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A Pair of Venetian Masterpieces by Canaletto Leads Christie's Old Masters Part I Sale in London, December 2023



Giovanni Antonio Canal, Canaletto (1697-1768)

*Venice: The Mouth of the Grand Canal from the East; and
The Molo, with the Piazzetta and the Doge's Palace, from the Bacino*
circa 1734

oil on canvas

18.1/2 by 30.7/8 in. (47 x 78.4 cm.) and 18.1/2 x 30.5/8 in. (47.1 x 77.7 cm.);

Estimate: £8,000,000-12,000,000

London – A pair of unpublished Venetian masterpieces by the world-renowned titan of *vedute* painting, Giovanni Antonio Canal, Canaletto will lead Christie's *Old Masters Part I* sale on 7 December in London during *Classic Week*, 2023. *Venice: The Mouth of the Grand Canal from the East*, and *The Molo, with the Piazzetta and the Doge's Palace, from the Bacino* are in excellent condition and estimated to realise between £8,000,000 and £12,000,000. Depicting two of his most evocative subjects, this exceptional pair of views was painted in about 1734 when Canaletto was at the height of his powers. Like most of his finest work of the period, the two canvases were almost certainly painted for an English patron for whom Joseph Smith, the merchant, collector and later consul in Venice, acted as agent. Their calibre is comparable to the great sequence of views on the Grand Canal now in the Royal Collection, and the celebrated series at Woburn Abbey. Offered from a private UK collection, they will be on public view in New York from 5 to 11 and also 14 to 18 October; and Paris 11 to 15 November; ahead of returning to London where they will be exhibited ahead of the sale between 1 and 6 December. A rare opportunity not to be missed, everyone is welcome.

Francis Russell, Christie's UK Deputy Chairman, commented: "*Both pictures are of classic views which were inevitably in considerable demand with Canaletto's patrons. He had a genius for recalibrating his compositions, subtly varying his angles of vision and invariably completely revising both his boats and his figures. Previously unknown to scholars, these masterpieces exemplify Canaletto's work at the height of his career.*"

PROVENANCE

Records survive of the payments John Russell, 4th Duke of Bedford, made between 1734-6 to Smith's brother and London agent, John Smith, for the celebrated Canaletto series at Woburn. It has been suggested by Charles Beddington that these pictures were components of the set of four canvases commissioned in 1733 by the Duke of Bedford's sister, Elizabeth Countess of Essex and despatched by Smith by 18 September the following year. Her husband, William Capel 3rd Earl of Essex, was appointed ambassador at Turin in 1732.

The choice of subjects suggests that Lady Essex may well have seen the two related works already ordered by her brother while these were still in Venice. The impact of the series now at Woburn, once displayed in Bedford House in London, was to lead to further family commissions, from the Duke's brother-in-law, Charles Spencer 3rd Duke of Marlborough, who commissioned the celebrated series of views formerly at Langley Park. Lady Essex, like her brother, may have ordered further works by the artist after the delivery of her four pictures.

By 1939, the pictures were owned by Donald Glass (1881-1944), the only son of James George Henry Glass (1843-1911), a distinguished engineer and a director of the Bengal Nagpur Railway Company, whose interest in Italy is reflected in the fact that he died in Naples rather than in his English residence.

KNOWING HIS MARKET: PROVIDING INSIGHT, MEMORIES AND INTERIORS

From the outset of his career as a view-painter, Canaletto knew that his depictions of Venice conditioned the vision of people who hadn't visited it, as well as memories for those who had as part of their Grand Tour. He was equally aware that many patrons required pictures that could be hung in pairs or as components of longer series and that by supplying pendants with complementary or intersecting viewpoints – as with this pair – he could offer a three-dimensional impression of the relationship between some of the key buildings of Venice. In the case of this pair: the spectator faces the west to experience the full architectural drama of the buildings flanking the Grand Canal as this moves into the Bacino and then can turn to the right to see the Molo and the great monuments of the heart of the city. Both pictures show Venice bathed in filtered morning light, heightening their bond.

COMPOSITIONS AND TECHNICAL DEVICES

The pictures imply viewpoints in the Bacino di San Marco just to the east of the mouth of the Grand Canal. Both were, and remain, among the most evocative of Venetian subjects. Canaletto never repeated his compositions, instead knowing how to vary them, shifting an angle of vision and varying the types and positions of the vessels that contribute so signally to the sense of receding perspective he presents to the viewer.

What some of Canaletto's patrons may not have realised is that he did not hesitate in altering the relative scale of buildings for compositional effect, most obviously in this case the Basilica. Anyone surveying the scene from a boat would have had a constantly shifting view, the artist varied the level of the waterline in successive compositions. He ensured that the reflections of buildings and boats were true to the light conditions implied by his skies. In the *Mouth of the Grand Canal* sun penetrates the cloud and there are strong reflections. In the *Molo* the cloud above must be denser, so the Doge's Palace is not reflected on

the water as in some other variants, the darker light enabling him to emphasise the subtle brick patterning on the palace itself, bringing out the warmth of the brick-front of the palace to spectacular effect.

Popular as the view of the *Mouth of the Grand Canal* was, views of the *Molo* were in even greater demand for very obvious topographical reasons. It was here that ambassadors to the Serenissima arrived. Canaletto painted views of it from both the east and the west, but his most successful composition, of which this is one of the finest variants, show it from the Bacino. Canaletto first developed the composition in a drawing *circa* 1729 at Windsor which shows the Bucintoro. This was followed about 1730 in three very large pictures, the celebrated masterpiece in the Crespi Collection, Milan; that in the Bowes Museum and the canvas in the Pushkin Museum, Moscow, which was acquired by Catherine the Great. Canaletto's fourth, substantially smaller, treatment – which was painted for Smith and now in the Royal Collection – is *circa* 1733-4 and was etched by Visentini in 1735. There are subtle architectural adjustments in each work and, as was invariably the case, the ships and figures differ in all Canaletto's variations. Closest in dimension to these exceptional canvases are those at Woburn.

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