Shipping In Stormy Waters, Attributed To Italian Artist Francesco Guardi



59 000 EUR

Signature : Francesco Guardi (1712-1793) Attributed
Period : 18th century
Condition : Bon état général, prêt à accrocher. la toile a été rentoilée. il y a de la saleté en surface et le vernis s'est décoloré en jaune. il y a un fin motif de craquelure sur la surface de la peinture. contactez-nous pour un rapport d'état complet.
Material : Oil painting
Diameter : 59.7 cm
Height : 50.8 cm

Description

The splendour of the tragic sea

Francesco Guardi and maritime painting in Venetian art

No Venetian painter was a stranger to the sea. After all, Venice was not only one of the most prominent ports of the Mediterranean, but indeed a city literally submerged in the ocean from time to time. Curiously however, the famous Venetian school of painting showed little interest in maritime motifs, favouring scenes from the iconic architecture of the city rather than seascapes. That is why this painting is a particularly interesting window into not only the painter Francesco Guardi himself - but to the significance of the element of water in art history, in absence as well

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as in the centre of attention.

Whether it be calm, sunny days with stunning views of the palaces alongside the canals of Venice or - more rarely - stormy shipwrecking tragedies at sea, water as a unifying element is integral to the works of painter Francesco Guardi (1712-1793). During his lifetime, Venetian art saw many of its greatest triumphs with names like Tiepolo or Canaletto gaining international recognition and firmly establishing Venice as one of the most vibrant artistic communities of Europe. While the city itself already in the 18th century was something of an early tourist spot where aristocrats and high society visited on their grand tour or travels, the artists too contributed to the fame and their work spread the image of Venice as the city of romance and leisure to an international audience, many of whom could never visit in person.

Still today, the iconic image of Venice with its whimsical array of palaces, churches and other historic buildings is much influenced by these artists, many of whom have stood the test of time like very well and remain some of the most beloved in all of art history. It was not primarily subtility, intellectual meanings or moral ideals that the Venetian art tried to capture; instead it was the sheer vibrancy of life and the fast-paced city with crumbling palaces and festive people that made this atmosphere so special. Of course, Venice could count painters in most genres among its residents, from portraiture to religious motifs, history painting and much else. Still, it is the Vedutas and views of the city that seems to have etched itself into our memory more than anything else, not least in the tradition of Canaletto who was perhaps the undisputed master of all Venetian painters.

Born into his profession, Francesco lived and breathed painting all his life. His father, the painter Domenico Guardi (1678-1716) died when

Francesco was just a small child, yet both he and his brothers Niccolò and Gian Antonio continued in their fathers' footsteps. The Guardi family belonged to the nobility and originated from the mountainous area of Trentino, not far from the Alps. The brothers worked together on more challenging commissions and supported each other in the manner typical of family workshops or networks of artists. Their sister Maria Cecilia married no other than the artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo himself, linking the family to the most renowned Venetian name of the time. During almost a decade, Guardi worked in the studio of Michele Giovanni Marieschi, sometimes simply known as Michiel, a painted similar in both style and motif. Canaletto is, however, the artist Guardi is most often compared to since they shared a mutual fascination for depicting the architecture and cityscape of Venice.

During the course of his career, Guardi tried his hand in many different genres. He was as swift in painting landscapes, Vedutas of Venice, sacred motifs, interiors and architectural compositions as he was in a number of other motifs. His style is typical of the Venetian school but also distinct and personal once we look a little closer. There is an absolute certainty in the composition, the choice of which sometimes feels like that of a carefully calculated photograph - yet it is also very painterly, in the best sense of the word: fluid, bold, sensitive and full of character. The brushwork is rapid, intense, seemingly careless and extraordinarily minute at the same time; fresh and planned in a very enjoyable mixture. His interiors often capture the breath-taking spacious glamour of the palaces and all their exquisite decor. He usually constructed the motif through remarkably simple, almost spontaneous yet intuitively precise strokes and shapes. The result was a festive, high-spirited atmospheric quality, far away from the sterile and exact likeness that other painters fell victim to when trying to copy Canaletto.

The painting here has nothing of the city of Venice in it. On the contrary, we seem to be transported far away into the solitary ocean, with no architecture, nothing to hold on to - only the roaring sea and the dangerous cliffs upon which the ships are just moments away from being crushed upon. It is a maritime composition evoking both Flemish and Italian precursors, in the proud tradition of maritime painting that for centuries formed a crucial part of our visual culture.

This genre of painting is today curiously overlooked, compared to how esteemed and meaningful it was when our relationship to the sea was far more natural than it is today. When both people and goods travelled by water, and many nations and cities - Venice among them - depended entirely on sea fare, the existential connection to the ocean was much more natural and integrated into the imagination. The schools and traditions of maritime art are as manifold as there are countries connected to the sea, and all reflect the need to process the dangers and wonders of the ocean.

It could symbolize opportunity, the exciting prospects of a new countries and adventures, prospering trade, beautiful scenery as well as war and tragedy, loss of life, danger and doom. To say that water is ambivalent in nature is an understatement, and these many layers were something that artists explored in the most wondrous ways. Perhaps it takes a bit more time for the modern eye to identify the different nuances and qualities of historic maritime paintings, they may on first impression seem hard to differentiate from each other. But when allowing these motifs to unfold and tell stories of the sea in both fiction and reality - or somewhere in between - we are awarded with an understanding of how the oceans truly built our world.

In Guardi's interpretation, we see an almost theatrically arranged shipwrecking scene. No less than five ships are depicted right in the moment of utter disaster. Caught in a violent storm, the waves have driven them to a shore of sharp cliffs and if not swallowed by the waves, crushing against the cliffs seems to be the only outcome. The large wooden ships are impressively decorated with elaborate sculpture, and in fact relics already during Guardi's lifetime. They are in fact typical of Dutch and Flemish 17th century ships, giving us a clue to where he got the inspiration from. Guardi must have seen examples of Flemish maritime art, that made him curious about these particular motifs. One is reminded of Flemish painters like Willem van de Velde and Ludolf Backhuysen, and this very painting has indeed been mistakenly attributed to Matthieu van Plattenberg. It bears, however, all the typical traits of Guardi and knowing his impressive versatility further strengthens the attribution to him, as do no less than ten other known versions of the same scene and a study drawing. Both the versions in Musée des Beaux-Arts in Montreal and the Gnecchi collection in Milan are particularly similar in their dramatic impact, treatment of the waves and positionings of the ships, together forming an interesting example of how one artist could rework and explore a composition.

Even though seascapes never became the speciality of Guardi, the existence of this painting is an intriguing testament to his virtuosity, and artistic advantages of using the sea as a metaphor for the fragility of life and man's vulnerability against the elements. Furthermore, it gives greater depths to the understanding of the entire school of Venetian painting which, for all its iconic architectural splendour, was much more versatile than was is commonly assumed. The fact that artworks like these also remind us about a forgotten relationship to the sea further enhances

the valuable lesson that a painting can be an eye-opener to history, once we give it the attention it deserves.

oil on canvas
canvas dimensions 20 x 23 ½ in. (50.8 x 59.7 cm.)
frame 25.7 x 29 inches (65.5 x 74 cm.)

Provenance:
Christie's London, 2 November 2016, lot 180 (as Attributed to Francesco Guardi), sold for GBP 102.500;
Private collection France;
Sotheby's Paris, 17 June 2021, lot 165 (as Attributed to Francesco Guardi)

Literature:
A. Bonfand,Francesco Guardi, una burrasca,étude inédite, 2017, cat. 15as by Francesco Guardi, fig. 1.

J. Byam Shaw, The Drawings of Francesco Guardi, London, 1951, p. 78, no. 73, illustrated.
A preparatory sketch for this composition is recorded by Byam Shaw. In several respects this drawing is closer to this painting than to the two versions of this composition by Guardi in the Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal and the Bortolotto collection. The design of the stern of the ship far right is different than in the Montreal picture, the crows nests are depicted at sharper angles and the cliffs along the right edge are more prominently displayed in the drawing and this lot. In the drawing the man standing on the rock has his arms outstretched and is trying to catch the rigging: in this picture he has already caught this.