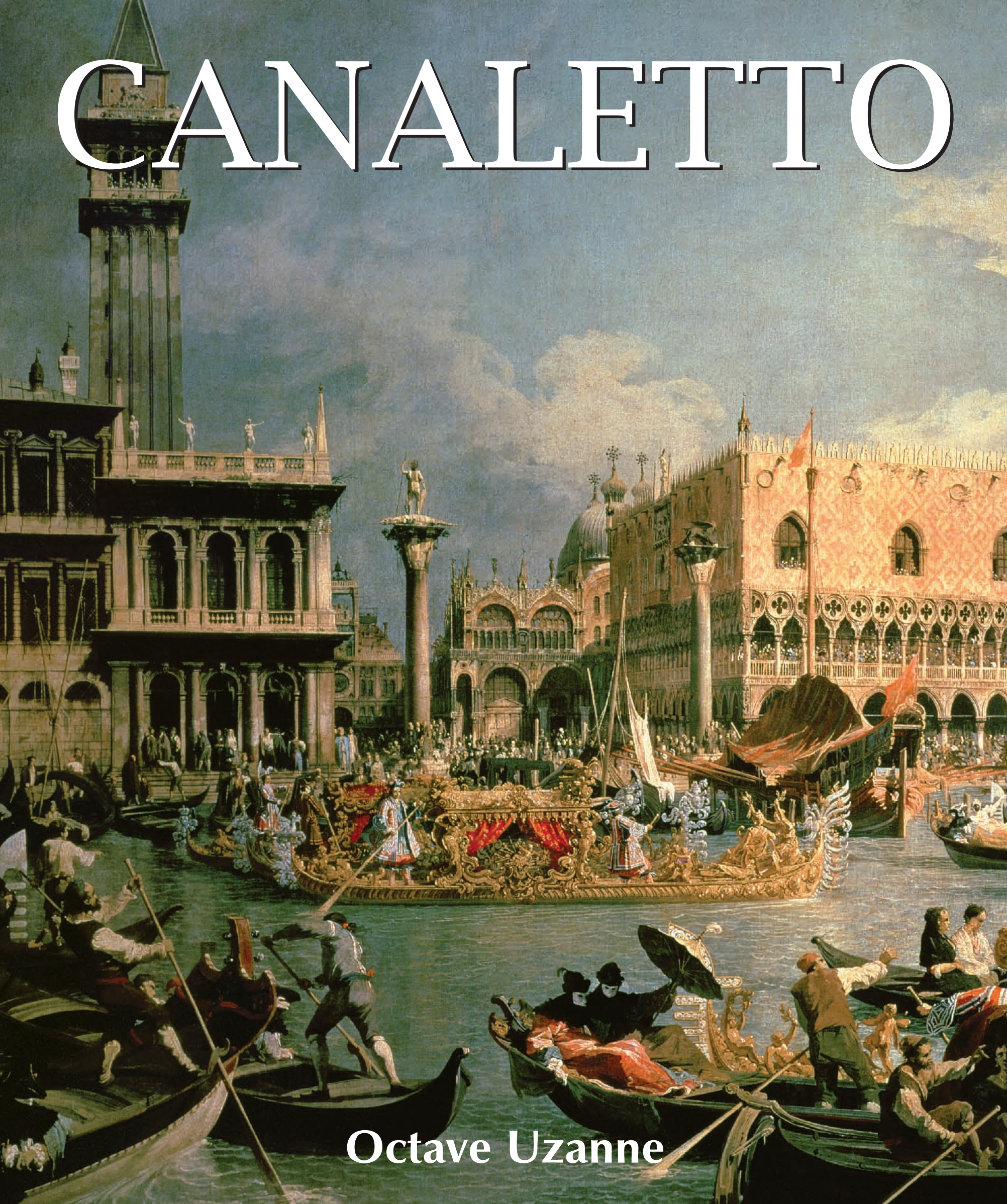
CANALETTO



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Octave Uzanne

Canaletto

PARKSTONE
INTERNATIONAL

Contents

Alfred de Musset

(1810-1857)

Venice

In Venice the Red,
No boat moves.
There is no fisher on the waters,
No lantern to be seen.

Alone, sitting on the strand,
On top of the serene horizon,
The great lion raises
Its bronze paw.

All around, in groups,
Are ships and rowboats.
Like herons
Resting in circles,

They sleep on top of smoky water
And cross,
With their flags, through the mist,
Caught up in light whirlwinds.

The fading moon
Hides its face that passes away
Against a starry,
Half-veiled cloud.

Then, the Saint Croix abbess
Pulls her cloak,
With the large folds,
Down over her surplice.

And then there are ancient palaces,
Solemn porticoes,
And the knight's
White staircases,

The bridges and streets,
The mournful statues,
And the gulf moves,
Rippling under the wind.

All is quiet,
Save the guards with long halberds
Who watch
Through the arsenal's crenellations.

Ah! More than one waits
In the moonlight.
Some young dandy
Keeps his ears open.

More than one who adorns herself
For the ball being prepared
Sets down a black mask
In front of the mirror.

On top of her bed, embalmed,
The rapturous Vanina
Is still embracing her lover,
As she drops off to sleep;

And mad Narcissa,
At the back of her gondola
Forgets herself
As she indulges in a feast that lasts till morning.

And who, in Italy,
Does not have a touch of madness?
Who does not save
Their most beautiful days for love?

Let's leave behind the old clock
At the old doge's palace,
As they count out the long-lasting boredom
Of his nights.

Instead, my beauty,
Let's count all those many kisses,
Given…or forgiven
On your restive mouth.

Instead, let's count your charms
And the sweet tears
That, in our eyes,
Sensuality has cost!

1. *Venice: the Piazzetta towards San Giorgio Maggiore,* c. 1724. Oil on canvas, 173 x 134.3 cm. The Royal Collection, London.

2. *The Entrance to the Grand Canal, Venice,* c. 1730. Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 72.5 cm. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Venice during the Eighteenth Century

Venetian Society

The famous city of Venice holds a special kind of influence over enthusiasts who are passionate about eighteenth century art. Indeed, one is at a loss to imagine a more marvellous setting for such a sensual society, always ready to enjoy life, and not worried about tomorrow. What more dignified atmosphere could so assuredly attract poets and painters? What a theme for the writer whose pen is akin to the colourist's brush and the goldsmith's chisel? Seduced by the beauty of this tableau and the lively allure of its characters, Théophile Gautier thought long and hard about how to describe and put new life into the city of Doges with a narrative that would trace the local mores of this exuberant and frivolous population. This novel was often pondered in the master's imagination, but was never written. However, we do find elements of the novel scattered throughout the memoirs of his contemporaries, and we find the same framework in the paintings of Canaletto. With equal interest, one can consult the memoirs of the most informed witnesses, such as Goldoni, Gozzi and Casanova, or, better yet, those by travellers with a trained eye and nimble tongue like Charles de Brosses and François Joachim de Pierre de Bernis.

In a light and at times teasing tone, the correspondence of de Brosses offered the most appealing portrait of Italy to eighteenth century society. Departing with several other gentlemen in the spring of 1739, Charles de Brosses, a spirited yet serious man, was determined to make these ten months serve both for pleasure and instruction. At the time, he was thirty years old and had been an adviser since the age of twenty-one. He was gifted with a mental acuity quite rare in young men, adding to his vast knowledge great perceptiveness and extremely sound judgement, to which his letters bear witness. Before occupying the office of principal magistrate, he found Venice so seductive that he thought about asking for the position of ambassador to the Venetian Republic. However, this observation post, located in southern Europe, being rather difficult to obtain, he revoked his candidature and the Abbot of Bernis filled the post fifteen years later.

A good judge of character, and rather difficult to please for this reason, Bernis, during his short mission, knew how to gain recognition for his style of governing, his personal aptitudes and his character. Thus, his memory lived on long after his departure. Having had several disputes with Venice, Pope Benedict XIV turned to him to mediate. Immediately receiving the approval of the opposing party, the future cardinal was able to settle the disagreement between Rome and Venice, satisfying both sides. No doubt, the success of his intervention contributed to his earning the red hat. The dispatches sent by Bernis during his ambassadorship were quite thorough and filled with very fine remarks written in excellent French, pleasing Louis XV. Judging his representative capable of more important services, the king called him back to France in 1757.

Before addressing Giovanni Antonio Canaletto's life and his work, it behoves us to draw a portrait of his birthplace and contemporaries. This is particularly important because at that time, perhaps more than at any other, art, literature and entertainment shared a joint

3. *The Grand Canal near the Rialto Bridge, Venice,* c. 1730.
Oil on canvas, 49.5 x 72.5 cm.
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

4. *The Canale di Santa Chiara looking North towards the Lagoon,* c. 1723-1724.
Oil on canvas, 46.7 x 77.9 cm.
The Royal Collection, London.

development. Could one truly understand the origin and progression of the master's talent, his intellectual habits and work methods, without first understanding the society of which he was a member?

Taking an initial glance at Venice's history, one cannot but be filled with wonder by the powerful energy and the expansive force of its people, enclosed as they are within such narrow limits. The city was thus stimulated by the most ardent patriotism; the prosperity and existence of each being inextricably linked to the interests of the city. Yet nothing is more modest than the origins of this small village of boatmen, nothing more desolate than the sands on which the first bands of fugitives settled. Nevertheless, nothing can match the heights reached by this Republic capable of launching a fleet of five hundred ships into the Bosporus, of navigating three thousand vessels together, and of developing, with the most diverse elements, an original artistic tradition. In this way, Venice assured its standing among the great kingdoms of Europe. With need for neither barriers nor fortifications, being well protected from warships by its shallow lagoons, the city could not be overtaken by outside forces. With a footing in the Middle East and Cyprus, the city continued its crusade along the Mediterranean coastline in Morea and on the island of Candia. Venetian soldiers never lagged in the war against the infidel. At Lepanto, for example, Venice furnished half of the Christian fleet.

Nevertheless, although the military spirit, which quickly died out in the neighbouring principalities, survived over a longer period in Venice, the city's prestige started to diminish. Geographical discoveries brought a fatal blow to its commerce and the Portuguese soon inherited all the traffic headed for Asia. Politics, carried out by a jealous oligarchy that flattered the Epicurean tendencies of the people, finally got the better of the city's bellicose behaviour and wish for power.

Of this government steeped in prestige, luxury and a terrible threat of torture, today we are familiar with its infernal police and secret dungeons, all the exterior workings that supplied the Romantic period with the subjects for so many plays and paintings. We know about the Council of Ten, whose masked judges met only at night, the room from which the accused departed only to disappear forever, and "the leads", the prison under the Doges' Palace from which Casanova managed to escape in an act of prodigious will. What hasn't been said about the three state inquisitors and their irrevocable sentences, about the boat with the red lantern light that would stop under the Bridge of Sighs before floating past Giudecca towards the Orfano canal, where deep waters enshrouded their victims and their secrets, where fishermen were prohibited from casting their nets? A row of wooden stilts indicated the waters where the boat would stop. Still today, one of the posts supports, with a lamp lit by gondoliers, the tiny chapel that received the last prayer of these supplicants.

5. *Entrance to the Grand Canal from the Molo, Venice,* 1742-1744.
Oil on canvas, 114.5 x 153.5 cm.
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

In the eighteenth century, a new political atmosphere was definitively set in place. Venice's prestigious history was over and the careers of great artists and great patriots were forever ended. In vain did Francesco Morosini,[1] for his prowess in Morea and on Candia Island, earn the nickname "Peloponnesiac". In vain did the old Marshal Schulembourg, who served twenty-eight


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6. *The Grand Canal, from the Foscari Palace,*
c. 1735.
Oil on canvas, 57.2 x 92.7 cm.
Private Collection.

7. *The Grand Canal: looking South-east from the Campo Santa Sophia to the Rialto Bridge,* c. 1756.
Oil on canvas, 119 x 185 cm.
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin.

years as General of the Republican Armies, merit the honour of an equestrian statue in Corfu Square. The lion of Saint Mark drew in its claws and the Queen of the Adriatic dozed off into a voluptuous nonchalance that only the bells of a masquerade could trouble. Moreover, the leaders kept up a system of perpetual amusement for the population. They thought this the most prudent method of guarding against intrigues, as this was the surest way to divert people's minds from unsettling preoccupations. For Venetians, who were naturally drawn to lavishness and superficial appearances, and who were located somewhere between unlimited freedom, as far as pleasure was concerned, and an absolute prohibition against discussing the actions of those in power, constant celebrations and the most rowdy of pleasures became a necessity. In this Cytherean court, which had never produced a Watteau, there was an overabundance of gaiety and the decadence was, at least, as sweet and bright as an evening on the banks of the lagoons.

Il Carnavale

Over a period of six months, the carnival attracted throngs of close to thirty thousand foreigners to Venice. Its theme: down with serious matters, long live freedom and folly! Yokels and patricians alike seemed to be overtaken by the same vertiginous activities, consumed by parades of people dressed up as astrologers, doctors, lawyers and gondoliers. Among the clowns, who wore huge cone-shaped hats, the most nimble of the bunch advanced on their hands, others danced about while playing barrel organs and the whole group whirled about to the sound of lively music. The people, free to loudly express their condemnation or approval, followed each group with shouts, catcalls, applause and jeers. At Saint Mark's Square, the major neighbourhood for masks, one wandered about without advancing through the dense crowd. The seven theatres reserved for the carnival proving to be inadequate for the festivities, harlequins performed their tomfoolery in the open air and comedic improvisers amused spectators with their buffoonery. At the smaller intersections, feats of strength and sleight of hand were organized. At the end of the carnival, there remained nothing but a few scattered passers-by appropriately armed with axes and cutlasses to defend themselves against the bulls that were led through the streets, fighting in certain places.

On Fat Thursday, the butchers' festival, a bull was beheaded with a single blow of the sword, a barbaric amusement established to commemorate an old victory over the Patriarch of Aquileia. The latter, accompanied by twelve clergymen captured at the same time, was to be beheaded in Saint Mark's Square, but, for some reason, this public execution did not take place, and twelve pigs and a bull were substituted for the condemned in order to appease the public. That same Thursday, the doge watched the Strengths of Hercules,[2] a game consisting of the construction of a human pyramid with a base of eight men locked arm in arm and capped with a child. In addition, an acrobat equipped with wings glided down a rope stretched between the top of the bell tower and the Doges' Palace balcony. Taking this aerial route, he arrived in front of the doge, offered him compliments and flowers, and then showered poetry and sonnets upon the crowd, enjoyed even by the least literate. A war of fists was another gift of lively amusement for the spectators. In this bizarre jousting match, two sides advanced atop

8. *The Grand Canal from the Fondamenta della Croce*, c. 1734.
Pencil and dark ink, 26.9 x 37.6 cm.
The Royal Collection, London.

9. *The Grand Canal in the Vicinity of Santa Maria della Carita*, 1726.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 132 cm.
Private Collection.

a narrow bridge with no parapet, namely the Saint Barnabas bridge, and each forced his way through, knocking his adversaries into the water. Seeing the fighters fall like grapes into the water, the spectators beat their hands together as wildly as possible.

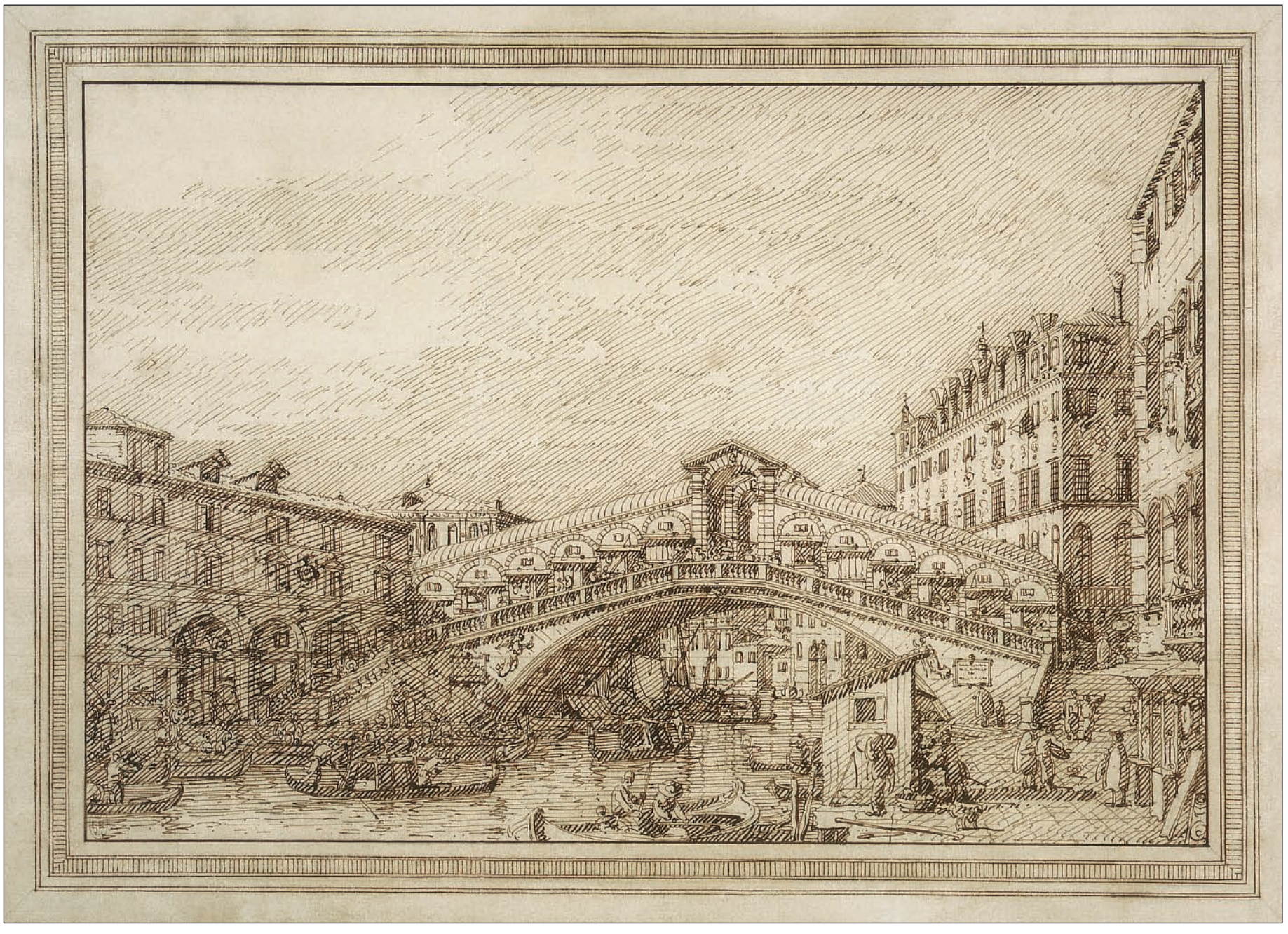
The whole of Venice was consumed in this rejoicing, in the enthusiasm of the crowd, in this emulation of which paintings and engravings give us a rather sketchy idea, in the joyful stamping of feet and cheering for the conqueror, in the freedom reigning sovereign over the city, encouraged by the *incognito* mask that, for the moment, suppressed all decorum and social inequality! The mask was a constant custom in Venetian mores. A mask was required to enter the gaming rooms, or *ridotti*, densely crowded with men and women. It was not unusual to see costumed nobles walk into the Doges' Palace, removing their domino in the Grand Council's antechamber. No one considered it scandalous to run into masked visitors in convent reception rooms or at gala dinners where the doge would bestow purple robes on the magistrates. Once promised in marriage, a young noblewoman might conceal her features under a velvet hood, and no one would see her face uncovered except for her fiancé and those privileged people to whom this rare favour was accorded.

Though these young women lived like prisoners inside palaces with barred windows, somewhat like Oriental women, occupying themselves with embroidery and making the marvellous lace on which Venice prided itself, they were suddenly emancipated through marriage and never again knew such crippling restraints on their freedom to be alluring. Those whose behaviour remained irreproachable drew from their devotion a self-restraint imposed neither by a family-oriented mindset nor the opinion of a libertine society. Since marriage was considered a formality importing little gravity, this forgetting of all duty led naturally to an abandonment of family life. They would spend the entire day out in the open air. Casinos served as a rendezvous point. There was something for the ladies, as well as for their husbands. Their children were like pretty dolls, dressed in rich outfits and prepared with good manners. As for the adolescents, they shocked travellers with the rowdiness that Venetians found amusing.

Discipline having lost its authority in schools, total capriciousness reigned in education. That of the writer Goldoni can serve as an example. In Rimini, bored with philosophical subtleties and passionate about ancient clowns and the theatre, he found a troupe of comedians made up almost entirely of his own countrymen. Under the pretext of going to Chioggia to kiss and greet his mother, he boarded their gondola and embarked on their journey. After that jaunt, having received a scholarship to a theological school in Pavia, he took up wearing the cloth with other worldly and stylish young abbots. But instead of applying himself to canon or civil law, he concentrated on fencing and the pleasurable arts, that is to say, all the games of society that a perfect gentleman could not ignore. Nevertheless, this life of extravagance did not prevent him, when in Chioggia, from composing a sermon that conferred on him a reputation for eloquence.

10. *Capriccio: the Rialto Bridge and the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore,* c. 1750.
Oil on canvas, 167.6 x 114.3 cm.
The North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh.

As far as convents were concerned, the cloister did not prove to be an adequate barrier between the recluses and the outside world. One of Longhi's most interesting canvases at the Correr Museum is precisely a representation of a visit by patricians to a nunnery.



11. *The Rialto Bridge from the South-west,*
c. 1740-1745.
Pencil and ink, 26.6 x 36.7 cm.
The Royal Collection, London.

12. *The Grand Canal and the Rialto Bridge, looking from the South,* c. 1727.
Oil on copperplate, 45.5 x 62.5 cm.
Private Collection.