



# Venice: Steeped in History, Awash With Beauty

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



**Santa Maria della Salute as seen from Giudecca**

graphite and watercolor on paper, 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x16

This view from my apartment, encompassing Santa Maria della Salute (far left) and San Giorgio Maggiore (far right) from a vantage point across the Giudecca Canal, is one I've painted frequently at different times of day. On a June afternoon, the sun strikes the forms of Salute and the facade of San Giorgio, but leaves the line of buildings fronting the Zattere promenade in shadow.

*a Serenissima* (“the most serene,” in Italian) is the name given to Venice, a once powerful, autonomous seafaring republic. From the fall of the Roman Empire, it ruled the waves for more than half a millennium and, at the time, was the among the most powerful city-states in the world. Its importance to painters flows from its founding in a lagoon around a series of islands, hence forestalling the rise of wheeled transport (other than the small handcarts porters use to move goods and luggage from the barges). The result is an enchanting and peaceful environment unlike that of any other major city in the world. It's no wonder that, for centuries,



**Santa Maria della Salute**

graphite and watercolor on paper, 8x5 $\frac{3}{4}$

Santa Maria della Salute is a centric church in the baroque style, designed by Baldassare Longhena (1598–1682). It's construction began in 1631, in commemoration of the rebirth of the city-state following a plague epidemic. This painting, inspired by John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), who captured the church from a similar vantage point, was done quickly; partway through, I realized I'd soon have to meet some friends for lunch. The enforced speed encouraged a degree of abstraction and suggestion I'd have been less likely to achieve with more time available.

artists have flocked to Venice's embankments, canals and squares to capture vistas of churches, palaces and bridges, all bathed in dazzling, golden light or in the soft haze of the frequent maritime fog. Our heroes, whether they be Canaletto, Guardi, Whistler, Turner or Sargent, have all been seduced by the city's charms, and indeed, their very artistic identity is framed by the work they produced there.

I first visited Venice at the age of 9 and began to tackle it artistically almost 40 years ago. It's in this city, along with Rome, that I've completed more plein-air watercolors than I have anywhere else. For me, the attraction is not only great architecture and some of the world's most appealing outdoor urban spaces, but also the ease with which the perfect vantage point can be found to set up and start painting. During my frequent visits, at all times of year, I follow the light, moving mostly by public vaporetto (the ubiquitous and frequent water buses) until I see the perfect spot and view. Giorgio and Il Redentore—among the greatest works of architect

**San Michele from moving ferry**

watercolor on paper, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ x8

The best way to get in the spirit of painting Venice is to paint quick warm-up sketches without preliminary drawing—and the best way to force yourself to do that is to paint from the deck of a moving ferry. There's not time to capture anything more than the shape and essence of the scene.





**Cortile With Sun, Palazzo Rezzonico**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 5x7½

I was captivated by the light streaming into this palace courtyard as well as the light coming through the portal facing out to the Grand Canal in the distance. For this quick sketch, I took advantage of a pre-mixed color of burnt sienna and ultramarine blue that I keep at the ready in a small vial. There are essentially three values: the white of the paper, a mid-tone and a shadow tone represented in two gradients.



**Dawn From the Giudecca**

graphite and watercolor on paper, 13x17

This, for me, is a familiar scene from the apartment where I often stay while visiting Venice. Once when, due to the effects of jet lag, I was up early, with the darkness of night still prevailing, I became aware of a lightening in the eastern sky with the sun just below the horizon. I caught the image in my mind's eye as well as on film and proceeded to sketch. The composition was simple enough to be quickly executed, but I soon discovered that the morning dampness prevented the washes from drying. I completed the work later in the relative dryness of the apartment interior.



**Il Redentore From the Zattere**  
graphite and watercolor on paper, 11x15

The broad canal in this view separates the Dorsoduro district from the island of Giudecca, which is the only major residential quarter of Venice that's not linked to the others by bridges. The Zattere is a wide promenade beside the canal where passenger ships used to dock, and where some small ones still do today.

Andrea Palladio (1508–1580)—and San Marco are subjects I've painted again and again. Some of my work, like the quick sketch of Santa Maria della Salute or impressions captured from a moving ferry, came about on the spur of the moment. And at the end of a day's work, there's always a nearby osteria for the indulgence of *cicchetti* (small snacks) washed down by an Aperol spritz!

This city has been spared the ravages and detritus of motorized wheeled traffic (road signs, acres of parked cars, noise and pollution), which, perhaps, explains why its physical form and appearance have changed so little from when it was captured by Canaletto in the 18th century. Yes, the boats powered by wind and the brawn of rowers have given way to more prosaic forms, and the incursion of mammoth cruise vessels and rising seas also threaten, but there are few other places on this rapidly changing planet where we can find things much as they've been for centuries. ♣

*Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.*