Modern Landscapes

Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, London 1775 - 1851 Chelsea)

*View of Venice: The Ducal Palace, Dogana, and Part of San Giorgio*, 1841
Oil on canvas
25 x 36 5/8 in. (63.5 x 93 cm)
Mrs. F. F. Prentiss Bequest, 1944
AMAM 1944.54

J. M. W. Turner dominated British landscape painting during the first half of the nineteenth century. His dramatic watercolors and oil paintings investigate the variable effects of light and atmosphere with an innovative, virtuoso technique that frequently borders on abstraction. Turner visited Venice on at least three occasions; the city's luminous atmosphere and dreamlike ambiance provided one of his favorite landscape subjects.

Venice, a romantic city precariously balanced between sea and sky, constructed of insubstantial splendors and pervaded by a dreamlike atmosphere, was one of Turner's favorite landscape subjects. The artist first visited Venice in 1819, and spent several days there sketching and painting watercolors. He returned to the city for a slightly longer visit probably in 1833, and again for two weeks in the late summer of 1840. Each of these trips resulted in numerous pencil sketches done *in situ*, and watercolors done either during the visit or upon the artist's return to London. Drawings from the 1840 trip are mostly quick sketches, registering only the essential shape and character of motifs; the watercolors probe the relationship between buildings, water, and sky under a variety of atmospheric conditions with brilliant, transparent washes.

Turner's first oil painting with a Venetian subject was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1833 (prior to his second visit to the city), and, except for 1838-39, he continued to show at least one Venetian scene annually until 1846; most were immensely popular with both critics and collectors. The Oberlin picture and a closely related composition, *Giudecca, la Donna della Salute and San Giorgio*, formerly in the collection of William Wood Prince, were effusively praised in reviews of the 1841 Royal Academy exhibition:

"In these Venetian pictures it would be hard to exceed the clearness of air and water--the latter taking every passing reflection with a pellucid softness beyond the reach of meaner pencil. The architecture, too, is more carefully made out than has lately been the case with Mr. Turner, and both pictures are kept alive by groups of southern figures, which, seen from a certain remoteness, give a beauty and not a blemish to the scenes they animate." "...A glorious example of colour, leaving, as usual, much to the fancy of the spectator; and absolutely extorting applause."

In the distance of the *View of Venice* is the Doges' Palace (Palazzo Ducale), seen from across the mouth of the Canale della Giudecca; to the viewer's right is the Riva degli Schiavone, and to the left, the Piazzetta San Marco with the Campanile and the Libreria Sansoviniana. In the middle ground, the Dogana projects from the left side of the scene and the Campo San Giorgio, with the domed church of San Giorgio Maggiore, from the right. The seemingly random placement of gondolas, other vessels, and bits of debris across the expanse of still water in the foreground is in fact highly structured, designed in tandem with the delicate cast reflections of the buildings to lead the viewer's eye ineluctably toward the distant prospect. The contemporary writer and critic John Ruskin noted admiringly that Turner's liquid views of Venice masterfully achieved spatial recession without resorting to "objects all over [the surface] to tell the story by
perspective." The style of the Oberlin work is consistent with Turner's other Venetian paintings from the early 1840s, in which the edges of forms are softer, more diffused; compositions more extended; and the buildings are situated further back in space, affording a greater role to the shimmering expanse of water in the foreground. Comparable paintings include the Giudecca, la Donna della Salute and San Giorgio; the Dogana, San Giorgio, Citadella from the Steps of the Europa (1842; London, Tate Gallery, inv. 372); and the Campo Santo, Venice (1842; Toledo Museum of Art, inv. 26.63). The evocative luminosity of Turner's Venetian scenes is achieved in part by the artist's innovative painting techniques, which wed the rich texture of oil paint with the transparent brilliance of the watercolor medium (see Technical Data). The delicate linear articulation of figures and architecture in View of Venice parallels Turner's use of red ink to define forms in his Venetian watercolors of about 1840, in both media imparting a sense of underlying structure that recollects the artist's training as a topographical draftsman.

M. E. Wieseman

**Biography**

From his beginnings as a topographical watercolorist to his mature investigations of the sublime, J. M. W. Turner dominated British landscape painting throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. He was born in London, but spent much of his childhood with relatives in Middlesex and Kent. He entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1789, was elected an associate of the Royal Academy in 1799, and received full status as an academician in 1802. In 1807 he was appointed to a professorship in perspective at the Academy, a position he held for thirty years. Turner's pedagogical commitment also inspired (in part) his publication of the *Liber Studiorum* (1807-1819), a series of etchings and mezzotints of diverse types of landscape made after his own designs. Turner's first exhibited works (from 1790) were watercolors of architectural subjects. His paintings of the 1790s are mostly landscapes and marines influenced by Thomas Girtin (1775-1802), Richard Wilson (1713/14-1782), and the old masters (especially Claude Lorrain). In 1802 Turner undertook a tour of Switzerland, the first of many continental journeys that inspired his vision of landscape; it was followed by trips to Italy, northern Europe, and several return visits to the Alps, as well as frequent tours of the north and west of England. Turner's watercolors and oil paintings proclaim his innovative technical virtuosity: full of movement and drama, they investigate the mutable effects of light and atmosphere in compositions that frequently border on abstraction.

Turner died in Chelsea (now London) on 19 December 1851. His much-contested will bequeathed to the British nation more than 300 oil paintings and 20,000 drawings (Tate Gallery, London).

**General References**


**Provenance**

Painted for the artist's friend, the sculptor Sir Francis Chantrey, R.A. (died 25 November 1841)

By descent to William John Broderip

His sale, London (Christie's), 18 June 1853, lot 89 (£1155., to Egg)

Collection T. Horrocks Miller, Singleton Park, Poulton-le-Fielde, Lancashire, by 1889

Sale Mrs. Horrocks Miller, 1925, to Thomas Agnew and Joseph Duveen

Sold by Duveen to Elizabeth Severence Allen (Mrs. F. F.) Prentiss, Cleveland, 1925
Bequeathed by her to the museum, 1944

**Exhibitions**

London, Royal Academy, 1841. Cat. no. 53.

London, Royal Academy, 1889. Cat. no. 141.


Iowa City, University of Iowa Gallery of Art, 1964. *Impressionism and Its Roots*. Autumn. Cat. no. 9.


**Literature**


**Technical Data**

Turner's *View of Venice* is in exceptional condition, with the impasto and glazes still very much intact. The original support was a lightweight linen canvas. The painting has been lined twice: during the nineteenth century, using paste; and in 1964, using a wax-resin adhesive. The painting was mounted on an ICA-type spring stretcher in 1964. The paint is applied in three distinct layers over the white ground: the initial blocking of forms is in a light tone, white in the main area of the painting and blue in the sky. A second layer of full-bodied paste was then applied, with low to moderate impasto; the third (top) layer, which carries most of the color, is very thin and appears to have been applied using megilp (mastic varnish added to linseed oil) as a painting medium, making it both transparent and easily soluble. Particularly in the second layer, Turner used his fingers, brush end, and knife to work the paint. There are small, scattered areas of inpainting along drying cracks in the two foreground groupings. There is slight cupping of the paint surface overall, as well as some localized wrinkling of the paint which may be related either to the thickness of paint layers, or to the use of excessive heat during the lining process.

The painting was painstakingly cleaned and treated by John Brealey, Conservator of Paintings at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in 1982. The removal of the thick, oxidized varnish was complicated by Turner's use of megilp, which renders the paint surface especially vulnerable to solvents.

**Footnotes**


6. Compare *San Giorgio Maggiore and S. Maria della Salute: Calm at Sunrise or The Riva degli Schiavone* (both Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, invs. 1361 and 1364, respectively); see Lindsay Stainton, *Turner’s Venice* (London, 1985), nos. 68 and 69.

