

The 18th-century public sought ‘naturalness’ in artists’ depictions of landscapes. Documentation of particular places became popular, in part due to growing travel opportunities and the expanding colonial imperative. Such depictions of geographic settings also served the needs of the many scientific expeditions mounted during the century and satisfied the desires of genteel tourists for mementos of their journeys. By this time, a ‘Grand Tour’ of the major sites of Europe was considered part of every well-bred person’s education. Naturally, those on tour wished to leave with things that would help them remember their experiences and that would impress those at home with the wonders they had seen.

The English were especially eager collectors of pictorial souvenirs. Certain artists in Venice specialized in painting the most characteristic scenes, or vedure (views), of that city to sell to British visitors. The veduta paintings of ANTONIO CANALETTO were eagerly acquired by English tourists as visible evidence of their visit to the city of the Grand Canal. It must have been very cheering on a gray winter afternoon in England to look up and see a sunny, panoramic view such as that in Canaletto’s *Basin of San Marco from San Giorgio Maggiore*, with its cloud-studded sky, calm harbor, varied water traffic, picturesque pedestrians, and well-known Venetian landmarks all painted in scrupulous perspective and minute detail.

Canaletto had trained as a scene painter with his father, but his easy mastery of detail, light, and shadow soon made him one of the most popular ‘vedutisti’ in Venice. occasionally, he painted his scenes directly from life, but usually he made drawings ‘on location’ to take back to his studio and use as sources for paintings. To help make the on-site drawings true to life, he often used a camera obscura (literally, ‘dark room’). As early as the 17th century, artists such as Vermeer had used such a device. These instruments were darkened chambers (some of them virtually portable closets) with optical lenses fitted into a hole in one wall through which light entered to project an inverted image of the subject onto the chamber’s opposite wall. The artist could trace the main details from this image for later reworking and refinement. The camera obscura allowed Canaletto (and other artists) to create visually convincing paintings that included variable focus of objects at different distances. His paintings give the impression of capturing every detail, with no ‘editing.’ Actually, he presented each site within Renaissance perspectival rules and exercised great selectivity about which details to include and which to omit to make a coherent and engagingly attractive picture.



ANTONION CANALETTO, *Basin of San Marco from San Giorgio Maggiore*, ca. 1740. Oil on canvas, 4’3” x 6’3”. The Wallace Collection, London.

Kleiner, Fred S. and Christin J. Mamiya. Gardner’s Art Through The Ages. 12th ed. Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2005.