



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

In the Land of Casanova:

AMERICAN ARTISTS SEDUCED BY VENICE

by Elaine Adams

Venice, Italy captures one's imagination. Often veiled in a cool, grey fog, the city provokes a sense of mystery. But, it is when the sun pours onto the canals that Venice is at its best — when the waterways sparkle and the buildings appear to dance.



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
Collection: Brooklyn Museum of Art

Santa Maria della Salute, 1904

Watercolour 18 3/16" × 22 5/16"



Otto Henry Bacher (1856–1909)
Doge's Palace from the Lagoon, c. 1880
 Oil on panel 11 5/8" × 18 1/4"
 Collection: Mr. Graham Williford

VENICE IS LOCATED ON THE NORTH-EASTERN coast of Italy at the head of the Adriatic Sea and, geologically, is a conglomeration of 120 mud islands. Its cultural history began in 452 AD with its earliest settlements consisting of reed and wood hut dwellings. Positioned in what may be considered the strategic heart of Europe, Venice developed into an important seaport. Traders became wealthy merchants who proclaimed their affluence by dotting the islands with an opulent array of grand palaces, magnificent cathedrals and a maze of impressive bridges.

The city may not be built on solid ground, in fact, the buildings appear to float on water, but there is something eternal and lasting about Venice. With its almost ethereal qualities, it seems to be more of a state of mind, than a city built by busi-

nessmen and *parvenues*. It is perhaps the city's surreal qualities that captivate the imagination. However, it is that same mystical quality that poses a challenge to the artist. How to capture the true soul of Venice on canvas?

Although since 1830 American artists travelled to Italy to fulfil a crucial part of their art education, it was not until thirty years later that Venice would be added to their essential repertoire. Perhaps its earlier exclusion was due to the city's unusual qualities that made it a challenge to interpret. Or, perhaps it was due to the highly successful polished paintings created a century earlier by Venetian-born artist **Canaletto**, née **Giovanni Antonio Canal** (1697-1768), that artists felt the subject had been done, and possibly even overdone. Canaletto's practice of painting city views, *veduta*, was highly

unusual in his day and gained immense popularity, particularly with the English aristocracy who collected the Venetian's paintings as souvenirs of their "Grand Tour."

By the mid-nineteenth century, Venice's most beloved, **San Marco Basilica**, built in 1071, was in desperate disrepair. The Venetian community assembled and debated the situation. It was decided to call

on the expertise of architect **G.B. Meduna**. Meduna implemented two separate restoration plans that spanned the years from 1860 through 1875. Unfortunately, he used inferior, although sturdy, materials. Meduna's substandard methods outraged the celebrated English aesthete and art critic, **John Ruskin** (1819-1900). Through the power of his pen and public outcries, Ruskin was successful in convincing the art world that the inferior restoration projects must be stopped before they reached the coveted west façade of the Basilica. In one of his letters, he expressed his dismay, "It is impossible for any one to know the horror and contempt with which I regard modern restoration – but it is so great it simply paralyzes me with despair."

PERHAPS IT WAS THE PUBLICITY THAT SURROUNDED San Marco Basilica that resulted in American artists becoming more aware of Venice. In addition, the recently developed ready-made paints packed in convenient and portable tubes made the practice of plein air painting more accessible, and therefore, the artists would effortlessly extend their Italian painting destinations. No doubt, there are a variety of reasons why American artists began to travel to Venice.

It could be said that Venice of the 1870s and 80s had developed into an American artists' colony. New York artist **David Maitland Armstrong** (1836-1918), who was also American Consul at Rome from 1869-1872, wrote of his experience in the San

Marco Basilica, "The artists were privileged; we could sit and paint wherever we pleased, no one ever interfering with us; we were allowed to store our easels in the sacristy - there were so many of them that it looked more like a studio than the rob-

ing-room of a church ... Never was there a more delightful place to work in." In May of 1879 the Massachusetts born artist **James A. McNeill**

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Whistler (1834-1903) arrived destitute in Venice to fulfil a commission set by the **London Fine Art Society** to create twelve etchings of Venetian scenes. He had just left London after declaring bankruptcy and auctioning off all his possessions, including his home, paintings and porcelain collection. Of further degradation to him was the loss of confidence from his patrons, most significantly from the shipping magnate **Frederick Leyland**, for whom he had recently completed the *Peacock Room*, and for which he was paid only half the requested price.

WHISTLER'S DESPERATE FINANCIAL SITUATION began in 1877 when the art critic **John Ruskin** denounced his moody painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, by referring to it as "flinging a pot of paint in the public's face." Whistler sued Ruskin for libel, and although he won the much publicized case, he was awarded only a farthing, one-fourth of a penny. The lengthy trial financially and morally drained Whistler.

At the time of Whistler's presence in Venice the population of American artists was growing. Ohio native **Robert Blum** (1857-1903), while employed as an illustrator for **Scribner's Monthly**, was traveling throughout Europe with his editor, **A.W. Drake**. The two reached Venice in the spring of 1880, and Blum was instantly captivated. Two more Ohio natives joined the enclave of artists with the addition of **Otto Henry Bacher** (1856-1909) and **Frank Duveneck** (1848-1919) along with the accompani-

ment of San Franciscan **Theodore Wores** (1859-1939). The three were travelling together through Italy, reaching Venice in the summer of 1880. Bacher and Wores were students of Duvenecks at the **Munich Art Academy**, and were part of the group that was affectionately known as "Duveneck's Boys."

Whistler, Duveneck, Wores, Bacher and Blum all resided at the **Casa Jankowitz**

on the Riva degli Schiavoni. Many of Otto Bacher's scenes were actually created looking through his bedroom window. The artists became good friends,

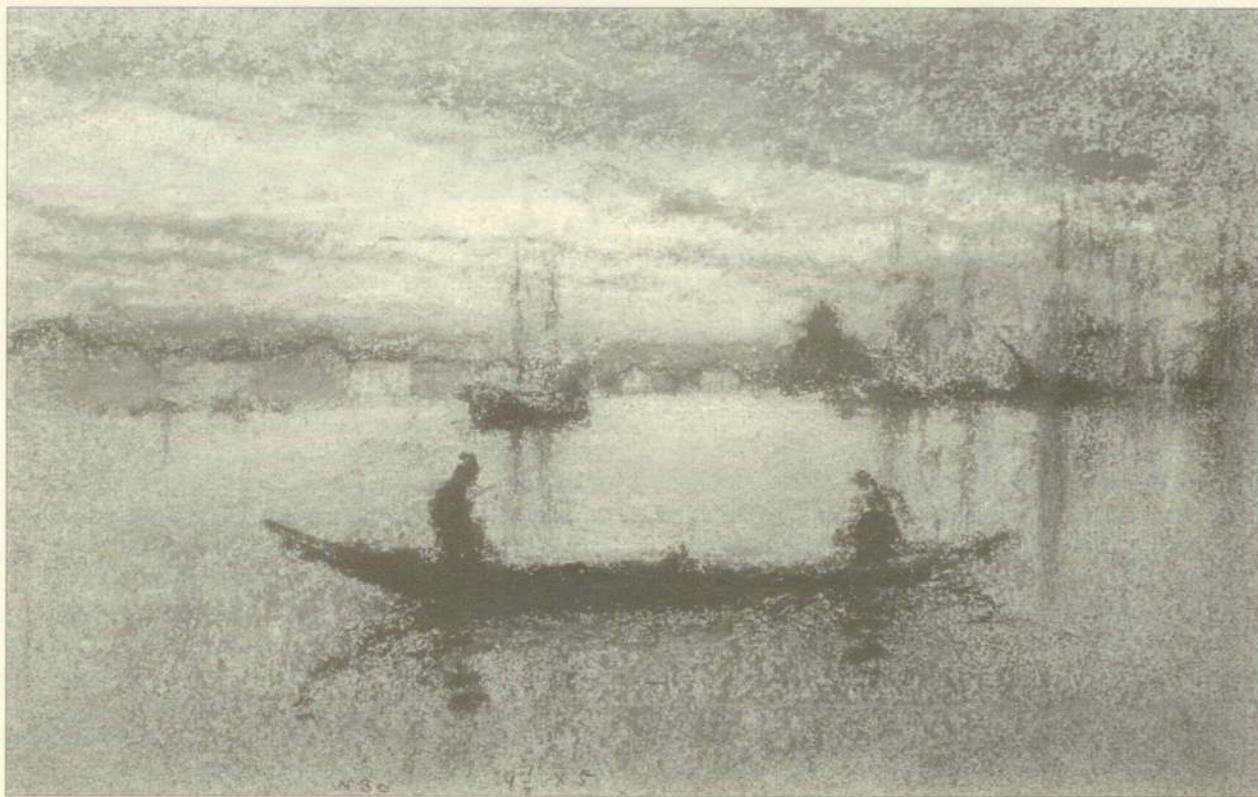
and Bacher and Whistler even shared an etching press together. It is also during this trip that Whistler, an Asian art enthusiast, inspired Wores to make his famous painting trip to Japan. The group often gathered at the popular cafés located along

the **Piazza San Marco**, such as **Florian's** or **Caffè Quadri**, where they would meet visiting artists from around the world.

Whistler

spent a total of fifteen months in Venice, during which time the city worked its magic, and the artist's psyche was restored and his confidence regained. When he

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James A. McNeill Whistler (1834-1903)

Note in Flesh Color: Guidecca, 1879-80

Pastel on paper 5" x 9"

Collection: Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Gift of George D. Pratt, Class of 1895



Robert Frederick Blum (1857-1903)
Venetian Bead Stringers, 1887-1888
 Oil on canvas 30 1/4" x 40 3/4"
 Private Collection

returned to London, his exhibition of the commissioned etchings received a mild response. However, his second exhibition, consisting of fifty-three pastel paintings of Venice, was wildly successful. In a letter written by **Maud Franklin**, Whistler's mistress, she recorded the public's reaction to this recent body of work, "As to the pastels, well - they are the *fashion* - There has never been such a success known - Whistler has decorated a room for them - an arrangement in brown gold and Benedictine red which is very lovely - out in it they look perfectly fine. All the London world was at the private view - princesses painters beauties actors - everybody - in fact at one moment of the day it was impossible

to move - for the room was crammed." And those critics who just a year and half earlier had humiliated him were now all praising Whistler's genius.

Cincinnati-born **John Henry Twachtman** (1853-1902) was mesmerized by Venice and travelled there on at least four separate occasions. Venice's soft natural lighting was very much in keeping with Twachtman's penchant for poetic paintings. His first trip was in 1877 with Frank Duveneck and **William Merritt Chase** (1849-1916). He returned briefly in 1881 with his new bride **Martha Scudder**. His last trip to Venice was from autumn of 1885 to the following January, during which time he met up with Robert Blum.

Thomas Moran (1837-1926) was born in Lancashire, England. However, at the age of seven he moved to the United States with his parents and his brother, Edward. Moran was widely recognized as a painter of the American West, particularly of Rocky Mountain scenes. In 1886 he travelled to Venice for the first time and spent six weeks painting there. He fell under the spell of Venice, and declared that the city is "an inexhaustible mine of treasures for the artist." Four years later, he returned for the summer, and from the compilation of sketches made during his two trips, he managed to create more paintings of Venice than he had of any other subject in his career. His use of soft opalescent hues created a romantic, somewhat *Turneresque*, vision of the city that gained immediate appeal amongst his collectors.

VENICE FURTHER APPEALED TO THOSE ARTISTS who were inspired by the era's popular *Orientalist* art movement, led by parisien, Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904). One of Gérôme's most accomplished students was the American, Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928), who found the exoticness of Venice just as exhilarating as the scenes he had painted in North Africa.

Another artist who had painted in exotic locales was the passionate traveller John Singer Sargent (1856-1925). Sargent expressed a special love for Venice. The city's mix of Byzantine and Renaissance influences stimulated his cosmopolitan sensitivities. It is possible that Sargent may have initially travelled to Venice as early as 1873, but it would have been for a brief stay. However, it is certain through the written correspondences that in September of 1880 he arrived in Venice with his parents and sisters. Together, they stayed at the stylish Hotel d'Italie.

After the family's departure from Venice, Sargent stayed on and moved to a location near the clock

tower at the Piazza San Marco and took a studio at the seventeenth century Palazzo Rezzonico on the Grand Canal where he remained until the following spring. The palazzo was owned by the son of poet Robert Browning and due to his father's position in

creative circles; the palazzo was a popular destination for visiting artists. During this time, it is speculated that Sargent may have met Whistler. Whistler had

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kept a studio space at the palazzo for the past year, but he would have been just leaving as Sargent was just arriving. To date, there is no documented proof of the two artists meeting at this time. Furthermore, it is not clear if Sargent mixed with many Americans at all. He spoke Italian fluently and was no doubt comfortable on his own, passing as a native. Also, he may have not wanted to associate with tourists, opting to keep the romance of Venice to himself.

There are some similarities in Sargent's paintings that can arguably be compared to those of Whistler's. Both artists practiced poetic interpretations, rather than the typical panoramic scenes produced by most artists. Sargent was intrigued with the dim Venetian light and smoky conditions experienced in intimate back streets and in the tattered halls of old palazzos. Even his canal scenes were unusual, loosely painted, but strongly composed, their abstract qualities and fragmented views are anything but postcard images. His uniquely stylish sense of interpreting commonly painted scenes presented a fresh approach. He often painted from a gondola vantage point and referred to this perspective of forcing the viewer to look up as "a worm's eye view."

Sixteen years later, in 1898, Sargent returned to Venice, and continued to return nearly each year thereafter until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Sargent was immensely popular for his portrait commissions, but longed to be recognized for his landscape and travel scenes. Venice enchanted



Thomas Moran (1837-1926)
The Fisherman's Wedding Party, 1892
 Oil on canvas 24" x 33"
 Collection: Detroit Institute of Arts, Bequest of Alfred J. Fisher

Sargent and had become one of his most beloved subjects.

Boston watercolorist **Maurice Brazil Prendergast** (1858-1924) spent several months in Venice from 1898 to 1899. In his letters, he expressed his excitement over the city's many atmospheric moods. He described Venice in the rain, "all its colours take on a fine, deep richness, seen through water, like polished stones in sea-pools." Prendergast's use of vivid colours and vivacious brush expressly interpret Venice's lively character as was experienced at the end of the nineteenth century. Although he created paintings of most of the

important historic landmarks, it is his energetic scenes of crowds scurrying about the city that are among his most successful.

OTHER PROMINENT AMERICAN ARTISTS WHO found inspiration in Venice were **Henry Ossawa Tanner** (1859-1937) who was in the city for a brief stay in May of 1897 and **John Leslie Breck** (1860-1899) who was there for several weeks in 1896-97.

In his extensive twelve volumes of memoirs **Giovanni Giacomo Casanova** (1725-1798) chronicled

his extraordinary exploits in eighteenth century Venice. His many identities included being an ecclesiastic, writer, librarian, soldier, spy and diplomat, but he is best remembered as one of history's great

est lovers. Perhaps it is in the legend and myth of this romantic spirit that nineteenth-century American artists became captivated by the many alluring charms of Venice.



Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1858–1924)
The Grand Canal, Venice, 1898–99
 Watercolour and pencil on paper 18 1/8" × 14 1/4"
 Collection: Daniel J. Terra

Notes:

The exhibition, Sargent and Italy, is on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from February 2 - May 11 (see Exhibitions listing).

Research for this article was gathered from the following sources: The Lure of Italy: American Artists and The Italian Experience 1760-1914 by Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. with essays by William H. Gerdtz, Erica E. Hirshler, Fred S. Licht and William L. Vance, published by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1992, ISBN 0-8109-3561-9; and Sargent Abroad: Figures and Landscapes by Warren Adelson, Donna Seldin Janis, Elaine Kil-murray, Richard Ormond, and Elizabeth Oustinoff; published by Abbeville Press, 1997, ISBN 0-7892-0384-7