

Vedute of Venice: The Eighteenth-Century Venetian View as Picturesque Locus of Transformation

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Abstract: In the long eighteenth century, Venice was memorialized in painted *vedute*, or view-paintings, which became both a style and a subject matter, buoyed by the popularity of the tableaux as souvenirs for Grand Tour travellers. The *veduta*, along with its fantasy counterpart, the *capriccio*, re-created the view as well as the perceptual experience of the spectator, engaging the processes of visual apprehension involved in the incision of the image onto the retina. *Vedutisti*, or view-painters, would use the camera obscura to achieve verisimilitude in a painting, while enlarging known monuments so as to activate the sense memory of the viewer. The Venetian *veduta*, in cross-pollination with picturesque landscape painting, facilitated the transformation from nature to art within the eye, projecting the perspectivized two-dimensional visual field onto the three-dimensional visual world, making pictures of the world around us, transforming the way we view the landscape today.

Keywords: Venetian *veduta*, view-painting, vedutismo, *capriccio*, eighteenth century, picturesque aesthetics, landscape painting, Canaletto, J.M.W. Turner

La Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia, The Most Serene Republic of Venice, was both a symbol and locus of eighteenth-century picturesque transformation.¹ As a city fashioned by nature and human engineering, transformation characterized Venice's rise from torpid lagoon to maritime republic to its eighteenth-century incarnation as artistic subject and Grand Tour destination. Venice, as interstice between land and water, splendor and stagnation, and topography and imaginary, was a site of catalysis.

The otherworldly quality of the floating city facilitated the flux between the observed and the imagined, enchanting Grand Tour travellers and artists alike. This intersection gave rise to a new kind of topographical, yet evocative way of envisioning Venice, manifested in the *veduta*, or view-painting.² The Venetian *veduta* lay at the threshold between the physical landscape and human perception, demonstrating the transformation from nature to art within the eye. In Francesco Guardi's *veduta ideata* or idealized view-painting, *Gondole sulla laguna* (1761-1770), Venice's topography floats upon atmospheric waters conjured by the artist (fig. 1).

The Venetian *veduta* drew upon Venice's rich painting tradition, with fifteenth- and sixteenth-century painters such as Bellini, Carpaccio, and Giorgione including topographically representative Venetian backdrops in their narrative and figurative works.³ In the seventeenth century, painters like Gerard ter Borch and Willem van Nieulandt II brought the Flemish panoramic view of a century earlier to the Roman *veduta*, conceiving both realistic and idealized representations of Rome's landscapes and cityscapes.⁴ Grand Tour travellers also had an impact on the *veduta*, preferring recognizable views that evoked the sights and sensations of Venice. Filippo Pedrocchi links the evolution of Canaletto's style to the taste of British buyers in his move toward a luminous, topo-

graphically precise tableau.⁵ Seventeenth-century landscape artists Salvator Rosa and Claude Lorrain also contributed to the development of the idealized Italian tableau, anticipating the picturesque aesthetic that would arise a century later. As the *veduta* rose in standing and popularity as a painting genre and Grand Tour souvenir, Venice's imaginary proliferated Europe, attaining near-mythical status.

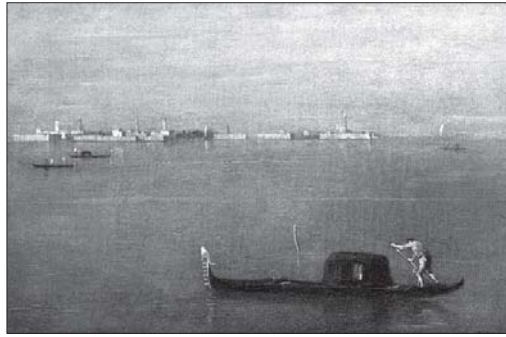


Fig. 1. Francesco Guardi, *Gondole sulla laguna (Laguna grigia)*, 1761–1770, oil on canvas, Milan, Museo Poldi Pezzoli. *Vedute ideate*, or idealized view-paintings, blurred the lines between Venice's topography and its imaginary.

While the *veduta* was meant to reproduce the natural and architectural contours of Venice, *capricci*, on the other hand, evoked Venice's imaginary. At the confluence of topography and invention, the *capriccio* deployed known monuments or contrived new ones, discarding inconvenient scenery at will. In Canaletto's *A Capriccio View with a Pointed Arch* (1744), a crumbling Venetian arch frames a domed church in the distance, while the scene opens out onto an assortment of architectural ruins, with peasants inhabiting a world both cataclysmic and picturesque (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Giovanni Antonio Canal called Canaletto, *A Capriccio View with a Pointed Arch*, 1742–1744, oil on canvas, Royal Collection Trust. Crumbling ruins, exotic monuments, and architectural inventions were motifs in the Italian *capriccio*.

The subordination of the Venetian scene according to the will, or “caprice” of the painter underscored the role of the artist as conduit of natural and even supernatural phenomena, exalting the sensing human as empirical oculus.⁶ The subjectification of nature went hand in hand with the elevation of the human as conduit of knowledge according to John Locke's empiricism (1689), which stated that knowledge was created through experience, evidenced through sensory perception and reflection.⁷ Étienne Bonnot de Condillac even more radically excluded reflection in his

empirical sensationism (1746), asserting that knowledge is composed purely of transformed sensation.⁸ The conversion from visual sensation to knowledge was performed within the eye of the spectator, reflected in the transposition from land to landscape, and re-created in the *veduta*. Contemporary scholar Alain Roger describes this transformation as *artialisation in visu*, wherein land is visually transposed into landscape according to the aesthetic conventions of a given time period.⁹

The eighteenth-century shift toward empiricism was echoed in the progression from the topographically imitative *veduta esatta* to the *veduta ideata*, as landscape perfected by the human. The *capriccio*, diverging from all that was natural or existent, showed the mastery of the artist over the natural and built environment, however, the categorical distinctions between *vedute* started to blur where topographical accuracy and the appearance of naturalness diverged. In fact, the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *veduta* had already been corrected, enhanced, and reconstructed for the eye's delectation, deviating from the projection of the camera obscura.¹⁰ In Canaletto's *veduta esatta*, *The Grand Canal with Santa Maria della Salute Looking East Toward the Bacino* (1744), an "exact view" of Venice was generated from the camera obscura's wide-angle perspective of the imposing church, contraposed by a line of diminishing *palazzi* leading toward the painting's vanishing point (fig. 3). The church's dome would have been corrected by the artist along with the curved or distorted forms that appear on the periphery of the projection's vanishing point. Whether or not the camera obscura was consulted in the painting of a particular *veduta*, known monuments were enlarged by *vedutisti* to capture the eye, just as the gaze might linger over such sights in the three-dimensional visual world.



Fig. 3. Giovanni Antonio Canal called Canaletto, *The Grand Canal with Santa Maria della Salute Looking East Toward the Bacino*, 1744, oil on canvas, Royal Collection Trust. This view appears modern due to the camera obscura's wide-angle projection of the scene, the contrast between the size of the church in the foreground and the buildings lining the canal, along with the cropping of the tableau.

The exclusion of the church's finial and miniature dome atop the church's domed roof was likely due to the framing imposed by the camera obscura.

As with the two-dimensional projection of the view onto the retina, the Venetian *veduta* constructed a two-dimensional impression that was anything but objective. The act of visual perception is laden not only with subjectivity, but imbued with emotion, each image evoking a particular perspective, light, hue, character, and mood of Venice. John Macarthur describes this subjectivity through early nineteenth-century empathy theory as "subject-objectification", defined as the "projection of subjectivity onto the object", which in this case is the Venetian landscape, subjectified through the human gaze.¹¹

In Luca Carlevarijs's *The Bridge for the Feast of the Madonna della Salute* (1720), Venice's topography is transformed into what appears to be a stage set, illustrating Macarthur's subject-objectification as spectators gaze out upon the panorama from a bridge that doubles as a mezzanine, while

onlookers peer out from balconies above (fig. 4). A plume-like cloud further encloses the scene, conveying the gaze toward the focal point. The bridge removes the subjects from the prospect, while the spectator becomes a party to this displacement. An almost voyeuristic awareness is educed in the picture-viewer, who, as an entity outside of the painting, projects subjectivity onto this picture within a picture.



Fig. 4. Luca Carlevarijs, *The Bridge for the Feast of the Madonna della Salute*, 1720, oil on canvas, Hartford, USA, Wadsworth Atheneum. Luca Carlevarijs, along with his teacher, Gaspar Van Wittel, pioneered the sweeping views that would come to characterize the eighteenth-century Venetian *veduta*.

The extraction of the two-dimensional tableau from the three-dimensional landscape, exemplified in the *veduta*, lends insight into the eighteenth-century picturesque aesthetic that made pictures of the world around us.¹² However, this aesthetic category was so ambiguous that eighteenth-century picturesque theorist Uvedale Price complained that the picturesque was “applied to every object, and every kind of scenery which has been, or might be represented with good effect in painting.”¹³ What the picturesque aesthetic lacked in concreteness, was made up for in the *veduta*, which could be considered the ideal testing ground for picturesque precepts due to its narrower scope and subject matter, defined approaches, and dual focus on representation of the landscape and the elicitation of its experience. It can be argued that eighteenth-century *vedutismo* and picturesque landscape painting cross-pollinated, attaining fruition together. The *veduta* was perfected through advances in technique and execution driven by the expertise of the *vedutisti*, bolstered by commercial demand for painted Venetian views, while the picturesque accompanied the rise of European Enlightenment, underscoring humanity’s relationship with nature, while signalling its domination, in the ultimate testament to human ingenuity, progress, and sovereignty.

The operation of contraries in both *vedutismo* and picturesque painting seems best described by Hegel’s dialectical method outlined in his 1807 *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*. These dualities include the flux between the observed and the imagined in the Venetian view, the eye’s darting between contrasting points of view in *papillotage* (see Vernet’s *Italian landscape* in fig. 5), the conversion from the third to the second dimension in the retina, and the transformation from landscape to picture.¹⁴ Hegel’s dialectics brought together opposing ideas, forging a new, more resilient concept in a “unity of distinctions.”¹⁵ The result of this dialectical process, according to Hegel, was “a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding—richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite.”¹⁶

Hovering between the dialectics of being and non-being, the fixed and the fleeting, the observed and the imagined, Venice itself had become a *capriccio*, its contours traced by humans, its tides determined by nature, its imaginary exalted to mythical status. Venice, whether brought back as a sense memory from the Grand Tour, or evoked through a painted souvenir, demonstrated the *veduta* as both stimulus and vestige of sensory experience, the ultimate conveyance of empirical knowledge.



Fig. 5. Claude Joseph Vernet, *Italian Landscape*, 1738, oil on canvas, London, Dulwich Picture Gallery. The mode of visual apprehension known as *papillotage*, or fluttering, was re-created in eighteenth-century painting so as to innervate the senses and re-create the perceptual experience of vision and the view. *Papillotage* relied on visual contradiction, achieved through contrasting patches of color, light, or pattern, along with the addition of multiple prospects, fragmented outlooks, or superimposed points of view. Vernet makes use of *papillotage* in this *Italian Landscape*, which dazzles with a multiplicity of prospects seen through the viewpoints of the various subjects depicted, including that of a shepherd, lolling lovers, and precariously poised wanderers, while the gaze flits between contradistinct planes in the rock strata, which seem to re-position themselves according to the oscillating focus of the viewer. The objective of Vernet and other eighteenth-century artists was to replicate the movement of the eye when apprehending a landscape by postponing the eye's arrival at the focal point of the painting, just as the gaze continually shifts when viewing a landscape.



Fig. 6. Thomas Gainsborough, sketch of an artist using a Claude glass, c. 1750, graphite on paper, London, The British Museum.

While the picturesque transformation from landscape to image may seem unremarkable according to the almost automatic mental picture-making processes of today, the picturesque view, for the first time in history, stimulated, and even required the conversion from landscape to image, thus foreseeing the still and moving image. In a sketch by Thomas Gainsborough (c.1750), an artist gazes into a device called the Claude glass, which converts the three-dimensional visual world into the perspectivized two-dimensional visual field (fig. 6).¹⁷ This dark, convex mirror framed and coerced the landscape into a circumscribed, two-dimensional tableau while reducing its tonal range, making it appear more like a picture, or picturesque.¹⁸ The Claude glass was employed not only by artists, but by tourists, and Grand Tour travellers. In using the glass, the observer would turn their back on the landscape, effectively detaching themselves from it, excising the two-dimensional image from the three-dimensional landscape. Both the Claude glass and the camera obscura can be considered precursors to the photographic camera in their use of glass or lenses to frame, convert, perspectivize, and capture the image.

Challenging the dialectics of the picturesque was Joseph Mallord William Turner, who ushered picturesque aesthetics into the nineteenth century, transfiguring them in the process. While not strictly a picturesque artist, nor a true *vedutista*, Turner engaged with both picturesque and view-painting precepts, confronting their problematics. Turner responded to picturesque contraries with innovation, effacing the boundaries between worlds, transcending the dichotomic notions of the picturesque. Turner's *Storm at the Mouth of the Grand Canal, Venice* (1840) exemplifies the picturesque view as an interstitial space between materiality and immateriality, exposing Venice's architectural underpinnings while invoking its fugitive essence (fig. 7). Turner lays bare both inner and outer worlds, evaporating the landscape while preserving its dualities, demonstrating the Venetian *veduta* as combining not only multiple prospects, but myriad planes of existence, shimmering side by side in Hegel's "unity of distinctions".



Fig. 7. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Storm at the Mouth of the Grand Canal, Venice*, ca. 1840, watercolor on paper, National Gallery of Ireland.



Fig. 8. Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice - Sunset, a Fisher*, 1845, oil on canvas, London, Tate Gallery.

In Turner's *Venice - Sunset, a Fisher* (1845), a dark swath of clouds bisects the tableau, inverting the balance of the painting, as if auguring a collapse of negative forms in space-time (fig. 8). These volatile forms destabilize the seascape in a simultaneous movement of expansion and collapse. The delineation and dissolution of the natural and architectural contours of Venice show the superimposition of perspective onto the three-dimensional landscape as altering its physical disposition. Thus, the projection of the two-dimensional visual field onto the three-dimensional visual world ultimately brings about its destruction. This process of disintegration and re-coalescence of the tableau is continual, as the eye splinters and agglomerates a multiplicity of prospects, like a film, composed of individual frames, becomes a personalized visual narrative. This picture-making process both privatizes and subjectifies the image, making the two-dimensional projection of the image onto the retina closer to a vision, dream, or imagining.

Turner's reconciliation of the visual world with the visual field, along with the unification of Venice's seascape with its imaginary, are a visualization of Hegel's dialectical method in which being, as a stable moment, passes to its opposite, nothing, and is destabilized and conjoined to its contrary. Hegel's *Aufheben*, or sublation, not only to cancels, but uplifts and preserves, forming a new, even more essential or resilient concept which evolves over time.¹⁹ According to Hegel, history proceeds not through the discarding of contradictory notions, but through the process of becoming, or sublation.²⁰ Turner's resolution of picturesque dialectics marks the turning point from the early modern to the modern in art, illuminated through the transcendence, pluralism, and durability of his future vision.

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Notes

¹ Venice, known as *La Serenissima*, The Most Serene, was officially called *La Serenissima Repubblica di Venezia*, or The Most Serene Republic of Venice. The Venetian Republic existed until the very end of the eighteenth century, spanning an 1100-year rule from 697 CE to 1797 CE, becoming a part of unified Italy in 1866.

² A *veduta* (pl. *vedute*) is a painted view or panorama of a landscape, waterscape, or cityscape, known as a view-painting in English. A *vedutista* (pl. *vedutisti*) is a view-painter. *Vedutismo* signifies the movement or style of view-painting in Italy, especially in Venice or Rome, with its apogee in the eighteenth century.

³ Filippo Pedrocchi, *Canaletto and the Venetian Vedutisti* (New York: Scala/Riverside, 1995), 3–5.

⁴ Giuliano Briganti, *Gaspar van Wittel e l'origine della veduta settecentesca* (Rome: Ugo Bozzi, 1966).

⁵ According to Pedrocchi, Canaletto's style had been influenced by his association with Owen McSwiney, who, in 1727, began commissioning Canaletto's work on behalf of English collectors. Pedrocchi, *Canaletto*, 30.

⁶ The *capriccio*, or caprice, was a fantasy view which freed the artist from the constraints of mimesis, or the imitation of nature in art, which, according to classical Greek thought, enabled art to attain beauty and truth, with nature serving as a model. Still very much a relevant precept in the long eighteenth century, poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge expounds upon the role of mimesis in poetry; Coleridge opposes what he sees as Wordsworth's mere mimicry of nature in his poetry, instead relying on a participatory relationship with nature issuing from a liberal interpretation of mimesis wherein the "spiritual instinct of the human being" impels one toward a whole that is "assimilated to the more important and essential parts [through] interfusion". Coleridge states that "the composition of a poem [...] consists either in the interfusion of the SAME throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or of the different throughout a base radically the same", evidencing the dialectics that had emerged from the eighteenth-century understanding of human perception and its implication in the arts. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Adam Roberts (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, [1817] 2014), 259; emphasis in original.

- ⁷ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Basset, 1689). In Locke's *Essay* he explores the origins of ideas, displacing divine or innate ideas from the center of knowledge creation, describing the mind as a blank slate at birth. According to Locke, knowledge is acquired through sensory experience followed by reflection on that experience.
- ⁸ According to Condillac, all knowledge is transformed sensation. Condillac writes that "the perception or the impression occasioned in the mind by the action of the senses is the first operation of the understanding." Just as Condillac excludes reflection in his sensationist epistemology, Hegel discounts the efficacy of reflective cognition, demonstrating the potential of speculative cognition in the advancement of knowledge through his dialectical method. This rejection of reflective thinking points toward the need for further study on whether or how reflection might interact with sensory experience. Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, trans. and ed. by Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1746] 2001), 19.
- ⁹ Alain Roger, *Court traité du paysage* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997). Alain Roger resurrects Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne's term *artificialisation* to depict the visual transformation of land into landscape according to aesthetic convention, which Roger calls *artificialisation in visu*.
- ¹⁰ Christoph Lüthy, "Hockney's Secret Knowledge, Vanvitelli's Camera Obscura", *Early Science and Medicine* 10, no. 2 (2005): 338.
- ¹¹ John Macarthur, "The Picturesque Movement-Effect: Motion and Architectural Affects in Wölfflin and Benjamin", *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 3, no. 1 (2002): 136-157.
- ¹² Rebecca J. Squires, "The Radical Traverse of Space-Time in the Eighteenth-Century Picturesque Garden", *Arquitectura y Paisaje: Transferencias Históricas, Retos Contemporáneos*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2022), 1697-1708. The author writes:
The term "picturesque" finds its origins in the Italian "pittresco", which comprises two distinct meanings: a landscape resembling a painting, or a painterly quality or style. The painting, as three-dimensional object and two-dimensional image, exemplifies this fluctuation between dualities. The picturesque shift between landscape and art was noted by Alexander Pope in 1734 when he said "all gardening is landscape-painting, just like a landscape hung up". Thus the picturesque landscape flickered between nature and art, and the third and second dimension, while its image was fragmented, displaced, and re-assembled in the mind of the spectator.
- Joseph Spence quotes Alexander Pope in *Anecdotes, Observations, and Characters, of Books and Men. Collected from the Conversations of Mr. Pope and other Eminent Persons of His Time* (London: W.H. Carpenter, 1820).
- ¹³ Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful; and, on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape* (London: J. Robson, 1796), 46.
- ¹⁴ *Papillotage* gathers multiple points of view, interrupting the cohesion of the gaze, splintering visual impressions within the unconscious, creating a discourse between object and self. Marian Hobson writes that *papillotage* "expresses both the gaze, the acceptance of the object seen, and the blink which cuts the eye from contact with the world and, in so doing, brings the self back to self." Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 52.
- ¹⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1807] 2019).
- ¹⁶ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. George di Giovanni (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1812-1816] 2010), 54.
- ¹⁷ James J. Gibson distinguishes between the three-dimensional visual world and the two-dimensional visual field in *The Perception of the Visual World* (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1950). According to Gibson, the three-dimension visual world is the "familiar, ordinary scene of daily life in which [...] square objects look square," horizontal surfaces never meet, and "the book across the room looks as big as the book lying in front of you", while the visual field requires "the attitude [...] of the perspective draftsman". Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World*, 26-27. Katherine Myers refers to the operation of Gibson's visual world and visual field in the picturesque, stating that the picturesque "must pre-suppose a theory of vision that allows for the ability to see the world as if projected on a flat canvas." Katherine Myers, "Visual Fields: Theories of Perception and the Landscape Garden", *Experiencing the Garden in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Martin Calder (Bern: Peter Lang, 2006), 13-14.
- ¹⁸ The Claude glass was named after seventeenth-century painter Claude Lorrain due to its purported ability to effect a Claude-like transformation of the landscape in the glass. Claude Lorrain (1600-1682), also known

as Claude Gellée, or simply Claude, was a seventeenth-century picturesque forerunner who created landscapes and seascapes that would epitomize the picturesque ideal a century later. The Claude glass was probably never used by Claude, as it came into popular use in the eighteenth century.

¹⁹ For more information on the application of phenomenological concepts, see: Brian E. Neubauer, Catherine T. Witkop, and Laura Varpio, “How Phenomenology Can Help Us Learn from the Experiences of Others”, *Perspectives on Medical Education* 8 (2019): 90–97.

²⁰ Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

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