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Félix Ziem  
*Turkish Merchants in Venice*

FÉLIX ZIEM

Beaune 1821–1911 Paris

*TURKISH MERCHANTS IN VENICE, C. 1889*

Signed lower right: "Ziem."

Oil on canvas

41 x 63 cm; 16 ¼ x 24 ¾ in.

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Provenance

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Acquired from the The Walters Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.A;  
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In Venice, light does not merely shine; it dances, blending with the water to dissolve the solid city into something shimmering and fluid. The canal acts as a looking glass in which the facades of Gothic and Renaissance buildings are mirrored with ethereal, constantly shifting precision, a city that exists as much in reflection as in reality. It is this quality of light that drew Félix Ziem back to Venice more than twenty times, and it saturates every corner of this sunlit view of the Giudecca Canal. A large frigate flying what appears to be a Turkish flag fills the right of the canvas, its masts and rigging rising into an expansive blue sky. A gondola carrying merchants moves across the shimmering water toward the Fondamenta della Zattere, where the facade of Santa Maria del Rosario, the church known as I Gesuati, anchors the left bank with its familiar presence. On the horizon, the city softens into a warm haze, its rooftops and domes dissolving in the light.

The composition belongs to the great *vedute* tradition of Venetian topographical painting, which reached its height in the previous century with Canaletto (1697-1768) and Francesco Guardi (1712-1793); Ziem deploys its conventions with both fluency and freedom.<sup>1</sup> The Giudecca Canal, the broad, deep-water anchorage where ocean-going vessels moored before their cargoes were ferried by smaller craft to the quays of the main city, provides the spatial framework of the scene. The frigate and the facade of the Gesuati support the composition to right and left, drawing the eye along the diagonal of the canal toward the gondola at the centre and the city beyond. The horizon sits low, surrendering the canvas to sky and light. Ziem's brushwork shifts registers with characteristic ease, loose and shimmering across the water and sky, more deliberate in the rigging of the ship and the stonework of the church, the whole held together by that radiant, sparkling, Venetian light.

Venice had long occupied a singular place in the European imagination as a city poised between East and West, its Gothic and Byzantine architecture bearing eloquent witness to centuries of commerce and cultural exchange with the Islamic world. The Zattere, the broad southern quay that faces the Giudecca Canal, had served as a maritime gateway for the Venetian Republic since 1519, the point of arrival for cargoes from the mainland and beyond. By the nineteenth century, it had become one of the great promenades of the city, its Fondamenta stretching along the waterfront in full sun, yet its mercantile origins remained legible in the scale and character of the quay and in the deep-water anchorage of the Giudecca that lay before it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Vedute* (singular: *veduta*) are detailed topographical paintings depicting urban views, a genre closely associated with Venice and brought to its height in the eighteenth century by painters such as Canaletto and Francesco Guardi.

<sup>2</sup> The Fondamenta delle Zattere, running approximately 1.7 km along the southern edge of Dorsoduro from San Basilio to Punta della Dogana, was developed as a formal stone quay in the

The church that Ziem places so prominently on the left bank is Santa Maria del Rosario, known as I Gesuati, a masterpiece of eighteenth-century Venetian Baroque designed by Giorgio Massari (1687-1766). Massari's design engages consciously with the great Palladian churches of the Venetian waterfront, Il Redentore and San Giorgio Maggiore, whose white facades and classical porticoes had defined the ceremonial face of the city since the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> By deliberately including the Gesuati in his composition, Ziem situates his scene within the deepest layers of Venetian architectural history.

The Turkish presence in his painting belongs to a more complex history. As Deborah Howard has shown, before the sixteenth century, Turkish merchants were rarely seen in Venice, and the turbaned figures that appear in Venetian Renaissance paintings, more often served as symbols of exoticism or biblical authenticity rather than as portraits from life.<sup>4</sup> A regulated Ottoman commercial presence eventually established itself in the city: the Fondaco dei Turchi, originally built as a palace for the Pesaro family, was converted into the official Ottoman trading post at the start of the seventeenth century, its facade on the Grand Canal a visible symbol of the economic ties linking the two powers despite their political rivalries.<sup>5</sup> By the time Ziem was painting, however, the Turkish merchants arriving by gondola at the Zattere belonged just as much to the realm of imagination as to contemporary reality. Venice had become, for European painters, the quintessential city where East met West in memory and myth, and Ziem's painting knowingly participates in that tradition. What makes it distinctive is the reversal it presents: where Orientalist painters typically depicted European travellers venturing into the East, here it is Ottoman merchants arriving in Venice, completing a cycle of exchange that the city had envisioned for centuries.

Félix François Georges Philibert Ziem was born on 26 February 1821 in Beaune, in the Burgundian heartland of France, the son of Georges Barthélémy Ziem, whose family origins were far more colourful than biographical accounts have generally suggested. According to Louis Fournier, Ziem's grandfather, Jean was born in Erzeroum in Armenia, served in the Turkish cavalry, and eventually settled in Poland. His father, Georges, was captured by French troops during the siege of Danzig in

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early sixteenth century, with paving largely completed by 1519. It served as a principal point of arrival for cargoes, particularly timber, salt and wool, entering Venice from the mainland and beyond. See Ennio Concina, *A History of Venetian Architecture*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Volta, Valentino. "Massari, Giorgio." *Grove Art Online*. 2003, <https://www-oxfordartonline-com.lonlib.idm.oclc.org/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000055004>.

<sup>4</sup> Howard, Deborah, *Venice and the East: The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture 1100-1500*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

1807, brought to Beaune as a prisoner of war, and chose to remain there when his freedom was restored.<sup>6</sup>

Ziem studied at the École d'Architecture et des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, an education that gave him a lasting sensitivity to structure, proportion and spatial rhythm that would inform his painting throughout his career. Even before his Paris debut, Ziem had attracted distinguished attention: in 1839, during a ceremony in Marseille marking the construction of the city's new water canal, he presented a series of watercolours to Ferdinand Philippe, Duc d'Orléans (1810-1842), who received them warmly and rewarded him generously. Largely self-taught as a painter, he began exhibiting at the Paris Salon from 1849, where his atmospheric landscapes quickly attracted both critical attention and an elite clientele that came to include Princesse Mathilde Bonaparte (1820-1904), the Baron de Rothschild and the Duke of Devonshire. The distinction of which he was perhaps most proud came when he became the first living artist to have his paintings acquired by the Louvre.<sup>7</sup>

By 1850, Ziem had formed a close friendship with Théodore Rousseau (1812-1867) and, through him, established ties with the Barbizon circle, whose emphasis on working from nature, tonal harmony and the careful observation of light deeply influenced his approach. Yet Ziem's affinities ranged more widely: he admired Claude Lorrain (1600-1682) and J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) above all as masters of luminous effect, and in 1868 the critic Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) famously compared his work to that of Turner and Bonington (1802-1828), a judgement that captures something essential about his ability to dissolve form in atmosphere while retaining the underlying structure of a scene. The French state formally recognised his achievements in 1857, when he was awarded the Grand Medal and appointed Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, later rising to Officier (1878) and Commandeur (1908).

Travel was as central to Ziem's life as it was to his art. Beginning in 1842, he journeyed through Italy, discovering Venice on that first visit and forming with it a bond that would endure for the rest of his long life. He returned to the city more than twenty times, often remaining for months at a stretch, and it became the primary source of his artistic inspiration. Remarkably, his passion for Venice had been kindled even before he first set eyes on the city. As a young man in Beaune, he befriended a Venetian singer who came to perform in his family's courtyard, and her descriptions of her native city so fired his imagination that he began painting Venetian watercolours

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<sup>6</sup> Fournier, Louis, *Félix Ziem: Notes biographiques*, Beaune, Henri Lambert Fils, 1897, pp. 13-14 and 25.

<sup>7</sup> The Chauchard bequest of 1910 brought several of Ziem's works into the Louvre during his lifetime, making him one of the few living artists to be represented there. See Musée du Louvre Collection Online: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/>

from her words alone, long before he had made the journey himself.<sup>8</sup> When he arrived, he made Venice entirely his own. Characteristically, he worked from a boat moored on the canal, which served simultaneously as his studio and his living quarters, immersing himself in the waterborne life of the city and in the perpetual drama of its light on water. This was a man who did not merely visit Venice but inhabited it, returning season after season across more than four decades to pursue what *Benezit* calls his systematic study of its changing light over the hours and through the seasons.

His travels extended far beyond Italy. He journeyed through Russia from 1843 to 1844 in the company of the artist Prince Gregori Gagarin (1810-1893), visiting Odesa, Kyiv, Moscow and St. Petersburg. He travelled to Constantinople in 1847 and again after 1856, following the Treaty of Paris that ended the Crimean War, spending two months in the Ottoman capital and finding there the same intoxicating interplay of light, water and reflected sky that he loved in Venice. Egypt, Beirut and Damascus followed, enriching his visual repertoire with the landscapes and peoples of the wider eastern Mediterranean. At home, he divided his time between four houses, in Venice, Martigues, Nice and Paris, and his studio in Martigues was transformed into a Moorish structure complete with cupola and minaret, a domestic expression of the Orientalist imagination that ran through so much of his work.

Throughout his career, Ziem produced several thousand canvases, a prodigious output that enabled him not only to sustain his considerable lifestyle but to support young artists and fund charitable works, including an asylum for the blind. He received medals at the Salon in 1851, 1852 and 1855, and his final honour, the *Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur*, came in 1908, three years before his death in Paris on 10 November 1911, at the remarkable age of ninety. At his death, he bequeathed a significant part of his studio, studies and drawings to the city of Paris; this collection, housed at the Musée du Petit Palais, remains the finest place to appreciate the full range of his technique and talent.

"*Beau ciel, lagunes polies et silencieuses où j'ai rêvé le beau*," Ziem wrote in his journal in November 1879: "*beautiful sky, still and silent lagoons where I dreamed of beauty.*"<sup>9</sup> No sentence more precisely captures what drew him back to Venice more than twenty times across five decades, and what animates every corner of this radiant painting. For Ziem, Venice was not merely a subject. It was a threshold, the city where the light of the Mediterranean first revealed to him the luminous possibilities of the East, and from which he ventured onward to Constantinople, Egypt, Beirut and

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<sup>8</sup> Fournier, Louis, *Félix Ziem: Notes biographiques*, Beaune, Henri Lambert Fils, 1897, pp. 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> Isabelle Collet and Charles Villeneuve de Janti, eds., *J'ai rêvé le beau: Félix Ziem, peintures et aquarelles du Petit Palais* (Paris: Paris Musées, 2013).

Damascus in pursuit of that same intoxicating interplay of water, sky and reflected light.

In this sense, Ziem belongs to a distinguished tradition of Orientalist artists for whom a first encounter with a city saturated in Eastern influence became the gateway to a wider imaginative journey. Just as Rudolf Ernst (1854-1932) and David Roberts (1796-1864) found in the Islamic architecture of Moorish Spain a stepping stone toward the broader world of the Orient, and Mariano Fortuny (1838-1874) crossed directly into North Africa to document the Spanish-Moroccan War of 1859, so Venice, at the western terminus of the Silk Road, its stones bearing the imprint of Byzantium and the Islamic world, pointed Ziem eastward. And when he finally reached Constantinople, he found what he had already dreamed in Venice: the same domes rising above water, the same quality of Byzantine light, the same city suspended between its own reflection and the sky above. It is no coincidence that the Basilica of San Marco, which had presided over the Venetian waterfront throughout his decades of painting, was itself modelled on the great churches of Constantinople, that most 'Venetian' of Eastern cities.

Ziem's place in the broader history of nineteenth-century painting is equally distinctive. Beginning his long career in the shadow of Delacroix (1798-1863) and ending it on the butte Montmartre near the studio of the young Picasso (1881-1973), he spanned an era of extraordinary transformation in European art while remaining serenely, magnificently himself. Admired by Van Gogh (1853-1890), compared by Théophile Gautier to Turner and Bonington, he was neither quite of the Barbizon School nor quite of the Impressionists, but rather a singular figure who pursued his own vision of luminous atmosphere across ninety years and several thousand canvases. The French state honoured him with the *Commandeur de la Légion d'Honneur*; the Louvre acquired his work during his lifetime; and at his death, he bequeathed his studio to the city of Paris, ensuring that his gift to the world of light and beauty would endure.

He was buried at Père-Lachaise beneath a monument in the Gothic Venetian manner, his reclining marble effigy watched over by the winged lion of Saint Mark. Even in death, he did not leave Venice entirely behind.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The tomb of Félix Ziem (1821–1911) is located in the 93rd Division of Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. Designed and executed by the sculptor Victor Ségoffin (1867–1925) around 1912–1913, the monument features a life-sized white marble effigy of the painter. Notably, the base of the monument includes a bronze winged lion, a direct tribute to Venice, which served as a primary subject and enduring inspiration throughout Ziem's career.



Victor Ségoffin (1867-1925), *Tomb of Félix Ziem*, 1912,  
Père-Lachaise Cemetery, Paris.  
Photograph: Pierre-Yves Beaudouin, Wikimedia Commons.

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