

THE
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TEACHERS' NOTES

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A Regatta on the Grand Canal

Canaletto,
about 1740



Surrounded by a riot of colour, movement and noise, thin black boats slice through the water of Venice's Grand Canal, jostling for position as they desperately try to push ahead of each other. Bright sunlight glints on the water, the decorated buildings, the elaborate vessels lining the canal and the spectacular outfits of the crowd. It seems like the whole city has come out to watch this boat race, one of the many annual celebrations in a place famous for excitement and spectacle. But this very Venetian scene, by a very Venetian artist, was made for tourists and it allows us to travel back in time to experience a 300-year-old holiday picture.

A regatta

This large painting, over a metre tall and almost two metres wide, captures a city in party mode. The calm blue skies of the painting's top half are contrasted by its bottom half, every inch crammed with intricate details. We are looking at Venice's major thoroughfare, the Grand Canal, lined on each side with hundreds of boats of varying colours and sizes – some undecorated and others looking more like tropical birds or plants. In them, thousands of people stand, sit, cheer and chat, as they watch the race. Above, spectators line the balconies of waterfront palaces, decorated with cloths in a rainbow of colours.

We are witnessing an exciting part of one of Venice's famous regattas – days of boat races that are still held today. Regattas are held in many countries but the word is originally Italian, and this regatta is thought to date back at least as far as the 1300s. The elaborate vessels along the side are *bissone*, eight-oared parade boats which would have started the regatta by leading a procession. The central racing boats are *gondolas*, flat-bottomed rowing boats that are unique to Venice.

The *gondolas* would have been rowed by people who used boats in their day-to-day jobs, each representing a different profession. The most skilled rowers could become working-class heroes celebrated throughout the city. Regattas featured many races in different categories – women, men, pairs and large groups all competed for recognition. In this scene, two rowers look like they're almost colliding, while another races into the frame, hinting at the fierce competition on display.

Celebration

Across the world and throughout history, different cultures have marked important occasions with celebrations. How to celebrate is often just as important as what is being celebrated. Colour, decoration, costume and ceremonies commonly feature, and all are on full display in this painting. The drying laundry visible in so many of Canaletto's other paintings has been taken in – coloured banners are instead hung from balconies. Everyday work has been set aside to watch and cheer on the big race.

Canaletto

This view of Venice was created by a Venetian artist called Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697–1768). His father, Bernardo, painted scenery for theatres. Young Antonio joined the family business, and later made his name as Canaletto (meaning 'little Canal'), painting scenes of his home city at work and play.

If you look closely, you may notice that many people in the crowd are wearing costumes – black three-cornered hats, cloaks, and white masks. Venetians wore these special outfits to the theatre, formal celebrations, festivals, and spring and summer regattas. Disguises allowed people not only to assume different identities, but also to feel part of a communal celebration where everyone played a part.

On the left of the painting is the Palazzo Balbi, recognisable for the tall obelisks on its roof, and home today to Venice's regional council. The building closest to us with steps and columns, gleaming in white, pink and gold is, astonishingly, a temporary structure made from wood, plaster and papier mâché. It was called the *macchina della regatta* – an elaborate parade float built especially for the race! It was the race's finishing line and where the prizes would be given out. Rowers would race past the *macchina* to the far end of the Grand Canal, turn around and then speed back up to finish outside it.

Colour

The Gallery's Scientific team analysed samples of this painting to find that Canaletto used Prussian blue pigment to create his expanse of blue sky. The best blue was ultramarine but it was very expensive, made from lapis lazuli gemstones. Smalt, made from crushed cobalt glass, was a cheaper option but often faded to a dull grey. Prussian blue was accidentally created in around 1706 when a Berlin paint maker was attempting to make red. This new discovery allowed artists to achieve bright, long-lasting colour without the high price tag.



Cityscapes

Highly detailed cityscape paintings, known as *vedute* (literally 'views'), were fairly new to Venice in the 1700s. Portraits, religious paintings and mythological scenes were typically bigger sellers. While they'd grow to become a hugely popular Venetian genre, they were first popularised by a Dutch painter known as Gaspar van Wittel (1653–1736) who painted cities across Italy.

The Grand Tour

During the 1700s, countries like Britain and France were becoming richer. This wealth often came from trade, the development of empire, and the exploitation of colonised land, people and resources.

The growing upper classes could afford the time and expense of international travel. They increasingly went on trips for education, self-fulfilment and pleasure, often known as the Grand Tour. Italy was a popular destination. While cities like Rome and Florence offered Roman ruins, ancient sculptures, and more recent masterpieces by artists such as Michelangelo; Venice was known as a pleasure city, home to exciting parties and carnivals. After a journey lasting weeks, arriving in a city built on water must have been extremely exciting. Artists like Canaletto capitalised on this excitement – his views of Venice were in high demand.

There are more paintings of Venice by Canaletto in one room of the National Gallery than there are in all of the public galleries in Venice. Perhaps because Venetians could simply open their windows to see Venice, Canaletto came to sell most of his views to tourists wanting a souvenir. No one bought more of these than the British, thanks in large part to Canaletto's British patron and agent, Joseph Smith. Canaletto was so popular in Britain, that he decided to live and paint there for most of the years between 1746 and 1755.

Canaletto's *Regatta* has a partner painting: *The Basin of San Marco on Ascension Day*. Identically sized and with a matching frame, it's another enormous view of a great Venetian celebration. There are many similar versions of both paintings in collections across the UK, including at the National Gallery. Canaletto and his workshop of assistants often recycled figures, boats and buildings across paintings to meet demand. Look closely at the intense detail and you can see how many figures are created by little more than a few skilful flicks of paint, the highlights on the water are a repeated white wiggly line.

An impossible city

There is nowhere quite like Venice – its art, architecture, culture, language and international status are unique. Venice's buildings are built atop huge wooden staves driven into the lagoon's bed – it is an engineering marvel that is in constant battle with the natural environment. Originally inhospitable marshland, its first settlers transformed the landscape, building a city on water, and turning it into one of Europe's most powerful trading centres.

Venice defended itself with its wealth, buying armies and making diplomatic agreements with foreign powers. Its location was also protective – a shallow lagoon that stopped large warships from entering. Its strategic position on the shores of the Adriatic Sea meant

that it became a gateway for trade between the East and West, and a meeting place for people and cultures.

However, Venice's history with trade is difficult and complicated. Not only a place that sold spices, textiles and pigments, Venice also transported and sold enslaved people, at great human cost. People were often captured from Asia and the Middle East, and their exploitation contributed to Venice's prosperity.

By Canaletto's time, Venice was a city in decline. It was no longer a great trading power – Portugal, the Netherlands and Britain had all overtaken it. The lagoon that protected it also trapped it. The city often relied on fresh water being imported from the mainland, and its densely packed buildings meant it was prone to diseases spreading swiftly. Venice was still able to trade on its history and status, though. Its carnivals, festivals, buildings and memories of its past successes all continued to attract tourists.

Venice today continues that tradition and, although the historic city centre only has around 49,000 people living there, it welcomes over 13 million tourists a year. While visitors bring money into Venice, the strain on its historic architecture, coupled with rising global sea levels, means that preserving the vision of the city in Canaletto's paintings is a constant concern.

However, Venice remains a city of celebration, with its unique carnival one of the oldest in the world. Its traditional festivals like the regatta have been reintroduced, helping new generations connect with the city's past. Venice also remains an artistic centre – it is home to the world's oldest film festival and oldest international art festival, the Biennale. In times of prosperity and difficulty, art remains an important way for Venice to support its local communities and speak to the rest of the world.



Ultramarine
Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*
(detail), 1520–3

Faded smalt
Paolo Veronese, *Happy Union*
(detail), about 1575

Prussian blue
Canaletto, *A Regatta on the Grand Canal*
(detail), about 1740

Discussion points

Celebration

What have you celebrated before? What different things have people in your class celebrated just once, a few times, or often? Do you wear any particular clothes, eat certain foods, or take part in special activities when you celebrate? Can you find out why? Is there anything you don't currently celebrate that you would like to? Why and how would you like to celebrate it? Which things are common to celebrations throughout the world, and what is unique? Is there any difference between a celebration and a party? Does everyone agree? Are celebrations always happy occasions?

Travel and tourism

If you could go anywhere, where would you go, and why? Which different places do you go to most days, some days and rarely? Why do you go to these places? When might people travel somewhere because they have to, and when because they want to? What do people do on holiday that they don't normally do? Which places in the world are most popular with tourists and why might that be? What makes someone a tourist? What is the difference between a tourist and a local, and does everyone in the class agree? Can you be a tourist in your home town? How can tourism help a place, and how might it harm it?

Local identity

What sort of buildings and spaces are there where you live? Which are your favourite ones to go to, and which have you never been to? What does your local area have that is the same as in other parts of the country? What is unique about your local area? If someone visited you, what would you recommend they see, and why? Are there any special events where you live? What are you proud of in the area you live in, and what would you change?

Changing landscape

Which places in your local area are new, and which are old? What is similar and different about them? Think of a place you see every day and try to imagine how you would feel if it was no longer there. Are there any buildings or places near you which are temporary? Why are they temporary and how are they different to more permanent places? What things do you do differently in cold and hot weather, wet and dry weather? How would your life be different if it was always cold, hot, wet or dry? What would you still be able to do, and what would you have to do differently?

Competition

Have you ever been in a competition? Were you being watched by a crowd of people? How did that make you feel? How did you feel about winning or losing that competition? How did you feel about the people competing against you? Can losing sometimes be a good thing? How? When is being competitive a positive thing, and when might it be negative? Does everyone agree?

Comparison artworks

In the National Gallery Collection:

George Bellows, *Men of the Docks*, 1912.

Canaletto's other regatta painting, *Venice: A Regatta on the Grand Canal*, about 1735.

Canaletto, *Venice: The Upper Reaches of the Grand Canal with S. Simeone Piccolo*, about 1740.

Canaletto, *London: Interior of the Rotunda at Ranelagh*, 1754.

Claude, *Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba*, 1648.

Edouard Manet, *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, 1862.

Peter Paul Rubens, *A Roman Triumph*, about 1630.

Claude-Joseph Vernet, *A Sporting Contest on the Tiber*, 1750.

Elsewhere

Vittore Carpaccio, *Miracle of the Relic of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto*, about 1496, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

Nick Cave's *Soundsuits*, 2009–10, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Ship of Tolerance*, 2005–present day, shipoftolerance.org

Hew Locke, *Armada*, 2017–19, Tate Liverpool

Lygia Pape, *A Multitude of Forms*, exhibition, 2017, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

William Powell Frith, *The Derby Day*, 1856–8, Tate Britain, London

Royal barge *Gloriana*, built for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee, 2012, glorianaqrb.org.uk