



## Canaletto and the Art of Venice

National Gallery of Ireland 5th December 2018 – 24th March 2019

It is always strange, booking an appointment to see a gallery exhibition; I am more accustomed to rolling up to such events at my leisure. This introduction of formality about the arrangement lends an air of anticipation and expectation. After negotiating the eccentricities of the Luas tram system I made my way to the National Gallery, glancing frequently at my watch as I did not wish to be late. The exhibition itself was held in a small adjunct to the main galleries with its own reception area and serviced by young, fresh-faced attendants.

Canaletto was so named as a pet diminutive form of his patronym of *Canal*, and it is by this he is known to us today. Born and raised in Venice at the turn of the 18th century, when Venice itself was still an independent city-state, he painted what was around him – the canals, the ornate architecture, and the people who lived and worked in the beautiful, aquiferous city. He became known for his precise renditions, filled with the most intricate details and yet there was a conceit to his work, he would subtly alter the size, shape and positioning of some of the buildings, to create a more 'perfect' perspective. It was kind of like not letting the facts get in the way of a good story. The narrative that he created in his paintings, was of an idealised version of what was actually in existence.

He was also noted for his vibrant use of colour, the brilliant marine colours of his canals, were again an idealised realisation of the actual colour of the water, which was a rather murkier greyish brown. The sun always seemed to be shining in Canaletto's Venice; he captured the light in his paintings so exquisitely, it appeared that he had stolen a handful of glittering dust from that great golden orb and sprinkled it like precious gold onto his artists' palette.

In the oral guide to the Exhibition, I discovered that Canaletto's great patron and benefactor, Joseph Smith, a wealthy English banker, was responsible for conveying much of this work, to visiting English gentry and ensuring an enduring appreciation for this Venetian painter that continues to this day. Smith also created the special gold-panel frames for Canaletto's work, which further drew in the ambient light and enabled the colours to increase their intensity; unfortunately, George III, who bought Joseph Smith's collection in 1763, ruined the effect by butchering many of the

frames to satisfy a penchant for gratuitous rococo carving.

I confess I was somewhat sceptical of his work prior to seeing the exhibition; I wanted a little more than Disneyfied verisimilitude picture-postcard views of the great city of Venice. Nothing quite prepared me for seeing these pictures in the flesh, so to speak. They really do shine like gemstones. The prismatic quality of the colours really took my breath away. I was drawn into the pieces as I studied the detail. I began to hear the sounds of Venice, elicited from my own memories: the continuous lapping of the waters against the masonry; the shrieks of sea-birds, the thrum of a crowd and the occasional chunter of the vaporetos. The deep briny smell of the waters caused my nostrils to twitch as if assailed by some invisible flying insect.

*Wow!* I said to myself; this was what Canaletto was about. He wanted those who had visited Venice to have a perpetual reminder of what they had experienced; their own personal magic-box carrying a tiny sliver of the soul of Venice. They could then invite other people to gaze upon the beauty of Venice as they recalled their own adventures in the city.

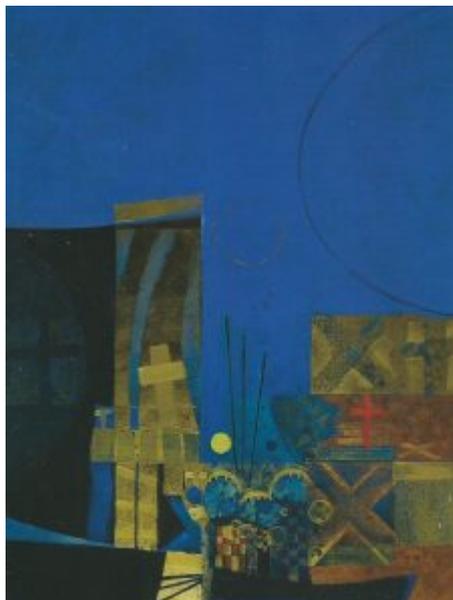
I left the Exhibition hours later, weighed down by a hefty catalogue of the Exhibition and a whole new appreciation of Canaletto, the man and the subtle genius of his work.

***John Llewellyn James***

The featured painting, *The Bacino of San Marco on Ascension Day*, c.1733, is in the Royal Collection.

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## **Royal Ulster Academy Exhibition in Enniskillen**



In an exciting first venture, the **Royal Ulster Academy** chose Enniskillen as one of the venues for their Outreach Programme. Part of the 137th Annual Members Exhibition travelled to the West to the *Waterways Ireland* gallery. This was quite a coup for Enniskillen, brought about in no small measure by the persistent lobbying by Noelle McAlinden, Arts Officer for the Western Education and Library Board.

The exhibition, in the attractive Waterways Gallery, proved a huge success with over 2,000 visitors in 30 days. Refreshingly, many of the visitors were local schoolchildren who would never otherwise have had the opportunity to view such a diverse display of artwork and sculpture. The range of artists and sculptures chosen to be brought to Enniskillen reflected the full range of the exhibition held at the Ulster Museum in Belfast. From oils to watercolours to bronzes this was in no way a diminished exhibition, rather a condensed one. The headquarters of Waterways Ireland generously hosted the event, providing a spacious venue with professional lighting.

Throughout the month there were talks, master-classes, demonstrations and lectures on a wide range of themes; Landscape Painting, Sculpture and 3D Thinking, and Oil Painting Technique by members of the Academy including Joanna Mules VPRUA, Julian Friers PPRUA and the current president of the academy, Betty Brown.

A wine reception to mark the exhibition finale included a lecture by Dr Denise Ferran, Past President of the Academy, on the influence of Kathleen Bridle on her two Fermanagh pupils, William Scott and T.P. Flanagan. To a packed hall, Dr Ferran explored the background to this remarkable woman artist and how she made her way in the male-dominated art world of the early 20th century. Comparing the technique, composition and light in Scott and Flanagan's art to that of Kathleen Bridle's Dr Ferran brought these Fermanagh artists to life. There was much lively debate amongst the large audience in identifying some of the landscapes and streets in the paintings. Final agreement from the Enniskillen audience on *Shop Through Curtains* was that it showed Hackett's fruit and vegetable shop in Darling Street, directly opposite Kathleen Bridle's then lodgings. Many in the audience later knew the shop as the *Garden Shop* owned by Gretta Maguire.

A native of Fermanagh and a passionate advocate of art education, Dr Ferran concluded her lecture with a plea to Councillor Howard Thornton, Chairman of

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, who was present to officially close the exhibition, for the creation of permanent exhibition space in Fermanagh. The large numbers of the public who attended the exhibition, as well as the number of schools who had participated in the activities over the month, would indicate the enthusiasm and need for such space.

We have a theatre; why not an exhibition centre?

**Christine Campbell**

The featured painting is *Devenish 1* by Brian Ferran HRUA



## Western Stars by Bruce Springsteen

A new album from the Boss is always an event, but this is something a bit special. *Western Stars* sees him channelling Glen Campbell and Burt Bacharach among others in a widescreen homage to Westerns. It's Bruce taking a bold new direction down well-travelled roads. Rumours that Bruce has been through writer's block give writers everywhere a boost when the results are an album of easy-listening gold.

There's all the storyteller Springsteen as usual with beautiful arrangements and orchestration. This is rock-pop infused with Country tales of mortality. Bruce, who is nearing his 70th birthday, doesn't sugar coat life. Track by track is steeped in empathy for small lives written large.

The song *Tucson Train* has Bruce's trademark lyrics

"We fought hard over nothing. We fought till nothing remained"

*Sleepy Joe's Cafe* sounds like a song of *The Mavericks*. Apart from that, this record has more in common with *Tunnel of Love*. Other stand-out tracks are *Stones* and *Hello Sunshine*. It's a bit left-field, but I think it will become a fan favourite. There's also a connection between this record and *The Rising*; both were when he had nothing to prove but he had something to say. We can only hope that he tours this album. After his stint on Broadway, he might prefer smaller venues.

We can only hope he hasn't lost that fire.

**Thomas McGovern**

*Thomas McGovern writes short stories and lives in Derrylin*

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## The Watch has Ended

And what a great watch it has been! A decade long in the telling of the story: characters we have loved and those we have hated have met their fates; some got what they deserved, many had surprises, others seemed to have been ill-served by the cruel hands of the author. *Game of Thrones* has been an epic tale, told over many years, both for the characters and the viewing public.

From childhood I read Ursula Le Guin's Earthsea books and Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern*, slavishly following the chronological order in which they were written – testing the patience of many a Librarian along the way. Into my teenage years, I found the likes of David Eddings, Raymond E. Feist and Stephen R. Donaldson and lived half my life in magical lands of swords and sorcery. However, I was unsure whether such outright 'fantasy' if televised would attract a mainstream audience. Yes, people avidly follow soaps, despite the obvious contrivances employed, or detective series where the maverick loner always get their men – or women. Actual fantasy with swords, magic and dragons was generally considered to be largely enjoyed by nerdy loners who spent far too long living at home with their parents.

Game of Thrones broke so many moulds that the rules of television have come to have been re-written. One of its the signature characteristics was the multiple theatres in which the characters performed; from Winterfell to The Wall; Kings Landing to Dorn and to Marine and the roads, my goodness the roads that led between them, so much of the show could be classed as a 'road-movie'; characters were travelling hither and thither, exploring the vastness of Westeros and beyond. The characters were intricately drawn and, whether you liked them or not, at the very least you understood them and the reasons for why they did what they did. Their motivations were revealed in their actions and in what they said; there was very little folderol in the dialogue, the spoken word developed the characters and the relationships they had with each other.

A word about the violence: *Game of Thrones* featured many acts of violence, some quite horrific and shocking and gruesomely realised on the screen; but in the context of the situation that the characters found themselves in, they were never without a reason, however dark and disturbing the justification. I have never enjoyed the mindless shoot 'em ups of many a Hollywood action caper, nor the reflexive shock and gratuitous gore of horror movies; nor have I ever indulged in the dubious pleasures of explicitly violent electronic games. I have always felt that the author has to justify the portrayal of violence by the strength of the story and the characters involved; the story or film cannot be used a fig-leaf to shovel inane depictions of violence to its audience. *Game of Thrones* trod the line between thrilling graphic representation and gratuitous 'red-meat' baiting of its audience, rarely if ever, falling the wrong side.

The other issue was the portrayal of sex and nudity; many critics felt there was too much of it and that it was largely from the heterosexual male gaze. In the light of the #me-too movement, we are looking again at the industry that produces much of our moving-images, rightfully asking searching questions of it and the products that are created. I felt that this was a valid criticism, however, placed within the context of the quite demonstrably patriarchal society that is depicted on the show, it was not without justification. However, it is positive to note that *Game of Thrones* has produced so many incredible, complex and strong female characters, like Daenerys Targeryan, Cersei Lanister, Sansa and Arya Stark and Lady Brienne of Tarth amongst many others.

Many critics said that the action in the final season was were rushed; story and character arcs took abrupt pivots and journeys that were shown at length in previous seasons were now curtailed to bring about the denouement. I think that criticism is valid, but you could not help being awestruck at the scale of the logistics involved in the making of the series, to bring the audience the spectacle they craved. A whole army of technical, artistic and creative people was employed over many locations to produce the show. One of the producers commented that they could not logistically take the show any further. If that is a failure, then it is a noble one.

The endeavour to bring such a story to us has been inspirational. For me, as a writer, it always comes down to the story. As Tyrion Lanister said – what matters is not who won and who lost, who lived and who died, it is the stories that were created.

What will follow *Game of Thrones*? I have no idea. But I can hardly wait.

***John Llewellyn James***

The featured image is a closeup of the *Game of Thrones Door* in Blakes of the Hollow, Enniskillen