

Canaletto

Giovanni Antonio Canal (born in Venice, October 28, 1697), better known as Canaletto, was a Venetian artist famous for his landscapes, or vedute of Venice. He was also a significant printmaker in etching.

Canaletto was born into a noble family whose coat of arms he occasionally used as a signature. How he came to be known as Canaletto is uncertain, however; perhaps the name was first used to distinguish him from his father, Bernardo Canal, a theatrical scene painter in whose studio Canaletto assisted. Canaletto is recorded as working with his father and brother in Venice from 1716 to 1719 and in Rome in 1719-20, painting scenes for Alessandro Scarlatti operas. It was in Rome that Canaletto left theatrical painting for the topographical career that was to bring him international fame so quickly, although a close connection to his theatrical work remained in his choice of subject matter, his use of line and wash drawings, and his theatrical perspective.

When he returned to Venice, he began his contact with the foreign patrons who would continue as his chief support throughout his career. Four large paintings were completed for the Prince of Liechtenstein, in or before 1723, and in 1725-26 he finished a series of pictures for Stefano Conti, a merchant from Lucca. Dated memorandums accompanying the Conti pictures suggest how busy and yet how exacting the artist was at this time. Canaletto indicates that delays in the delivery of the pictures had been due to the pressure of other commissions and his own insistence on obtaining reliable pigments and on working from nature. In his pictures of the late 1720s, such as *The Stonemason's Yard*, he combined a freedom and subtlety of manner that he was rarely to achieve again with an unrivaled imaginative and dramatic interpretation of Venetian architecture. His understanding of sunlight and shadow, cloud effects, and the play of light on buildings support the contention in his memorandums that he was working out-of-doors, which was a most unusual procedure for painters of that time.

Throughout the 1730s Canaletto was deeply absorbed in meeting foreign demands for souvenir views of Venice. Such was the pressure upon him that he ultimately was forced to work largely from drawings and even from other artists' engravings, rather than from nature. He also developed the use of the camera ottica, a device by which a lens threw onto a ground-glass screen the image of a view, which could be used as a basis for a drawing or painting. Finally, he developed a mechanical technique, in which ruler and compasses played a part, and architecture and figures were put into the picture according to a dexterous and effective formula. Such a vast number of views of Venice were produced during his lifetime that it is often thought that Canaletto was head of a large studio, but there is no evidence of this.

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