

Press Release

Canaletto: Celebrating Britain

Abbot Hall Art Gallery

22 October 2015 - 14 February 2016

Abbot Hall was built in the Palladian style just three years after Canaletto left England for the last time. In 1746, by then in his late 40s, he first arrived for a prolonged stay in London. He was to remain for most of the following 10 years.

Already a well established artist, his work had proved very popular with aristocratic Englishmen doing their Grand Tour of Europe. In the 1720s, having started his career as a theatrical scene painter, Canaletto started painting his distinctive views of Venice, frequently featuring the many major churches designed for it by Palladio. One of his clients was Joseph Smith, an English merchant banker who lived in Venice for 70 years, for 16 of which he was the British consul there. Smith bought many Canaletto works for himself, and also helped arrange commissions from wealthy English collectors – by the late 1720s his works were already in the collections of Goodwood, Chatsworth, Woburn and of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Smith himself owned by far the largest collection of works, including 52 oil paintings and over 140 drawings, which he eventually sold to George III in 1762 for £10,000 – half the sum the latter paid the previous year for Buckingham Palace.

Canaletto came to London as an indirect result of the War of the Austrian Succession, which started in 1741. This had made continental travelling difficult for his wealthy English patrons, severely reducing his income. He therefore decided to move himself to London, setting up his studio near Golden Square. He arrived a month after Culloden, the last pitched battle fought on British soil, and at the beginning of a period of unprecedented domestic peace and prosperity, which saw London turning into the world's richest and largest city.

Although the bulk of the works with English subjects were of London scenes, with the Thames a frequent presence, he was also a regular visitor to the countryside, often at the invitation of his rich patrons, and painted several views of Warwick Castle, as well as of Alnwick, Badminton, Eton and Walton.

The rapid change of London's architecture during his time here is also documented. In "The Old Horse Guards from St James' Park" of 1749, he caught the Horse Guards Parade ground, complete with parading soldiers, as well as men peeing against the wall of Downing Street, and dozens of people promenading, showing the artist's interest in depicting scenes of daily life. Within a couple of years, from almost exactly the same spot, he was back painting the new Horse Guards parade, the

one that is still there today – it can be dated very precisely to 1752-3, as the clock tower still has scaffolding on it, while the south wing had yet to be constructed.

Canaletto is often accused of depicting London whilst using bright Venetian lighting. However, in both his pictures of the Horse Guards, the light is soft and diffused. In “A View of Walton Bridge” the sky is even more typically “English” – and un-Venetian – with the sun competing with storm clouds brewing overhead. The picture also includes a portrait of Thomas Hollis, who commissioned 5 works from Canaletto, as well as a rare self-portrait of the artist, shown painting the scene. The bridge was regarded at the time as an advanced feat of engineering. The contrasting stately bulk of Westminster Bridge and the views from it was evidently something that fascinated Canaletto, who clearly would have agreed with Wordsworth’s later opinion that “earth hath not anything to show more fair”. The bridge was under construction during his time here, and he painted and sketched it repeatedly. In one of the pictures generously lent by Her Majesty The Queen from the Royal Collection’, he frames a view of the Thames, St Paul’s and the City as if he had drawn the scene from under one of the new arches of the bridge, while others show it still under construction.

It is easy to forget that Canaletto continued to paint Venetian scenes throughout his time in London. Worked up from his sketches, or done from memory, these provided him with a significant proportion of his income whilst in London, as his more conservative patrons demanded work that they were familiar with, rather than venturing into the new views that the artist was confronting. For example, his “Bucintoro at the Molo on Ascension Day”, showing the state barge after the annual “marriage” of Venice with the sea – which, when it sold for \$20,000,000 in 2005, was briefly his most expensive painting sold at auction - was painted in London in 1754.

Ruskin had a particular down on Canaletto. It is, however, unclear quite how familiar the ascerbic critic was with genuine works by the Venetian. As a hugely popular artist, his work was widely forged and copied both during his lifetime and afterwards. It is possible that Ruskin was sometimes writing about Canaletto pupils and assistants, when he thought he was writing about Canaletto himself. In “Notes on the Louvre”, writing about a picture of the Salute and the entrance to the Grand Canal, he said that it is “cold and utterly lifeless – truth is made contemptible” and that “boats and water he could not paint at all”. The picture has since been re-attributed to Canaletto’s pupil Michele Marieschi. Similarly the “bad landscape” he saw in Turin is almost certainly a work by Bernardo Bellotto, Canaletto’s nephew. Writing about Canaletto’s “vacancy and falsehood” in “Modern Painters”, he refers to a painting in the Palazzo Manfrin – Augustus Hare, who visited it at about the same time, noted that the palazzo “has a picture gallery which is open daily, but contains nothing worth seeing, all the good pictures having been sold.” It is unclear which work Ruskin was referring to when he said that Canaletto’s depiction of architecture was “less to be trusted in its renderings of details than the rudest and most ignorant painter of the 13th century”. Certainly that is not the view of most modern critics of most properly authenticated works by Canaletto, but Ruskin was never one to allow the facts to affect his pet prejudices.

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Press Images

High resolution copies of the following images are available to download on Dropbox:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/jq0e1bf2st35hzh/AAD22j4LgLYsgl7vZiWQ0n_5a?dl=0

All images are available at 300 dpi and approx. 15cm along the longest edge. Please contact us if you require a larger image.



Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal) 1697–1768
London: The Thames from Somerset House Terrace towards the City
c.1750-51

Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2015



Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal) 1697–1768
A View of Greenwich from the River
c.1750-2

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Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal) 1697–1768
A Self-Portrait with St Pauls in the background at Anglesey Abbey, Cambridgeshire
1746

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Editors Notes

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, Cumbria LA9 5AL

www.abbothall.org.uk

Open Monday - Saturday, 10.30am - 5pm (4pm November - February)

Open Sundays throughout the exhibition, 12 - 4pm

Closed 24, 25, 26 December 2015 and 1 January 2016

Adult admission during Canaletto £9 (without donation £8.15), free entry for students and children

Abbot Hall Art Gallery, along with Museum of Lakeland Life & Industry, Blackwell, The Arts & Crafts House and Windermere Jetty are managed by Lakeland Arts. (Registered charity no. 1153001).

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