

View of the Molo
Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal), ca. 1725
Oil on canvas
26 1/2 × 32 3/4 in. (67.3 × 83.2 cm)
Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina
CMA 1954.44 (K-252)



FIG. 1. *View of the Molo*, before treatment.



FIG. 2. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), after treatment.

View of the Molo: A Canaletto Attribution Reinstated

Elise Effmann

SHADOWED BY THE DOUBT of its attribution for decades, the *View of the Molo* was sent to New York in 1997 from the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina for conservation. This occasion was a valuable opportunity for close technical and stylistic examination. Shortly after Samuel H. Kress bought it in 1933, the painting was accepted unanimously as a genuine Canaletto by scholars evaluating the collection (figs. 1 and 2).¹ However, by the time the Kress Collection catalogue was published four decades later, enough suspicion had been raised to reduce the Venetian scene to “attributed to Canaletto” in the entry.² This downward revision of the work was largely a result of skepticism expressed by the foremost Canaletto authority of the day, W.G. Constable. Constable had such serious doubts about “the character of the brush work and the drawing” that he believed not only that the scene “is not by Canaletto,” but is “probably a work of the earlier 19th Century.”³ It was this view that was published in his two-volume catalogue raisonné in 1962; the revised edition remains the definitive study of the artist’s oeuvre to date.⁴

As research into the numerous paintings by and attributed to Canaletto and his studio continues, art historians have come to depend more frequently on technical study. Since 1980, published studies focusing both on individual paintings and on the broader development of the artist’s technique have been important in establishing a clearer chronology and also in resolving issues of attribution.⁵ These studies, as well as the opportunity to view a large number

of his early paintings assembled for a recent exhibition in Venice, helped to strengthen the case for the Kress *View of the Molo* being an early work entirely by the hand of Canaletto.⁶

Although he never wavered from painting *veduti* and *capricci*, Canaletto's style changed markedly over the five decades of his activity. The sleek scenes in his later works, filled with bright airy skies and formulaic brushstrokes, differ vastly in feeling from the immediacy and intimacy of his paintings from the 1720s. These early views are characterized by exuberant and highly textured brushwork, dramatic contrasts of deep shadow and radiant sunlight, and a low overall tone absent in his paintings from the following decades. However, as Canaletto strove to establish his mature style, his work was also marked by an unrestrained experimentation in composition, level of finish, and technique. The works are so different from his later work that some paintings have only recently been recognized as by his hand. With the exception of archival evidence, the examination of characteristic technical features, such as the extent and color of underpainting and the application of architectural elements, is perhaps the most tangible method for placing a painting within Canaletto's vast and varied oeuvre.

In addition to stylistic parallels, the Columbia



FIG. 3. *Grand Canal: Looking North from near the Rialto Bridge*, Canaletto, 1725, oil on canvas, 35 1/4 × 51 3/4 in. (89.5 × 131.4 cm). Courtesy of the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli al Lingotto, Turin.

Museum of Art painting shares numerous other similarities in its structure and paint handling with several works by Canaletto datable from 1724 to 1726, most notably the series of four Venetian views commissioned by the Lucchese textile merchant, Stefano Conti (fig. 3). Through payment receipts, these paintings can be securely dated to 1725–26 and are critical to establishing the painter's early chronology.⁷ These four scenes are high points of Canaletto's early painting style, showing the great care he took in rendering texture and light through a masterful control of his medium. Many idiosyncratic aspects of technique, such as the body of the paint, the sequence of its application, the treatment of pictorial details such as figures, stormy skies, and still water, as well as the distinctive appearance of the architectural details, all share striking similarities with the painting in Columbia, South Carolina.

Like the majority of Canaletto's paintings from the 1720s, *View of the Molo* is painted on a plain-weave canvas that has been primed with a red ground.⁸ On this preparation layer, the general form of the architecture was blocked in with broad brushstrokes of thick paint, quickly establishing the basic planes of the composition with short horizontal marks for the quay and sweeping diagonal ones in the Palazzo Ducale.⁹ The texture of these first rapidly applied strokes is clearly visible through the successive thinner paint layers and enlivens the finished surface (fig. 4). The principal composition thus established, the sky and water were underpainted in gray. The selective use of a gray underpaint is typical of Canaletto's technique in the mid-1720s; later in the decade he simplified it to a uniform gray layer applied overall.¹⁰ It is interesting to note in the Kress painting that the initial roofline of the Palazzo Ducale was lowered with the application of this gray layer to the sky. The artist then scored a perspectival line into the wet gray paint to mark the upper limit of the ornamental crenellations crowning the façade.¹¹

The energetic brushwork that is so clear on the surface of the painting is even more noticeable in the X-radiograph (fig. 5). The sheer exuberance



FIG. 4. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), detail.

and texture of the paint application, often worked wet-into-wet, is visible in the two gondolas in the left foreground. This produces an X-radiograph strikingly different from the more restrained and controlled depiction of a similar scene from the Kress Collection at the El Paso Museum of Art that dates to the early 1730s.¹² In fact, the “unusual appearance . . . under X-ray” of the South Carolina painting was cited in the 1973 collection catalogue as supporting Constable’s opinion that the painting was not by the Venetian artist.¹³ However, it is precisely this mastery of paint used to achieve a variety of textural effects visible throughout the composition that is so characteristic of his work during the mid-1720s. The great control he wielded over the consistency of paint allowed Canaletto to give physical

dimension to the folds in fabrics, animate the stone surface of the quay with flickers of light created by pastose dabs of paint, and create a stillness in the water through long horizontal strokes of his brush.

Although Canaletto used materials that were all commonplace in eighteenth-century Venetian painting, it is of particular interest that he was one of the first artists to introduce the newly discovered Prussian blue into his palette. The earliest modern synthetic pigment, it was first made in Germany around 1704 and soon became a valued alternative to other more costly blues. Canaletto, who relied heavily on blue because of his subject matter, used this new color almost exclusively throughout his career.¹⁴ When viewed under high magnification, the large blue flakes visible in a sample taken from the water of *View of the Molo* display optical characteristics identical to samples taken from other several other eighteenth-century Venetian paintings that have been identified as the early form of Prussian blue.¹⁵ Unlike the color achieved by later manufacture, which resulted in a very finely divided product, the typical eighteenth-century process was far less consistent and often resulted in pigment particles substantially larger than those of modern Prussian blue.¹⁶ The presence of this early form is further evidence of an eighteenth-century origin for the painting—not

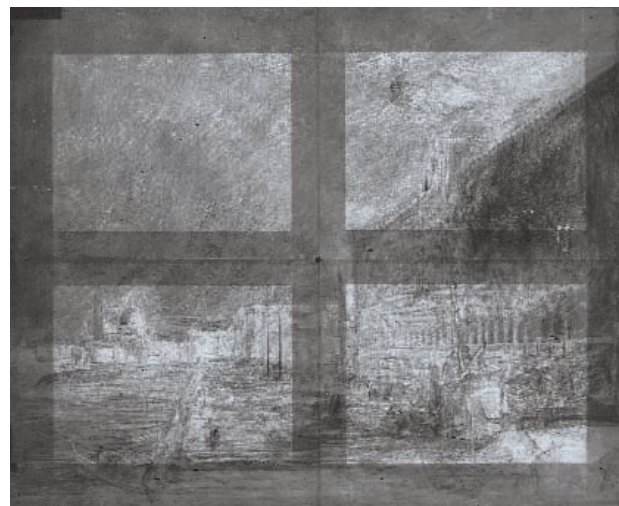


FIG. 5. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), X-radiograph.

the nineteenth century, as Constable conjectured.

At some point after work had progressed well beyond the initial lay-in stage, the painting was apparently abandoned for a period of time. When it was taken up again, the artist made several significant modifications to the composition that show the reworking of an already dry paint layer. Detectable on the surface of the painting, and clearly visible in the X-radiograph, a large boat with a mast that reached nearly to the center balcony of the Palazzo Ducale once dominated the lower right corner of the canvas (fig. 6). In the reconsideration, the composition was extended outwards at the right by almost an inch. The mast and spar of the boat were scraped down, resulting in jagged losses of a type that could only occur after the paint had had enough time to dry fully. These losses and the expanded right edge of the scene were repainted with the same quickly applied and textured paint dabs. The remainder of the boat was painted out and the bridge was shifted to the right, with the addition of the small and somewhat awkward figure standing in the gondola. It also appears that the left edge of the Palazzo Ducale was extended and the center balcony and crowning statue of Justice were shifted to the left, although it is not clear whether this was concurrent with other changes or earlier.



FIG. 6. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), detail of X-radiograph showing pentimenti in the lower right corner.

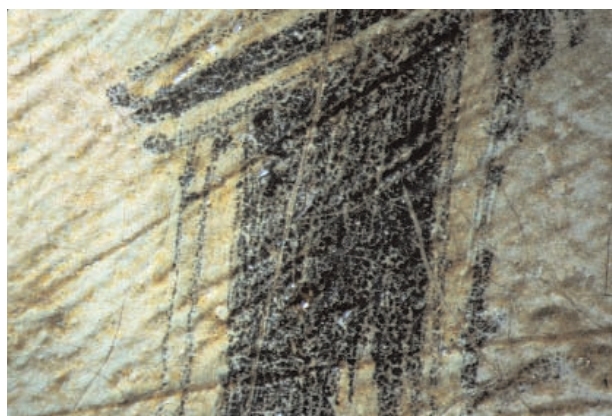


FIG. 7. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), detail of the black material used in architectural details.

Major adjustments like these to Canaletto's early work are not uncommon and attest to his compositional creativity and willingness to manipulate the topography and architecture as he painted.¹⁷

Canaletto added the glazed shadows, figures, and architectural details in the final stages of painting. The handling of figures and architecture is germane when considering dating and attribution. The behavior of the material used to render features in the architecture, such as the lines framing the windows and the shadowed areas under the arches of the Palazzo Ducale, is of particular interest. The medium used for the Kress painting appears to be identical to one identified by Viola Pemberton-Pigott in her examination of two of the dated paintings Canaletto did for Conti. She noted that in a technique peculiar to Canaletto: "the architectural detailing has been painted in a black substance that has reticulated on drying into broken lines of microscopic black beading which has the instant effect of softening and blending the lines into their surroundings."¹⁸ She suggests that the material might be ink, and it certainly has this appearance in the Kress painting. Areas painted with this medium appear to have resisted its application to a certain degree, creating an effect that is significantly different from the other oil glazes (fig. 7). Canaletto used this black material in other (but not all) paintings datable to the middle years of the 1720s, later abandoning it altogether in favor of lines painted in a fluid gray



FIG. 8. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), detail of gondolier.

or black paint.¹⁹ The depiction of the figures is typical of other early works by Canaletto. In a technique very characteristic of his paintings from the 1720s, he first underpainted the figures in *View of the Molo* with pure black before colorfully clothing them with fabric practically sculpted out of soft pastose paint. Canaletto used this method for painting figures until about 1727, when he began to simplify his technique and omit the step of underpainting altogether.²⁰ Although not conclusive evidence on its own, the close similarity to other early works in both appearance and paint handling of the gondolier and the robed magistrates in red and gray in the foreground, as well as the colorful little dots for figures in the distance, provides additional support for the attribution of the Kress painting to Canaletto (figs. 8 and 9).²¹

When the technique and process of *View of the Molo* are considered as a whole, it is unlikely that anyone but Canaletto could have painted this scene. The presence of the early form of Prussian blue in the water dates the painting to the early to mid-eighteenth century, undermining W.G. Constable's ascription of the work to a nineteenth-century imitator. However, the clearest evidence for the authorship of the painting lies in specific idiosyncratic aspects of the technique—construction and details that imitators would not notice and could not know. Every aspect of the technique of *View of the Molo*—the red-grounded canvas, the selective gray underpainting, a textured

and exuberantly painted primary paint layer, and the particular handling of final details and glazes—is completely consistent with that of other paintings by Canaletto dating between 1724 and 1726. This was a period in his career in which he was actively experimenting with style, creating expressively and carefully painted compositions, and developing techniques that he would later simplify to meet the high demand for his work.

Although there has been speculation about the participation of assistants in Canaletto's studio, particularly from the mid-1730s onwards, it seems highly unlikely that his paintings from the 1720s, when he was developing his own style and establishing his reputation among collectors, would involve any other hand than his own. The pentimento in the lower right corner attests to the



FIG. 9. *View of the Molo* (fig. 1), detail of Santa Maria della Salute.

creativity of the mind at work, a mind actively reconsidering the composition as a whole by choosing to eliminate the boat crowding the right foreground. This type of major compositional change indicates the hand of a master, not a follower. It is also unlikely that a follower or copyist would emulate the more idiosyncratic elements of Canaletto's early technique, such as the ink-like material used for the architectural details found in both the Kress and the Conti paintings.²² From the Palazzo Ducale's pink marble and white stone façade stained by algae growth to the minute rigging of the boats in the distance, all aspects of *View of the Molo* are infused with a care, calculation, and painterly skill that comfortably places the Kress painting with other accepted early works by Canaletto.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Katharine Baetjer, Curator of European Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Mark Tucker, Senior Paintings Conservator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, for their helpful suggestions and support, and Viola Pemberton-Pigott, former Senior Paintings Conservator of the Royal Collection, for sharing her years of research and opinions about the artist.

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NOTES

- The positive opinions were given by Giuseppe Fiocco, Roberto Longhi (1933), Raimond van Marle, F. Mason Perkins, and William Suida (1935). Photocopies of documents, Samuel H. Kress Foundation Archives.
- Fern Rusk Shapley, *Paintings from the Samuel H. Kress Collection, Vol. 3: Italian Schools, XVI–XVIII Century*. London: Phaidon, 1973, pp. 163–4.
- W.G. Constable to W. Suida, March 17, 1954, Samuel H. Kress Foundation Archives.
- W.G. Constable, *Canaletto: Giovanni Antonio Canal, 1697–1768*, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962. The second edition was revised by J.G. Links in 1976 (Oxford: Clarendon Press), and the volumes were reissued with supplemental and additional plates in 1989 (Oxford: Clarendon Press).
- See: Pamela England, "An account of Canaletto's painting technique" in Charlotte Millar and Oliver Millar (eds.), *Canaletto* (exhib. cat.). London: The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 1980, pp. 127–8; David Bomford and Ashok Roy, "Canaletto's Venice: The Feastday of S. Roch," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, 6 (1982) pp. 40–44; Keith Laing, "Canaletto: *Campo SS. Giovanni e Paolo*," *Bulletin of the Hamilton Kerr Institute* No. 1 (1988) pp. 96–8; Viola Pemberton-Pigott, "The development of Canaletto's painting technique" in Katharine Baetjer and J.G. Links (eds.), *Canaletto* (exhib. cat.). New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 53–63; David Bomford and Ashok Roy, "Canaletto's *Stonemason's Yard* and *San Simeone Piccolo*," *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, No. 14 (1993), pp. 35–41; David Bomford and Gabriele Finaldi, "Technique and style in Canaletto's paintings" in *Venice through Canaletto's Eyes* (exhib. cat.). London: National Gallery of London and York, City Art Gallery, 1998, pp. 54–63; Viola Pemberton-Pigott, "Canaletto 'prima maniera': tradizione e innovazione nelle tecniche pittoriche degli esordi di Canaletto" in A. Bettagno and B.A. Kowalczyk (eds.), *Canaletto: Prima Maniera* (exhib. cat., Milan, 2001), pp. 185–9.
- Canaletto, Prima Maniera*, exhibition, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice, Italy, March 18–June 10, 2001.
- The four paintings, now in the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Maria Agnelli in Turin, are: *Grand Canal: The Rialto Bridge from the North* (completed by November 25, 1725), Constable/Links 1989 (hereafter referred to as c/L) 234; *Grand Canal: Looking North from near the Rialto Bridge* (by November 25, 1725), c/L 230; *Santi Giovanni e Paolo and the Scuola di San Marco* (by May 1726), c/L 304; *Grand Canal: From Santa Maria della Carità to the Bacino di San Marco* (by June 15, 1726), c/L 194.
- It is quite likely that Canaletto used canvas already primed by the supplier. References to pre-primed canvas (*telle imprimate*) purchased for the artist appear in letters from Anton Maria Zanetti il Vecchio to Arthur Pond dated December 24, 1728 and March 5, 1729. See Bettagno and Kowalczyk 2001 (cited in note 5), pp. 210–11.
- This is a technique noted in all the Conti paintings at the exhibition in Venice in 2001. The diagonal strokes in the building to the left in c/L 234 are visible in a detail reproduced in *Canaletto*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989 (cited in note 5), p. 92.
- Pemberton-Pigott 2001 (cited in note 5), p. 186; Bomford and Finaldi 1998 (cited in note 5), p. 55; Pemberton-Pigott 1989 (cited in note 5), p. 63. Pemberton-Pigott (*ibid.*) notes that Canaletto used gray under the sky and water and red under the buildings until about 1727–28. By 1729–30, he began to lighten the tone of his paintings and simplify his process covering the entire canvas with a uniform beige or pale gray layer.
- Pemberton-Pigott 1989 (cited in note 5) notes that Canaletto used mechanical aids such as rulers and compasses throughout his career.
- View of the Molo*, El Paso Museum of Art, El Paso, Texas, Kress No. K-2174, c/L 88.
- Shapley 1973 (cited in note 2), p. 163. The origin of this opinion is unclear. Alan Burroughs, the conservation

- scientist who documented much of the collection by X-radiograph, had, in contrast, noted in an undated but earlier report that the image exhibited a “skill and freedom, sense of space and independence of technique” that supported its attribution to Canaletto. Photocopy of document, Kress Foundation Archives.
14. Prussian blue has been found in every analyzed painting except for *Piazza San Marco: Looking East along the Central Line* c/L 1 (circa 1723) in which ultramarine was used. Pemberton-Pigott 1989 (cited in note 5), pp. 62–3.
 15. Dispersed pigment samples were analyzed by polarized light microscopy. A gemologist’s Chelsea filter was particularly helpful in making this identification, distinguishing pigment particles that transmit red light, like ultramarine, from those that do not, like Prussian blue. The samples from the Kress painting were identical in appearance to Prussian blue particles identified by Mark Tucker in *The Ducal Palace* by Francesco Guardi in the collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Further microchemical tests on the Kress samples were inconclusive due to contamination by the mounting medium. For more on the use of a Chelsea filter see M.R. Schilling and D.A. Scott, “Letter to the Editor,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1989), p. 137.
 16. For a discussion of the early manufacture of Prussian blue, see Jo Kirby, “Fading and colour change of Prussian blue: occurrences and early reports,” *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, Vol. 14 (1993), pp. 62–71; and Frank S. Welsh, “Particle characteristics of Prussian blue in an historical oil paint,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, 27 (1988), pp. 55–63.
 17. Pemberton-Pigott has noted extensive reworkings of other paintings from the 1720s. See Pemberton-Pigott 2001 (cited in note 5), p. 188.
 18. *Ibid.* I wish to thank Viola Pemberton-Pigott for her generosity in sharing her original text in English.
 19. Other paintings seen at the recent exhibition in Venice that show evidence of this technique are: *Grand Canal: Looking North-East from near the Palazzo Corner-Spinelli to the Rialto Bridge*, Dresden Gemäldegalerie, c/L 208; *The Bacino of San Marco looking North*, Upton House, The National Trust, c/L 144; *Grand Canal: The Salute and the Dogana, from near the Palazzo Corner*, Berlin Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, c/L 181; also *Grand Canal: Looking North-East from the Palazzo Balbi to the Rialto Bridge*, Ferens Art Gallery, Hull City Museums, c/L 214.
 20. Pemberton-Pigott 2001 (cited in note 5), p. 187.
 21. For comparison see the gondoliers in the foreground of the Ferens Art Gallery painting (c/L 214) and *Grand Canal: Looking North-East from the Palazzo Balbi to the Rialto Bridge*, Ca’Rezzonico, c/L 210 and also the red-robed magistrate in the Conti painting *Il Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo*. In addition, a painting on copper of *The Molo Looking West* (c/L 89) has an almost identical grouping of magistrate figures.
 22. It is revealing to compare the Kress painting with the nearly identical version of the image in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, Italy. Both Constable and André Corboz name the Turin painting as the primary version in their books, and there has been much confusion over the years about the relationship of the two paintings stemming from

the comparison of poor quality reproductions. In fact, the best published image and detail of the “Turin” version is actually a picture of the South Carolina painting (see André Corboz, *Canaletto: Una Venezia Immaginarica*, 2 vols., Milan: Alfieri Electa, 1985, Vol. I, fig. 35, p. 53; and Vol. II, p. 51, p. 579). In addition to the topographical inaccuracies discussed by Katharine Baetjer in her paper in this volume, several technical elements are visible even in a color transparency of the Turin painting that seem to indicate that it is a copy of the Kress painting by a follower. The conspicuous absence of black under the figures and gray under the blue water differs from Canaletto’s deliberate practice of underpainting these areas to achieve specific color and tonal effects.

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

Figs. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9, pp. 188, 191, 192, and 193.

Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H.

Kress Collection (CMA 1954.44).

Fig. 3, p. 190. Courtesy of the Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli al Lingotto, Turin

