



including Bernardo Canal, grandfather of Bellotto and father of Canaletto – whose skill in illusion inspired painters to follow suit.

With Grand Tourists demanding souvenirs of their experience, Venice was in the grip of an ecstasy of images. As well as oil-painted views and *capricci* – fantasy landscapes of classical ruins in pastoral settings – a boom in copperplate engravings allowed the less wealthy to possess their own record of the Republic.

This show's opening gallery is devoted to etchings by Canaletto and his peers, including Antonio Visentini, a professional engraver whose reproductions of Canaletto's paintings were crucial to the diffusion of La Serenissima's profile beyond her borders.

With a sunlit day on the Grand Canal conjured in monochrome – chiaroscuro ripples on the canal, a splash of white on the belly of the bridge – one can see why Visentini's recreation of Canaletto's "Rialto Bridge with the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi" would have been the next best thing to an original in oil. Given their skill, it seems churlish to lament the genre's lack of colour. Yet it is hard not to hurry on to view the paintings whose brilliant chromatism captures Venice at her most picturesque.

From Luca Carlevario, the father of this genre, a 1721-23 painting of St Mark's from the bay falls to prepare one for "La Piazzetta towards the Basilica of the Salute". A gossipy drama of tradesmen, nobles and gondoliers captured in deliquescent brushstrokes by a 24-year-old

Canaletto, it enjoys the unashamed painterliness that made the master's early years among his finest.

Similar characteristics mean that the authorship of "The Rio dei Mendicanti and Scuola di San Marco", given here to Bellotto in 1741, is still disputed. Whoever is responsible, it is wonderful: the simple contrast of the midnight-blue rio and sunlit scuola complicated by the pewter gleam of gondola prows and a slab of shadow falling across the honeyed stonework. Lively, fluid figures possess a human verity absent in orthodox view painting.

In 1747 Bellotto, no longer in Canaletto's employ, was called to Saxon court in Dresden, a city enamoured of all things Venetian. Executed to accompany paintings – none here, sadly – Bellotto's series of engravings captured the city's new Baroque profile for posterity, much as Visentini had done for Venice.

The highlights here, however, are three splendid view paintings of Pirna, a small city 20km away on the banks of the Elbe. Freed from the geometry of an urban panorama, Bellotto reveals a gift for landscape and genre painting. In "Pirna from the Right Bank of the Elbe" (1754-56), for example, he sets the crisp profile of the town, with its gabled roofs and angular hilltop fortress, in contrast to a pastoral scene.

Stroking on paint in loose, thin layers for magnificently subtle tonal variation, he achieves a naturalism that predates the 19th-century Barbizon school, while his passion for local life makes him

an ancestor to Gustave Courbet. By 1767, Bellotto had transferred to Warsaw to work as court painter for its new king, Stanislaw August Poniatowski. Just like his Saxon and Habsburg peers, the monarch was engaged in urban regeneration and saw the painter as the perfect conduit for his country's new image.

Yet the canvases from this era suggest a painter quietly challenging orthodoxy. In "Suburb of Krakow towards the Column of Sigismund III" (1774) Bellotto negates all monumental grandeur. Instead he conjures a quasi-burlesque street scene whose cast includes a gilt-trimmed carriage trailed by liveried footmen, a barefoot nursemaid clutching knickerbocker-wearing charges, wandering players and two bourgeois ladies driving a cart and cow.

Having started his career painting the theatre of light, water and stone that is Venice, Bellotto pursued his fascination for earthier, more human spectacle ensure his northern paintings enjoyed the touch of Venetian magic necessary to satisfy his patrons.

After Dresden and Warsaw were razed to the ground in the second world war, Bellotto's paintings provided a crucial topographical record. Indeed, they were used by Warsaw's architects to recreate the city centre. The Venetian had substance as well as style after all.

Until April 15, www.bellottomegliano.it

Light touch:
"Pirna von Niederposta mit der Landstraße nach Copitz" (1754-56); below, Lenny Henry in "The Comedy of Errors"
Johan Persson



Making of the other Canaletto

Bellotto's trans-European journey from imposter to genuine article

VISUAL ARTS

Bernardo Bellotto: The Canaletto of the European Courts

Palazzo Sarcinelli, Conegliano

Rachel Spence

In the summer of 1749, Canaletto placed an announcement in the Daily Advertiser in London which invited "any Gentleman that will be pleased to come to his house to see a picture done by him being a view of St James's Park".

Behind the notice lay the need to prove his identity to a doubtful English public. For the great Venetian view painter – whose real name was Antonio Canal – was being threatened by a young pretender: his nephew and former apprentice Bernardo Bellotto, who had taken to signing himself "Bernardo Bellotto detto [known as] Canaletto".

The confusion has never really ceased. The Venetian scenes painted while Bellotto was still apprenticed to his uncle cause most trouble owing to his habit, as his 18th-century biographer and champion Guarienti put it, of "imitating [Canaletto] with study and assiduousness".

Concentrating on paintings made by Bellotto after he had left Venice for Germany, Austria and Poland, this show largely avoids controversy.

Instead, it is an opportunity to witness the transformation of northern Europe into a lost sibling of La Serenissima – still true to itself yet made subliminally new by theatrical light and exaggerated perspectives.

By the time Bellotto was born in 1722, peace with the Turks in 1699 had put an end to Venice's imperial ambitions. Instead she was a city where decadent carnival celebrations and elaborate civic ceremonies meant style eclipsed substance. A proliferation of theatres attracted avant-garde scenographers –

ARTS VIDEO

Robin reimagined: FT theatre critic Sarah Hemming goes behind the scenes at the RSC's "The Heart of Robin Hood" www.ft.com/arts