

COLNAGHI



Francesco Guardi
Perspective Study of a Venetian Colonnade

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FRANCESCO GUARDI
(Venice 1712 – 1793 Venice)

PERSPECTIVE STUDY OF A VENETIAN COLONNADE

Pen and brown ink

17.1 x 15.2 cm (6 3/4 x 5 in.)

A sketch of the ceiling of a colonnade in black chalk and brown ink on the verso.

Provenance

Adolphe(?) Verdé-Delisle, Paris(?);

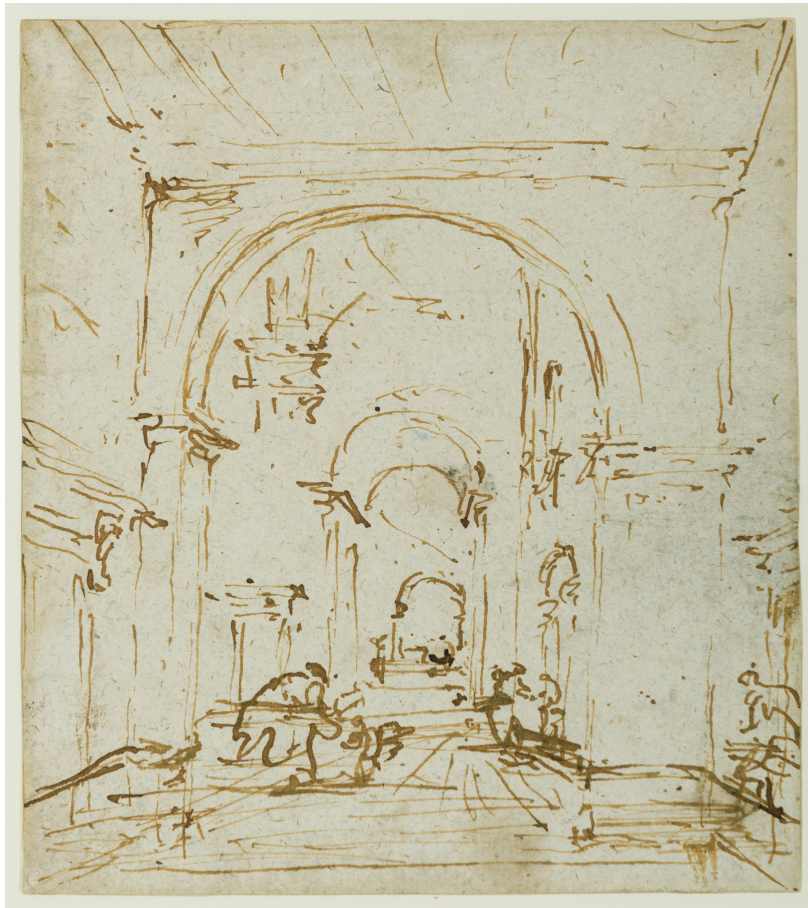
Thence by descent in the Verdé-Delisle family to a private collection, Belgium;

Anonymous sale, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Hôtel de Ventes [Aguttes], 27 March 2012, lot 18 (as Attributed to Francesco Guardi);

Jean-Luc Baroni Ltd., London, in 2014;

Private collection, New York.

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Francesco Guardi is thought to have trained in the studio of his brother-in-law, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Unlike Canaletto or the Tiepolos, however, he never seems to have sought fame abroad, preferring instead to remain almost exclusively in and around his native Venice. For much of his early career Guardi worked as a history painter, often in collaboration with his elder brother Gian Antonio, and it was not until quite late in his life—indeed, already in middle—that he took up the vedute painting for which he is best known today. He may even have been an assistant in the studio of Canaletto in the late 1750s or early 1760s, to judge from a contemporary description of him in 1764 as ‘a good pupil of the celebrated Canaletto’, although this is by no means certain. Guardi did, nevertheless, borrow liberally from Canaletto’s compositions throughout his career.

By 1761 Guardi had joined the painter’s guild in Venice, and soon established a reputation as a painter of Venetian views and imaginary landscapes, or capricci. He enjoyed a market for his views of Venice, painted with loose, spirited brushwork and transparent washes which allowed the artist the freedom to explore atmospheric effects. While he was fairly successful as a view painter, Guardi never achieved the level of fame enjoyed by Canaletto, particularly among foreign visitors to Venice. Nevertheless, his work was popular with British tourists to the city, and among his patrons was the English diplomat John Strange, the British resident in Venice between 1773 and 1790, who commissioned a series of view paintings of country villas on the terraferma. It was not until 1784, at the age of seventy-one, that Guardi was admitted to the Accademia in Venice, as a ‘*pittore prospettico*’. His son Giacomo was also an artist and continued the family studio well into the 19th century.

As Rudolf Wittkower has written, ‘Francesco Guardi’s art has often been compared with the music of Mozart. Despite his modernity, Guardi was a man of his century and, more specifically, a man of the Rococo. He continued creating his spirited capriccios and limpid visions of Venice long after the spectre of a new heroic age had broken in on Europe. When he died in the fourth year of the French Revolution, few may have known or cared that the reactionary backwater of Venice...had harboured a great revolutionary of the brush.’¹

The latter part of Guardi’s career found him painting numerous landscape capricci; imaginary views which often combined fantasy elements with recognizable Venetian motifs. Catherine Whistler has written that ‘Guardi began painting capricci, or fantasy landscapes, around 1760...He soon developed a vocabulary of fragments of ruins, slim classical columns and delicate modern structures in a setting evoking the

¹ Rudolf Wittkower, *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750, Part III: Late Baroque and Rococo 1675-1750*, New Haven and London, 1958, [1999 ed.], p.106.

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Venetian lagoon.’² Such imaginary works can be seen as part of a distinct Venetian tradition; indeed, as Michael Levey has commented, ‘the whole concept of the ‘caprice’ compositions, etched and drawn, in addition to being painted, seems a thoroughly Venetian one in its mixture of the factual and the fanciful, of the serious and the whimsical, asserting the freedom of the imagination.’³ Furthermore, as the same author has pointed out, capricci subjects such as those painted by Guardi were perhaps more suited to Venetian taste: ‘Canaletto might be popular for his view-paintings with visitors and foreigners, the British most famously, but contemporary taste in the city probably tended to judge those works aesthetically inferior to invented, ‘capricious’ compositions.’⁴

In his survey of Guardi’s drawings, published in 1951, James Byam Shaw noted that the artist’s imaginary landscape studies ‘may be described as the Romantic Capriccio – the idyllic landscape. A ruined tower or a ramshackle farmhouse by the lagoon, a Roman arch or colonnade, dilapidated and overgrown; the long span of an unparapeted bridge; a pyramid, a stone lion, a pair of crossed fir trees, a leaning umbrella-pine; fisher-folk, washerwomen, riders on strange unshapely horses, men digging for buried treasure or relics of antiquity—these are the stock-in-trade here, recurring again and again in innumerable combinations...So far as we need seek their inspiration in the work of other artists, it is [Francesco] Zuccarelli and [Giuseppe] Zais, surely, who provided the inspiration for the more pastoral elements, and Marco Ricci and [Antonio] Visentini for the classical, the antiquarian flavour. All of these were popular in Venice, and all were older than Guardi...Such influences there may be in Guardi, but in general his method of composing these Romantic Capricci is entirely individual, and their manner of draughtsmanship most personal and suggestive.’⁵

Guardi’s capriccio landscape drawings are perhaps the artist’s most individual works. As Byam Shaw has further noted, ‘It was in the Capriccio that Guardi, more than Canaletto, found the type of subject which, I fancy, pleased him most...If I were asked to guess what picture or drawing might have been Guardi’s favourite among his own work, I would choose some small Capriccio, in which the subject seems perfectly suited to his own spirit and his own technique...It is only in the case of the many Capricci that one feels that he was drawing for the sake of drawing—inventing, imagining, composing, above all enjoying himself. Often, of course, he must have gone through his portfolios, and chosen one of these from which to paint a sparkling little panel or canvas. But the impression remains that such drawings were made

² Catherine Whistler, *Baroque & Later Italian Paintings in the Ashmolean Museum*, London, 2016, p.186, under no. 52.

³ Michael Levey, ‘Introduction to 18th-Century Venetian Art’, in Jane Martineau and Andrew Robison, ed., *The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century*, exhibition catalogue, London and Washington, D.C., 1994-1995, p. 22.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁵ James Byam Shaw, *The Drawings of Francesco Guardi*, London, 1951, p. 31.

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independently, however slight they might be—as exercises, perhaps, but not as studies for paintings. These dangle before our eyes the key to the painter’s heart, and offer us a glimpse of his own private world.’⁶

As the art historian and museum curator Michael Levey has noted, ‘The artist Guardi increasingly became, in the second portion of his career, was hardly classifiable. View pictures and caprices merge as categories in paintings that are imbued with intense response to Venice but less for its bricks and mortar, or its inhabitants, than for its watery setting, its scattered islands, its sense of illimitable distance and silence amid crumbling fragments of ruin or in an isolated boat floating between the sea and sky. What Guardi seeks to capture, one might think, was the intangible — almost, the idea — of Venice.’⁷

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

⁷ Levey, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

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