Fig. 24 J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), *Venice: San Giorgio Maggiore – Early Morning*, 1819. Watercolour. Tate, D15254

Turner's Paintings of Venice

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On 12 August 1891, Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his diary that a painting of Venice he had seen that day in the possession of Camille Groult was:

> One of the ten that have delighted my eyes the most. For this Turner is liquid gold, and within it an infusion of purple … Ah! This Salute, this Doge's Palace, this sea, this sky with the pink translucency of Pagodite, all as if seen in an apotheosis of the colour of precious stones! And of colour in droplets, in tears, in fusings … And the beauty of the painting is made of something that is not taught in any book written by a teacher of aesthetics, it is made of energy, of riotous colouring, of exaggeration in the cooking.[41]

In spite of the fact that the painting was probably a fake, Goncourt's reaction typifies the intense fascination with the colour of Turner's late Venetian paintings, which was by this date almost universal. So, a few years later, Paul Signac made a pilgrimage to London to see Turner's paintings, and marvelled at the late work on display at the National Gallery, especially the artist's use of 'colour for colour's sake'. He also made a scribbled copy of one of Turner's paintings of the Salute, which he inscribed 'this poor little prayer to our God Turner'.[42] The apotheosis of this view of Turner as an abstract artist, especially in his late views of Venice, came in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1966, organised and catalogued by the painter and critic Lawrence Gowing. In his foreword, Monroe Wheeler claimed that 'in his forties, [Turner] found himself revolutionizing his art, eliminating from it linear draughtsmanship and classical composition; glorifying only light and shade, by the sole means of colour'.[43] To achieve this effect, the paintings were displayed without frames, with a tiny handful of early works, and a preponderance of Venetian subjects, in both oils and watercolours, from the 1830s and 1840s.

Naturally, with such a thesis, Gowing seized upon critic William Hazlitt's derogatory description in 1816 of Turner's works as 'too much abstractions of aerial perspective, and representations not properly of the objects of nature, as of the medium through which they were seen', to claim that, when Turner first arrived in Venice in 1819, he was very much affected by the spirit of the city, which the painter Henry Fuseli had called 'the birthplace and the theatre of colour', to 'make drawings entirely of colour, with no other substance'.[44] Yet, although Turner exhibited views of Venice almost annually from 1835 until 1846, it is clear that he intended them to be evocations of specific views – embodying reflections on historical truth – rather than simply blazing abstractions of

colour. Their commercial success confirms that this is how many of his contemporaries viewed them.

Turner spent a total of less than four weeks sketching in Venice, on three visits in 1819, 1833 and 1840. Paul Hills noted the city's particular appeal: 'No city built on land can offer so brilliant an arrangement and so strange an intermingling and intensifying of the colour of the sky and the colour of the buildings on the surface of its thoroughfares.'[45] Turner had eagerly read Byron's *Childe Harold*, published in 1818, and its romantic view of the city in terminal decline pervaded the painter's work ever after – as Ruskin wrote in his autobiography: 'My Venice, like Turner's, had been chiefly created for us by Byron.'[46] Even before Turner had been to Venice he made two remarkable watercolours reproduced in James Hakewill's *Picturesque Tour of Italy* (1819); these were based on the author's own pencil drawings.[47] During his first visit of a few days in late summer 1819 on a tour primarily devoted to Rome, Turner concentrated on making pencil sketches of specific architectural details – A.J. Finberg noted that 'it would take up too much time to colour in the open air – [Turner] could make fifteen or sixteen pencil sketches to one coloured'. However it is the four limpid watercolours in the 'Como and Venice' sketchbook that are regarded as the artist's exceptional work during the period.[48] Specialists disagree over whether they were all made in front of the motif or partly from memory, but they generally agree on Turner's novel depiction of light falling on buildings, or his illumination of them from behind (fig. 24). Although Turner had obviously fallen for the faded charms of Venice during this visit, his sketches resulted in only a handful of works prepared in his studio in London, including two illustrations for Samuel Rogers's *Italy, a Poem* (1830) and *Poems* (1834).[49] More notable were two oil paintings shown at the Royal Academy in 1833: *Ducal Palace, Venice* (untraced) and *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti painting* (Tate). The exhibition enjoyed great success, partly due to newspaper coverage of Turner's wish to outdo his rival Clarkson Stanfield.[50] According to the *Morning Chronicle* (6 June 1833), it was painted in two or three days after the artist heard that Stanfield was exhibiting a similar view. While this is unlikely, contemporary critics judged Turner's work favourably, *The Spectator* describing it as 'a most brilliant gem. The emerald waters, the bright blue sky, and the ruddy hue of the Ducal Palace, relieved by the chaste whiteness of the stone buildings around'. For Turner, it was a tribute to his great predecessor of Venetian painting, Canaletto.

Turner made his second visit to Venice in 1833 at the expense of his patron, H.A.J. Munro of Novar, who intended to commission a painting or watercolour based on his sketches. The visit was characteristically short but, together with the earlier studies, provided Turner with material for major oil paintings shown at the Royal Academy from 1834 to 1840. Although the financial arrangements are not clear, Munro bought Turner's *Venice, from the Porch of the Madonna della Salute* at the Royal Academy in 1835 (fig. 25). The brilliance of colour – showing the buildings almost dissolving into their reflections in the Grand Canal – was almost universally appreciated by contemporaries. By contrast, Turner's view of Venice shown the following year, *Juliet and her Nurse* (private

Fig. 25 J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), *Venice, from the Porch of Madonna della Salute*, *c.*1835. Oil on canvas. Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1899 (99.31)

collection), was the subject of such a severe review by the Rev. John Eagles that it inspired the teenage John Ruskin to write his first defence of Turner.[51] Eagles, in *Blackwood's Magazine*, contended that the picture was 'a strange jumble … neither sunlight, moonlight, nor starlight, nor firelight … a composition as from models of different parts of Venice, thrown higgledy-piggledy together, streaked blue and pink and thrown into a flour tub'. Turner discouraged Ruskin from publishing his riposte, in which he defended the painting in poetic and whimsical terms, identifying the mists rising above the city as 'aetherial spirits, souls of the mighty dead breathed out of the tombs of Italy into the blue of her bright heaven, and wandering in vague and infinite glory around the earth they have loved'.

Commercial considerations may have encouraged Turner to spend two weeks in Venice in the late summer of 1840, from 20 August to 3 September – he had recently exhibited two Venetian subjects at the Royal Academy, one commissioned by John Sheepshanks, so he knew there was a strong market for such pictures.[52] As usual, he worked assiduously, using a number of 'roll' sketchbooks, which were wide and narrow, with soft covers that could be rolled up and put into his pocket. Turner filled these with the usual pencil sketches of architectural compositions and details and, exceptionally, a sequence of about

Fig. 26 J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851), *Bridge of Sighs, Ducal Palace and Custom-House, Venice: Canaletti painting*, exhibited 1833. Oil on mahogany. Tate, N00370

100 watercolours, made on the spot or from memory in the painter's room at the Hotel Europa (now the Palazzo Giustinian). Some of these luminous and spontaneous sketches – on 'Whatman' paper brought from England – are now among the artist's most admired works, not least because Ruskin included three from the 'Storm' sketchbook in his gift to Oxford in 1861 (fig. 26), and two more (plus a further Venetian subject) to Cambridge in the same year; and most of the others are also in public collections. In addition, Turner bought sketchbooks and single sheets of mid-toned paper locally – both in Vienna and Venice – which he used for highly atmospheric interiors of St Mark's and the theatre, night scenes and frequent storms. Together, they 'present Venice as a sequence of phantasmagorical visions, where perspective and scale are often ambiguous and topographical features not always in sight'.[53]

Unlike his contemporary studies in Switzerland, which were frequently developed into large finished watercolours, Turner's watercolour sketches of Venice remained private exercises. The city did, however, provide him with 17 further exhibited oil paintings, of which nine were sold. Frequently, Turner appended to the title a quotation, or sometimes merely a reference, to his own poem, 'The Fallacies of Hope', reflecting his Byronic belief that the city was doomed. For example, when shown at the Royal Academy in 1843, *The Sun of Venice Going to Sea*, with its obvious symbolism of decline and eclipse, suggested that 'Fair shines the morn, and soft the zephyrs blow / Venecia's fisher spreads his painted sail so gay / Nor heeds the demon that in grim repose / Expects his evening prey'.[54] By no means all the late Venetian subjects are so despondent; indeed, one critic failed to notice the lines of verse and described the boat as being 'like a thing of life … so gay – so buoyant – so swift'.[55]

Ruskin may have been responsible for the fact that this painting did not sell: he had reserved both *The Sun of Venice* and *San Benedetto Looking towards Faustina* (Tate) at the exhibition, but could not decide which his father should buy. When he saw the former painting again in 1856, he noted that, in spite of the degradations in the colour of the sea and the darkening of the lead white in the sky, 'the marvellous brilliancy of the arrangement of colour in this picture renders it, to my mind, one of Turner's leading works in oil'. He did not acquire a major Venetian oil by Turner until 1847, when his father paid 850 guineas for *The Grand Canal, Venice*, which had been exhibited ten years earlier.[56] Its upright format and jostling crowds on gondolas in the middle of the canal – and on the piers on the edge – give it a mood of exuberance far from the melancholy of the broader views. This painting was perhaps better suited to Ruskin's increasing irritation with Turner's despondent view of the city.

Turner's paintings of Venice owe a great deal to Ruskin's advocacy. As early as 1841, he confided to a friend that Venice was 'quite beyond everybody but Turner'.[57] In the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843), he repeatedly praised the latest views of Venice, convinced that they were the artist's finest late oils. In 1845, he made a special trip to Venice to obtain 'authority for all that Turner has done for her'.[58] Increasingly in his own drawings, he abandoned the shimmering mirage of Turner's watercolours to make carefully observed studies of architectural fact. When Turner died in 1851, Ruskin was, by coincidence, in Venice gathering material for the later volumes of *The Stones of Venice*. When he heard that his hero had died, he wrote that 'everything in sunshine and the sky so talks of him. Their Great witness lost'.[59]