

GIACOMO GUARDI AND FRANCESCO GUARDI

(Venice 1764 - Venice 1835)

(Venice 1712 - Venice 1793)

A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Giacomo di Paludo

inscribed on the reverse in an old hand, possibly the artist's own: 'di S. Jacopo di Paludo di Venez[ia]'

oil on panel

17.3 x 25 cm (6¾ x 9⅞ in)

Provenance: Sir Thomas Fermor-Hesketh, 1st Baron Hesketh (1881-1944), Rufford Hall, Ormskirk, Lancashire in August 1917;
Thence by family descent to the previous owner.

Literature: Anon. compiler, Specification of Pictures and Furniture belonging to T. Fermor-Hesketh Esq., at Rufford Hall, Ormskirk, Lancashire, August 1st 1917, 'Two ditto by Guardi (very small) £200'.

THIS BEAUTIFULLY SERENE DEPICTION OF THE Island of San Giacomo in Paludo is, according to Professor Dario Succi, principally the work of Giacomo Guardi with the hand of Giacomo's father, Francesco Guardi, discernable in parts of the staffage. The painting is executed in the style of Francesco and demonstrates the great influence Giacomo took from his father. The flat glossiness of the lagoon, the sketchiness of the buildings, the spirited brush strokes and the impressionistic feel of the paintwork resemble Francesco's work. His characteristic style, known as *pittura di tocco*, was loose and informal, consisting of small dotting and quick strokes of the brush. This style, adopted by Giacomo, differed vastly from the linear, architecturally accurate approach of artists such as Canaletto (1697-1768), and gives the viewer a unique impression of life on the Venetian waterways.

The dominant feature of the painting is the church and convent of San Giacomo di Paludo, both of which were demolished in 1810. The church's steeple surmounted by a cross stands boldly delineated against the warmth of the sky, whilst gondolas pass by on the murky waters, one about to dock by a wooden jetty that leads to the entrance of the church. The view is based upon Antonio Visentini's (1688-1782) engraving of the same site, one of twenty islands featured in the *Isolario Veneto*.¹

The island takes its name from the church that once stood there, and is today known as San Giacomo in Paludo, and is located in the Venetian lagoon, between the islands of Murano and Madonna del Monte (fig.1). The island's name translates to 'St. James in the Marsh', an appropriate



Photograph of San Giacomo in Paludo (Figure 1)

name considering the church's watery foundations. In 1046, the island was given to Giovanni Trono of Mazzorbo for the purpose of building a monastery dedicated to San Giacomo Maggiore, which was to serve as a stopping point for pilgrims. In 1238, the convent was passed on to Cistercian nuns who inhabited it until 1440, after which they moved to the Santa Margherita Abbey in Torcello. In 1546, the church complex was

¹ A second edition was published in 1777 by Teodoro Viero.





Giacomo Guardi, *View of the Piazza San Marco, Venice*,
The Courtauld Gallery, London (Figure 2)

temporarily converted into a hospice, after which it was inherited by a Franciscan order. Despite its regular use and maintenance, the banks of the island increasingly eroded causing the buildings to decay. During the Napoleonic occupation of Venice, religious orders were suppressed, and the monastery, like many others, was demolished. From that point it was used as a military outpost, after which time the island became a munitions depot and in the nineteenth century, the Austrians, and then Italians, built a rampart on the site from which they controlled the navigation in the north Laguna. Today it lies in partial ruin.

Giacomo was primarily a painter in gouache, only occasionally venturing into oil painting. *View of the Piazza San Marco, Venice* in The Courtauld Gallery, see fig. 2, is an example of his work in gouache, whereas *View of the Isola di San Michele in Venice* in the Rijksmuseum, see fig. 3, like the present work, is a rare example of a composition in oil. The size of the panel in the Rijksmuseum is 14 x 21.5 cm, slightly smaller than the present painting, and both are typical of Giacomo's minute jewel-like works.

What is evident in *A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Giacomo di Paludo*, is how Giacomo appears to approach oil painting in a similar manner to painting with gouache or bodycolour, applying the pigment in as few layers as possible, which when translated into oils, endows the composition with a loose and fluid finish.

Elements of both the present painting and *View of the Isola di San Michele in Venice* display characteristics associated with watercolour. The



Giacomo Guardi, *View of the Isola di San Michele in Venice*,
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (Figure 3)

uniformity of colour and tone in both paintings gives the impression that they were created with a wash. Areas of the composition are blurred and blended in a manner reminiscent of wet on wet watercolour painting, while other details, such as the sky, are more delineated and formed using a drier brush. Giacomo also employs methods such as scratching out, which is primarily associated with works on paper.

Giacomo's interest in the contrast between light and shadow is evident throughout his *oeuvre* and gives his compositions a strong sense of form, compensating lesser embellished works. Although the architectural details in his gouaches, see fig. 2, are bold and outlined in black ink, these details are mostly omitted in his oil paintings. Instead of appearing bland and



Giacomo Guardi and Francesco Guardi, *A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Giacomo di Paludo* (Detail)

featureless on account of this economy of colour and line, however the architecture is dynamic and expressive, and the reflection of the buildings in the murky water is just hinted at in order to give the composition greater depth. In both the present painting and the Rijksmuseum example, the opacity of the lagoon, as well as the overcast sky, adds to the mystery and romanticism of the Venetian view.

The figures in Giacomo's oil compositions, made up of dashes and dots of paint, are striking in their simplicity and barely indicate details of clothing or hairstyle. This pared down approach allows the viewer to appreciate the entirety of the composition without focusing on the figures, as they are successfully integrated with the other elements of the painting instead of competing with them.

In *A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Giacomo di Paludo*, the staffage, which is thought to have been painted by Francesco,

reveals the great range of expression and movement that can be conveyed with a bare minimum of delineation or variation in colour. The sparing use of white to heighten selected parts of the staffage, such as the oars of the gondoliers who gently navigate their gondolas and more utilitarian *traghetti* through the lagoon, is particularly effective. This method is replicated in Francesco's painting *View of the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore* in the Hermitage, which is a larger and more highly finished composition, depicting a busy scene on the lagoon and the grander and more elaborate building complex of San Giorgio Maggiore (fig. 4). Certain elements of the painting, however, particularly the way in which the vessels are depicted, and the posture and movements of the gondoliers are very similar to the present image, as is the presence of a fishing boat in the left of the panel, whose mast echoes the vertical line of the bell tower.



Giacomo Guardi and Francesco Guardi, *A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Jacopo di Paludo* (Detail)

Both Giacomo and Francesco's style contrasts greatly with that of other prominent Venetian artists, such as Canaletto, who was noted for his precisely depicted views of Venice, which were painted for the tourist market and found particular favour amongst English collectors. They often record lavish Venetian public ceremonies such as *Reception of the French Ambassador in Venice* in the Hermitage, see fig. 5, which is a riot of colour and splendour, in contrast to the more subdued style of the Guardi family. The meticulously painted gondolas in the foreground of Canaletto's painting, their oarsmen and the figures crowding around the Doge's palace, of which every architectural detail is indicated, differ greatly from the impressionistic style of the present painting. *A View of the Venetian Lagoon with the Island of San Giacomo di Paludo* depicts its subject matter with vagueness instead of painstaking precision, yet manages in a few hasty brush strokes to convey the essence of the scene.

Giacomo was born in Venice in 1764, and was the son of Francesco, and grandson of Domenico Guardi (1678-1716), who founded the family workshop of *veduta* painting in Venice. The golden age of *vedutismo*, the art of painting Italian views of cities, towns, and villages, began in the



Francesco Guardi, *View of the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore*, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 4)

eighteenth century and the paintings produced were especially popular with travellers on the Grand Tour.

The business was inherited by Francesco and his older brother, Giovanni Antonio (Gianantonio) Guardi (1699-1760) (see inventory), one of the founders of the Venetian Academy. Francesco, now recognised as the last of the great Venetian *vedutisti*, spent many years working alongside Gianantonio painting altarpieces, and only began specialising in Venetian views around 1760. Though Francesco's style was initially influenced by the other great Venetian *veduta* painter, Canaletto, he was also influenced by another Venetian painter, Luca Carlevaris (1663-1730), who may have been a teacher of Canaletto. Francesco's cityscapes evolved to embrace a more free-handed style which created atmospheric effect.

Giacomo studied with his father and from c.1780 onwards painted numerous views of his native city, which were considerably influenced both in subject and style by his father. His paintings capture the picturesque beauty and atmospheric drama of Venice in an imaginative and distinctive fashion. Collectively, the Guardi family are often said to be the last true painters of the Venetian School in its classical form.



Canaletto, *Reception of the French Ambassador in Venice*, 1726/27, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 5)