

EXHIBITION

THE SPLENDORS OF VENICE

La *Serenissima*, as the “most serene” city of Venice is traditionally called, is so world-renowned for its artistic splendors that almost everything except tourism is now gone from the city, leaving behind only what caters to art lovers who visit from around the world, whether wealthy collectors coming for the Biennale or cruise-ship passengers disembarking for a day trip.

But “Sargent, Whistler and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano,” a thoroughly researched exhibition accompanied by a sumptuous catalog, takes us back over a century, to when the Biennale was a brand-new thing. It also was when the first wave of sophisticated American tourists fell in love with the city, drawn as much by its then-flourishing craft traditions of mosaic, glassblowing (centered in nearby Murano) and lace-work as by its old monuments.

John Singer Sargent and James McNeill Whistler, both of whose work was prominently featured in the first three Biennales beginning in 1895, were only the most prominent of the many turn-of-the-century American artists who were inspired both by Venice’s active artisans and its rich history.

Their paintings, drawings and prints, along with prime examples of the Venetian crafts, have been loaned from museums across the country to assemble the current show, which comes to the Amon Carter Museum of American Art from the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., where it originated, before it travels to Venice later this fall.

The encounter between wealthy American aesthetes, who congregated in the parlors of grand palazzos with the likes of Henry James and Edith Wharton, and the communities of traditional Venetian craft workers makes for a dramatic contrast.

We see clearly how, at a time when American art was funded by the wealth generated by Gilded Age America’s railroads and factories, Italy was still very much a developing country. So graceful are the young girls lugging buckets of water on their shoulders across the bridge in Frank Duveneck’s *Water Carriers, Venice* that one almost forgets to think about the perpetual exhaustion inherent in that way of life.

Many of the crafts on view are awe-inspiring as they call to mind the countless hours of arduous, painstaking handwork that would go into the production of a single piece, whether a lace panel with lions from the Scuola dei Merletti di Burano, a fish-and-eel vase attributed to Vittorio Zanetti or the mosaic tilework commissioned from Salviati & Co. for the brand-new Stanford University in California.

However, in interesting contrast to depictions of the alienated American urban working class in our noisy, dangerous steam-powered mills and factories, the crafts of Venice are represented as having a certain humane integrity, notably in Sargent’s painting *Venetian Glassworkers*, which emphasizes the care and attention that each individual worker gives to her piece.

Unlike American factories, Venetian craft workshops were major tourist attractions. Writer William Dean Howells observed that glass bead-making was “one of the things that strangers feel they must see in Venice.”

The curators also explain, though, that far from being a timeless survival of ancient traditions, these crafts were the object of determined efforts at revival in the 19th century, following the city’s long decline under the French and Austrian occupation that lasted for decades after Napoleon’s final conquest of the old republic in 1797.

These efforts included large-scale restoration of the mosaics in St. Mark’s Basilica with glass tiles from Murano and a newly founded Lace School in the nearby village of Burano, whose renowned tradition of lacemaking had almost died out. This all was part of a campaign for economic development in the newly unified Kingdom of Italy, marketed toward international visitors, that would eventually lead to the heavily touristed Venice of today.

The show also traces a stimulating encounter between modernism and tradition. Though they’re seen as complements rather than pure antagonists, sparks still fly as the past rubs against the present. Far away from the steel and concrete of modern Manhattan, painters exploring Venice were uniformly impressed by the ancient majesty of St. Mark’s and the other reminders of the city’s long-past golden age.

Novelist Henry James observed of the basilica, “You may go there every day and find afresh some lurking pictorial nook ... There are usually three or four painters, with their easels set up in uncertain equilibrium on the undulating floor.”

Charles Caryl Coleman’s majestic *The Bronze Horses of San Marco* suggests the grandeur that was present in every corner of the city. And yet, the painters often chose to represent these experiences in modern abstract styles as radical as anything from Paul Cézanne or Georges Seurat.

For example, in both Arthur Beecher Carles’ canvas *Venetian Gondolas* and Maurice Brazil Prendergast’s mosaic *Fiesta Grand Canal, Venice*, Venice seems to look simultaneously back to Byzantium and forward to the age of electricity. Maxfield Parrish’s *Venetian Lamplighters*, created as an advertisement for General Electric light bulbs, shows this new technology in essential harmony with its historic setting.

The magic of Venice reached as far as Chicago (where the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition hired 60 Venetian gondoliers for its artificial lake), Boston (where Isabella Stewart Gardner created a sumptuous Venetian courtyard for her new museum) and Japan (as evidenced by the exhibition’s prints by Yoshijiro Urushibara).

After World War I, it all came to appear old-fashioned, and the revival of historical traditions started to seem inauthentic and unmodern. For a long time, many of the works on view were quietly saved by collectors in old industrial cities like Albany, N.Y.; Toledo, Ohio; and Cincinnati, along with colleges from Stanford to Bowdoin — all of which lent pieces to the current exhibition.

But looking back a century later, this show sheds fresh light on the beginnings of American participation in what we now know as the international art world, as well as offering a lesson in how, at least for a time, craft traditions and a modern market can fruitfully coexist.

Benjamin Lima is a Dallas-based art historian and the editor of Athenaeum Review, the University of Texas at Dallas journal of arts and ideas.

Details

“Sargent, Whistler and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano” continues through Sept. 11 at the Amon Carter Museum of American Art, 3501 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth. Free. 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. 817-738-1933. cartermuseum.org.



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A View of Venice (1891) by Thomas Moran



Fiesta Grand Canal, Venice (circa 1899) by Maurice Brazil Prendergast

Williams College Museum of Art

NICE

Amon Carter Museum show examines the city's allure for artists and collectors



Smithsonian American Art Museum



A Venetian Woman (1882) by John Singer Sargent

Cincinnati Art Museum



Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum

Lace Panel with Lion of St. Mark (20th century) by La Scuola dei Merletti di Burano



Smithsonian American Art Museum

Water Carriers, Venice (1884) by Frank Duveneck



The Estate of Robert and Linda Wueste; photo by Susan Goines
Venetian Gondolas (circa 1909) by Arthur Beecher Carles