ART AND OCCUPATION

Giovanni Antonio Canale (Canaletto)
The Arsenal the Water Entrance 1732

Beneath a pale blue wintry sky, the citizens of Venice’s Castello district go quietly about their business along the Campo dell’Arsenale. Small boats, including the ubiquitous gondola, ply their way under a wooden suspended footbridge (now iron). Beyond the bridge, a pair of crenellated red brick towers guards the entrance to a canal basin whose massive open gates reveal a large masted ship and the dry docks’ serrated rooftop. By the left-hand tower stands a magnificent gateway whose striking portico bears St. Mark’s lion and other imposing statuary, whilst in front of the right-hand tower, sits a diminutive Greek temple (16th century Oratorio d’Madonna dell’Arsenale), where a woman kneels to pray. In the distance is the spire of the 10th century Sant’Angelo.

This picture (47 × 78.8 cm oil on canvas) is one of 22 vedute (views) purchased in 1736 by John 4th Duke of Bedford and hangs in the Dining Room at Woburn Abbey, residence of the current 15th Duke. The painting shows the entrance to the Arsenale, site of Venetian shipbuilding for over 600 years. The Antonio Gambello gateway on the left is a reinterpretation of the triumphal Roman Arch of the Sergii in Pula (Croatia) [1]. The archway’s St. Mark’s lion is a symbol of Venice’s imperial power [2], and the statue of Santa Giustina on the archway’s pinnacle celebrates the Venetian navy’s victory over the Turkish fleet at Lepanto on Giustina’s feast day (7 October) 1571. The two lions at the base of the portico and various classical statues of the gods were added in 1682 [3].

Founded around 1100 AD, the Arsenale expanded greatly during the 15th and 16th centuries to meet Turkey’s naval threat [3]. Surrounded by 2.5 miles of brick walls (30 ft high in places), it eventually covered 60 acres, with berths for 80 galleys as well as dry docks and a foundry. It employed over 4000 workers (Arsenalotti) including gunmakers, oarmakers, mastmakers and sailmakers (many of whom were women). This “Factory of Marvels” could prepare 30 galleys for sea in 10 days. It was one of the earliest and largest examples of state capitalist industry—perhaps the greatest manufactory of the pre-industrial world [4]. However, constant friction between management and labour impeded the Arsenale’s ability to adapt to the rapid developments in 18th century shipbuilding techniques and lead ultimately to its subsequent decline and closure in 1810 [5].

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Giovanni Antonio Canal was born in Venice (1697) the son of a theatrical scene painter (Bernardo Canal—hence, Canaletto or ‘Little Canal’) with whom he apprenticed, painting sets for operas in Venice and Rome. Returning to Venice (1720), he abandoned theatrical work in favour of topographical painting (though often with a stage-set appearance) for which he is now famous [6]. A superb and prolific draughtsman he worked in the studio from drawings made ‘on-site’, probably using a camera obscura [7,8]. He meticulously captured architectural detail but often changed the size and position of buildings to create better compositions. He worked intermittently in Britain (1746–1756) but many authorities consider his earlier paintings with their “lyrical union of sky, light and water” [7] as his best. In 1756, he returned again to Venice and was finally elected to the Venetian Academy of Fine Arts (1763). Five years later, he died of a ‘fever’ aged 71 years and was buried in the Venetian church of San Lio, where he had been baptized.

After the Arsenale’s closure, shipbuilding continued elsewhere in La Serenissima (Venice) and more recently has been associated with the occurrence of malignant mesotheliomas in the region [9] (although construction [10] and textile work [11] have also contributed). Since 1968, UK mesothelioma deaths have risen from 153 to 2249 [12] and are expected to peak between the years 2016 (males) [13] and 2026 (females) [14]. Nevertheless, despite calls for an international ban worldwide, asbestos use continues unabated [15]. Meanwhile, the Arsenale has become a playground for exhibiting modern art [16].

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References