew this suggestion and explained how the misunderstanding had occurred. There were in fact two Canalettos at work in northern Europe. The original one, who was now operating in London and his nephew and pupil Bernardo Bellotto who had established himself in Dresden - here is one of his views of that town in its rococo glory. The confusion was understandable because Bellotto actually

used to sign his picture "Bernardo Canaletto" on occasion, and they were of superb quality. In fact, though it was unfair to say - as Vertue remarked, that some of Canaletto's London paintings were "no better than some painters in England can do". But he did have a rival in his nephew, who was his match as a painter of views.

Canaletto had his ups and downs in England. In 1751 when he again exhibited a picture in his lodgings on Silver Street, it didn't work and the picture was subsequently cut in half presumably to make it more saleable. But something remarkable happened as time went on. Canaletto, that most Venetian of Venetian painters, began get a feeling for England and English architecture. He may have started by making the Thames look like the Grand Canal, but he was soon tackling the most English of subjects.

Here's his take on Windsor Castle, done we know from an inscription on the back "by sig Canaletti who took the view from the window of a small cottage at the end of the enclosure next to Mr Crowle's garden finished July 11 1747." His later picture of Eton from across the across the Thames is a bit cavalier with the facts. There are complaints, for example that the church on the left never existed. But it does show how Canaletto was beginning to get his eye in for something he certainly would never have seen in Venice; English perpendicular gothic architecture.

There is even an acceptance of the English weather in this charming picture of the new bridge at Walton, 25 miles up river from Westminster, seen in a sudden shower of rain. Thomas Hollis, the patron who bought this and several other assorted Canalettos is visible in the middle wearing yellow, with a friend named Thomas Brand, his servant Francesco and dog Malta, and the painter on a stool sketching is presumably Canaletto himself.

In the end English elements even got into his fantasies. Here's a picture in which a perpendicular building, identified as the ruined chapel of St Catherine, Guildford, has been transported in imagination to the Venetian lagoon. And in this picture which was painted for Baron Hollis whose country house was between Guildford and Godalming, the opposite seems to have happened. A number of Italian and ancient Roman structures have appeared in what is quite definitely the neighbourhood of Box Hill. So there is a more amazing cross-cultural phenomenon than Canaletto in London: Canaletto in Surrey.

I'm going to end by suggesting that the influence worked both ways. I think Canaletto's decade in London left more of a mark on British art than is usually reckoned. Turner and Girtin copied his works in their youth, Paul Sandby followed his practice of using the camera obscura. Indeed the late 18th and 19th century obsession with topographical views was surely stimulated by this great master of the form living in Britain for almost a decade.

The greatest tribute to him perhaps is time, painted in 1796 by William Marlow: the ultimate comment on Canaletto's sojourn in London: St Paul's plonked down in the middle of a Venetian vista of canals.

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