

*View of the Grand Canal with Dogana*

Francesco Guardi, 1775–80

Oil on canvas

16 1/2 × 26 1/4 in. (41.9 × 66.7 cm)

Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, South Carolina

CMA 1954.46 (K-1947)



FIG. 1. *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana*, before cleaning and restoration.



FIG. 2. *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana* (fig. 1), after cleaning and restoration.

## *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana and Guardi Studio Practices*

*Helen Spande*

**T**HE VIEW ACROSS THE GRAND CANAL of this sunny Venetian promontory is one of approximately twenty closely related compositions attributed to the eighteenth-century painter Francesco Guardi (1712–1793). Each scene shows the activity along the water and on the quay near the customs house or Dogana di Mare. In this version, the church of Santa Maria della Salute occupies a noble position on the right of the canvas. Its slender bell tower and seminary buildings extend behind, partially obscured by the dark brick, crenellated warehouse of the Dogana. Miniature characters depicted with the briefest gesture of the brush pose alone or in pairs against the architecture. Spaced elegantly across the foreground, three gondolas ferry passengers across the canal. The gondoliers' poles leave delicate white ruffles on the surface of the water.

With its generous portion of clear sky, this painting is a classic Venetian view painting or *veduta*. English travelers on the “Grand Tour” found these appealing, affordable<sup>1</sup> views to be the perfect souvenir. This version of the popular scene, *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana*, was purchased by Samuel H. Kress in 1953 (figs. 1 and 2). Now in the Columbia Museum of Art, South Carolina, this work has close counterparts in the Wallace Collection, London, the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, the Nelson-Atkins Museum in Kansas City, and elsewhere. Examination of the painting shows it to be in good condition and structurally sound. The scene is painted on a lightweight, coarsely woven canvas. The painting has been glue-lined, and the canvas visible on the reverse is of modern origin.

The painting was brought to the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University for cleaning; it had a thick natural resin varnish layer that had become severely discolored over time (see fig. 1). Removal of the old yellow varnish not only uncovered the intended color relationships and illusion of depth in the painting, but also afforded an opportunity for a thorough examination. X-radiography is one technique that often reveals aspects of the artist's process such as which components were laid in on the canvas first, or whether their shapes were modified during painting. In this case, the X-radiograph provided the surprising discovery of an entirely unrelated composition beneath the surface image. Guardi painted this Venetian scene on top of a decorative floral composition showing symmetrical scrollwork flourishes framing a round vase with flowers (fig. 3).

While the surface scene appears not to have been cropped, the floral image underneath was cropped along the left side and top. Only the canvas weave along the lower edge shows clear

cusping, the faint scallop pattern along the edges formed by slightly uneven tensions on the weave of the canvas as it is stretched for the first time and nailed to the stretcher. Once the canvas is sized and painted, the cusping pattern becomes a fixed record. The presence or absence of cusping usually provides sufficient information to determine whether the image still retains its original dimensions, for a canvas will be missing cusping along the sides that have been cut down. In this case, the cusping pattern was established when the floral composition was painted and cannot yield anything conclusive about the Venetian scene.

There are several precedents for the discovery of a decorative design underneath a Guardi view painting. As discussed in the catalogue of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian paintings at the National Gallery of Art, Washington,<sup>2</sup> both *View on the Cannaregio Canal, Venice* (fig. 4) and *Temporary Tribune in the Campo San Zanipolo, Venice* (fig. 6) have been painted over fragments of earlier works also revealed by X-radiography (figs. 5 and 7). The former appears to have been made from the

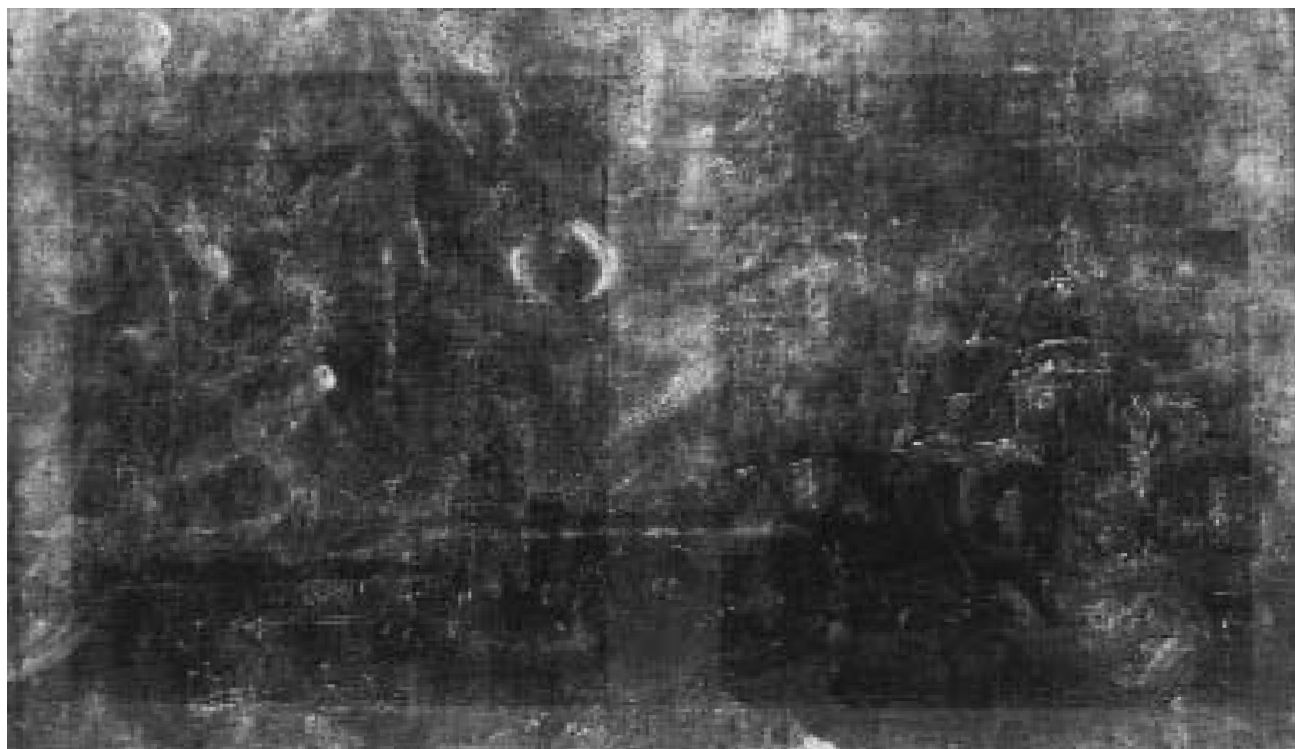


Fig. 3. *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana* (fig. 1), X-radiograph.

left end of a decorative painting with scrollwork (overall a stronger and clearer design than the one beneath *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana*) while the latter appears to have been painted over a still life of a vase of flowers. This recycling of canvas illustrates the thrifty practices of the Guardi studio. The National Gallery of Art finds the decorative underpainting with scrollwork to resemble fairly closely the design on a number of altar frontals that were made by Francesco Guardi and his workshop. Guardi also painted a number of floral still lifes, though the symmetrical nature of the large flourishes in this painting make it unlikely that this is one of them. Unfortunately neither of the National Gallery of Art underpaintings matches the floral composition under this Venetian landscape.



FIG. 4. *View on the Cannaregio Canal, Venice*, Francesco Guardi, ca. 1775-1780, oil on canvas,  $19\frac{3}{4} \times 30\frac{1}{4}$  in. ( $50 \times 76.8$  cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

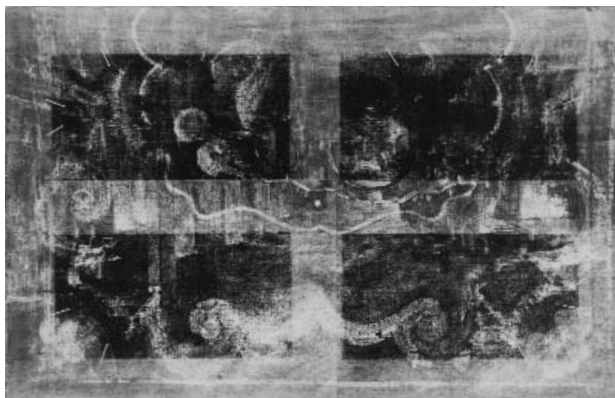


FIG. 5. *View on the Cannaregio Canal, Venice* (fig. 4), X-radiograph.



FIG. 6. *Temporary Tribune in the Campo San Zanipolo, Venice*, Francesco Guardi, 1782 or after, oil on canvas,  $14\frac{3}{4} \times 12\frac{3}{8}$  in. ( $37.5 \times 31.5$  cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

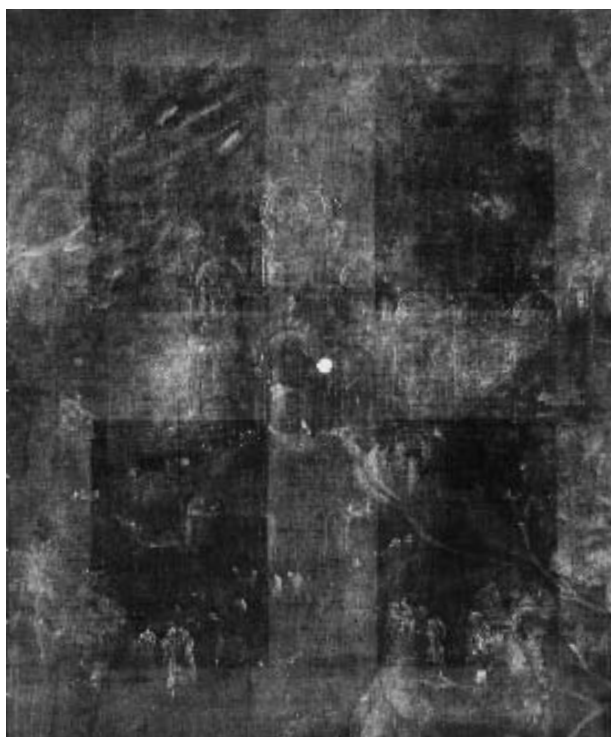


FIG. 7. *Temporary Tribune in the Campo San Zanipolo, Venice* (fig. 6), X-radiograph.

By examining some areas of the X-radiograph image where the lead white highlights of the underlying decoration show most clearly, it is possible to see that the painting underneath shows extensive wear and damage. There are no regular scrape marks or other traces to suggest the paint was sanded down or intentionally abraded in preparation for repainting, but this is a possibility. The only other conclusion is that the surface had become damaged from wear and use during its original incarnation as a decorative panel. Whereas some artists simply change their minds about a composition and paint over it immediately, scraping off paint that may not even have dried fully, in this case the original canvas appears to be considerably older than Guardi's view painting.

There is a warm brown oil ground visible beneath the water in the foreground. This dark ground shows through especially in areas of abrasion or where the paint is thinly applied. Around the upper edges of the buildings, a pale violet layer appears. This may have been a ground layer for the sky. Along the right margin, one structure was painted over the blue of the sky, which gives it a different tonality than the rest of the architecture that has preparation layers in another color. The painting of the sky was done in two campaigns: a glossy sky blue beneath a leaner, grayer light blue, separated by a layer of varnish. It is possible that the second layer is a later overpaint, but it is also possible that the modifications were made while the work was still in Guardi's studio. The craquelure penetrates through the ground layer, and in no place is there obvious overpaint that crosses over it, demonstrating that the top sky layer is quite old. When one is aware of the existence of the original floral design, this makes more sense. The design from the underlying decoration probably began to show through not long after the work was painted and varnished and required masking by the second sky layer.

Though the brushwork is quick and gestural, it is also fairly precise, and the gondoliers are described with brief but expressive marks. Some

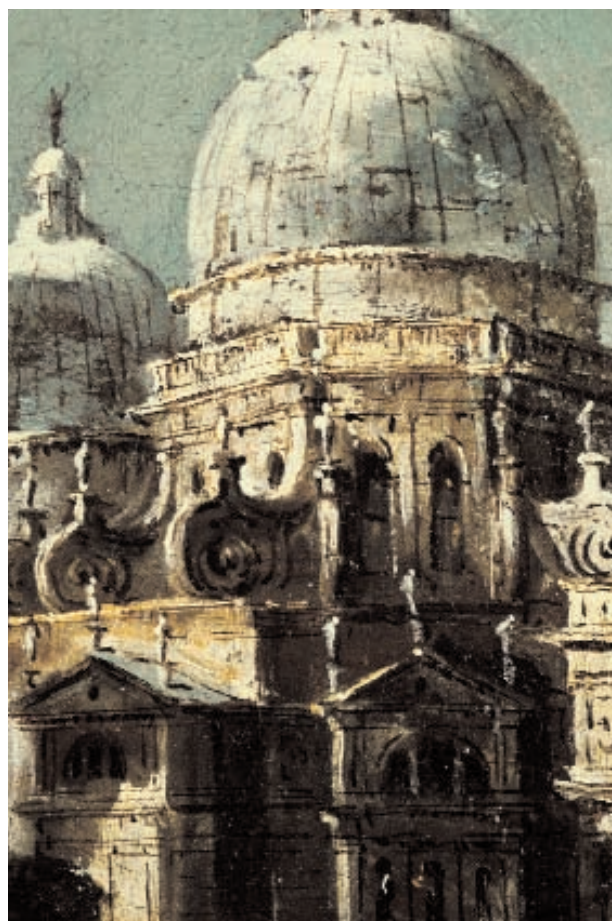


FIG. 8. *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana* (fig. 1), detail of dome.

of the details have a slightly mechanical quality, such as the white prow of the craft in the lower right corner, but this may be a result of the overall wear of the surface. The architecture is hardly Guardi's most exacting rendition, but it is pleasing in its detail and for the play of light and shadow. It appears that the fine dark lines of the architecture have been rendered not with a brush, but with a quill pen, for the even lines show the tell-tale split where the pressure of the stroke forces the nib apart. This drawing also leaves tiny gouged trails in the wet paint beneath the dome of Santa Maria della Salute (fig. 8).

Some research into Guardi's materials has already been conducted; these analyses used a variety of techniques including scanning electron microscopy coupled with electron dispersive spectroscopy, polarized light microscopy, and

X-radiograph diffraction.<sup>3</sup> These findings provide a means of comparing the pigments used in this painting with Guardi's known palette.

Guardi's standard palette consists of vermilion, lead white, bone black, green earth, van Dyck brown, Naples yellow, iron oxide, red lake, and earth pigments such as raw sienna and yellow ochre. For a blue pigment, Guardi has been shown to have used both Prussian blue and ultramarine as well as ultramarine ash. It is likely that he chose among these based on availability and expense. A ubiquitous finding both in other Guardi's and in this painting is that the paint contains both tiny particles and large coarse agglomerates. Even Prussian blue, a pigment characterized by particles of submicron size, occurs in aggregates large enough to see clearly without magnification. The visual effect of mixing coarse and fine particles is both characteristic of Guardi and an easily recognized and replicated technique. This texture alone cannot be used to prove that a painting is an authentic Francesco Guardi. However, this data in conjunction with the pigment analysis of *View of the Grand Canal with Dogana* does allow us to draw some conclusions. Several different colors were analyzed by polarized light microscopy, and essentially all of the pigments found, including Prussian blue and Naples yellow, are consistent with the expected palette of Francesco Guardi. For example, in terms of the chronological development of pigments, Naples yellow "enjoyed its greatest popularity between roughly 1750 and 1850 after which it gradually became replaced by lead chromate and cadmium sulfide yellows."<sup>4</sup> However, Naples yellow is still available today. Its precursor, lead-tin yellow, was commonly used until about 1626 and disappeared completely after the middle of the eighteenth century. Prussian blue, first made in 1704 and also used by Canaletto, was an inexpensive alternative to ultramarine blue and well suited to the hues of the sea and the sky.

Although no single piece of evidence definitively proves that this painting is a work by the master's hand, the cumulative effect of this examination's findings add support to a Guardi attribution. The support, the pigments, and the

painting technique—even the underlying decorative image—are consistent with the materials available at the time and match phenomena found in other Francesco Guardi paintings.

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#### NOTES

1. Francesco Guardi's clients were probably "middle-class Venetians and English visitors of modest means" as discussed in De Grazia et al. (1996), pp. 120–21.
2. De Grazia et al. (1996).
3. Discussed in Albertson and Coddington (1981), pp. 101–19.
4. Feller (1986), p. 226.

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#### PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

- Figs. 1, 2, 3, and 8, pp. 206, 208, and 210. Columbia Museum of Art, Columbia, SC, Samuel H. Kress Collection (CMA 1954.46).
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