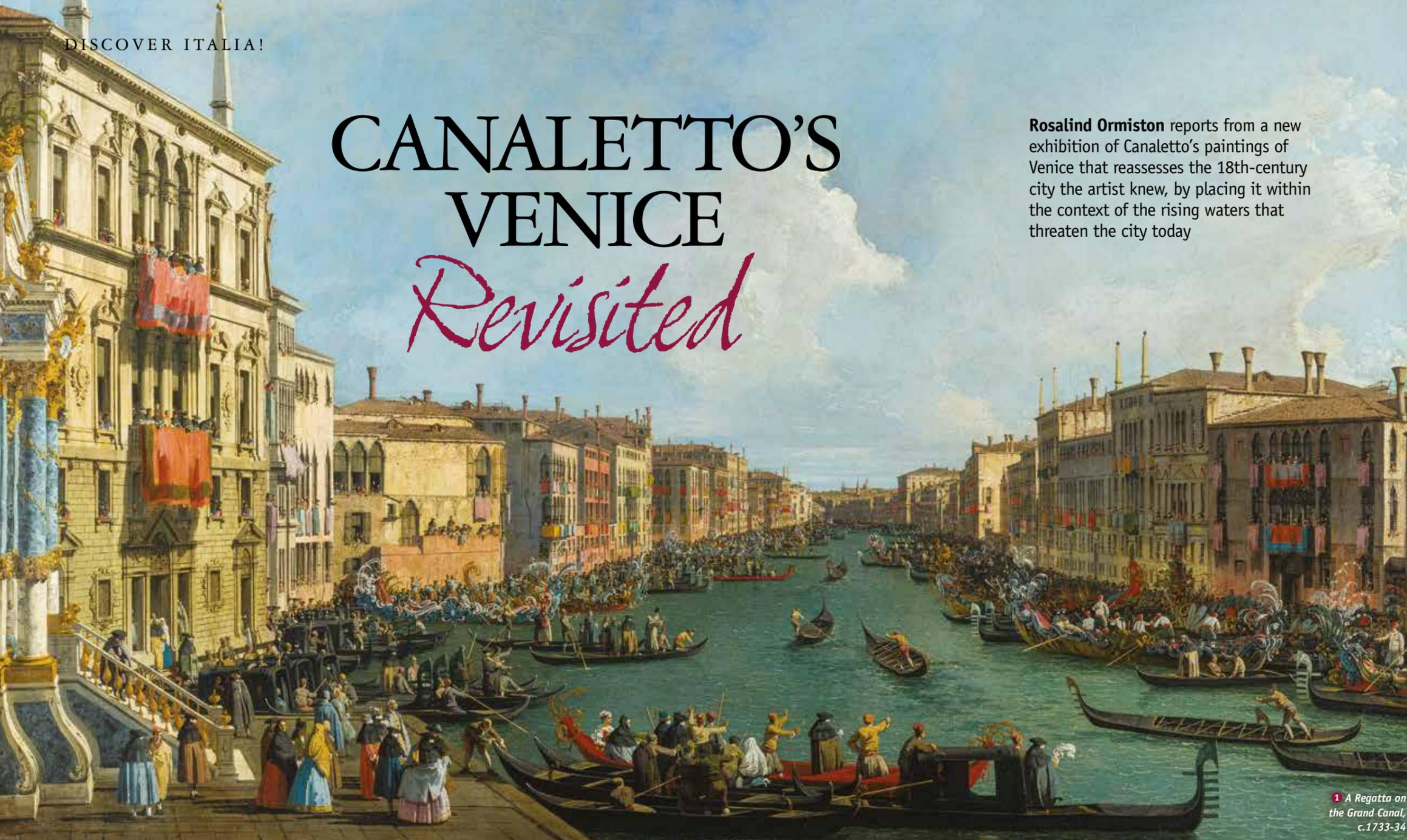


CANALETTO'S VENICE

Revisited



1 A Regatta on the Grand Canal, c.1733-34

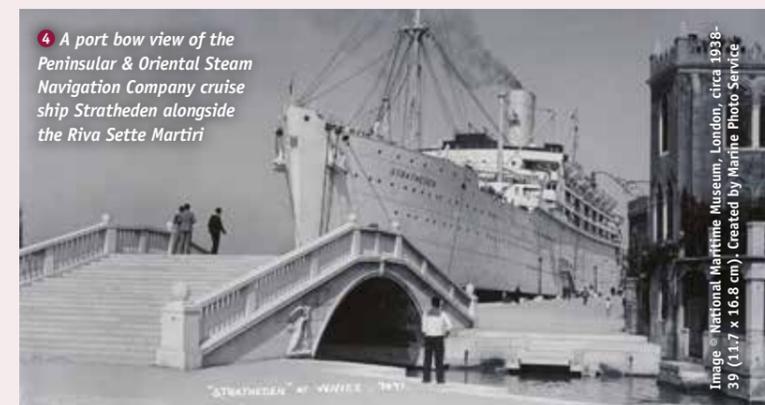
Rosalind Ormiston reports from a new exhibition of Canaletto's paintings of Venice that reassesses the 18th-century city the artist knew, by placing it within the context of the rising waters that threaten the city today



2 A view from Piazzetta San Marco



3 The Orient Line cruise ship Orion (1935) moored in the San Marco Basin, seen from the Piazza San Marco



4 A port bow view of the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company cruise ship Stratheden alongside the Riva Sette Martiri

Image 1 © From the Woburn Abbey Collection, Canaletto 43.5 x 74 in. (115.5 x 194 cm). Oil on canvas

The London exhibition *Canaletto's Venice Revisited*, at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, (until 25 September) opened on 1 April, one year to the day since Venice banned large cruise ships from entering the city's canals. Vessels of 1,000 tonnes or more have been re-routed away from the centre. The cruises, known in Venice as 'hit and run' tourism, with up to 4,500 tourists on one ship, would disembark for a very short time, disrupting the city's way of life. This was a serious concern because Venice is losing its resident population – it stood at 159,262 in 1921 and sank to 50,510 by 2021. The remaining inhabitants want to retain Venice's cultural significance and natural environment; for it not to become an empty, Disney-esque version of what it used to be. The Maritime Museum show juxtaposes Canaletto's 18th-century views of Venice with the marketing of the city – posters, films, holiday package tours – that encouraged mass tourism in the 20th century.

Now that large vessels are banned, the waterways have returned to vistas not out of place in a Canaletto painting, as in a contemporary photograph taken from Piazzetta di San Marco, looking out to the lagoon 2. In this show, the infrastructure and waterways are shown on a 1718 map of Venice 7 and explored through twenty-four iconic Venetian views, on loan from Woburn Abbey. They were painted by the Venetian-born painter Giovanni Antonio Canal (28 October 1697-19 April 1768), known as Canaletto, for Lord John Russell, the 4th Duke of Bedford, during the 1730s. It was the painter's largest single commission. The stunning beauty of the paintings draws attention to the Venice of Canaletto's era, when he painted topographical views of the city for moneyed 'grand tourists'. The curators of Canaletto's Venice Revisited have compared these wondrous paintings of the city with the experience two-hundred years later when ocean liners, such as the Orient Line cruise ship *Orion*, were moored in

the San Marco Basin 3, and the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation cruise ship *Stratheden* docked alongside the Riva Sette Martiri on the lagoon in the 1930s 4, a foretaste of mass tourism. Large cruise ships became more frequent, and more damaging, until the ban in 2021.

THE WATERWAYS OF VENICE

The lagoons, canals and waterways are the lifeblood of the city, and Canaletto focused on them. What captures attention in a painting is the spontaneity of the scene before you. Visitors to Venice recalled that they watched Canaletto drawing, and sketching in oils, on the spot, capturing views that mirrored life in the squares and on the water – the merchant ships transporting goods, distinctive Venetian gondolas transporting people, and the activities of residents and visitors on quaysides and squares. His originality stemmed from a perceptive observation of nature and

its translation into paint of the scenes taking place before him. A composition might start from a scenic observation sketched on site, carried forward to create in his studio. A painting could contain various scenes from different viewpoints, not exact reproductions of specific views. Buildings might be enlarged, or the angle of a view from a bridge or canal distorted to reveal a wider scene. Topographical views were adjusted to enhance various events. His early career began as a scene painter, in Venice and Rome, taught his father Bernardo Canal, a theatrical scene painter. One can see the theatricality of composition in his work.

Two monumental views in the Woburn Abbey collection demonstrate why Canaletto was so popular. *A Regatta on the Grand Canal* c.1733-34 1, teeming with life, places the viewer close to Palazzo Balbi (the building at left) on the Grand Canal, looking down on the crowd gathered to watch a spectacular regatta taking place. A gentleman standing on a balcony to the left looks

5 The Grand Canal, Ascension Day: The embarkation of the Doge of Venice for the Ceremony of the Marriage of the Adriatic



6 The Ascension Day Festival celebrated on 8 May 2016



GETTING TO VENICE

► High season in Venice is May to October. Visiting in the quieter months, from November to April, means less crowds and more opportunity to enjoy the lagoons, canals and islands. February is Carnival month.

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across, engaging our attention. This canal has the longest and straightest stretch of water in Venice. Since 1300, races have taken place here. Canaletto accentuates how far it stretches into the distance. A decree of 1315 allowed races to take place annually to mark the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin/Candlemas Day (*La Festa della Madonna della Candelora*) on 2 February. It was part of the Carnival period, lasting from 26 December until Shrove Tuesday. One can see some spectators – men and women – dressed in black cloaks and tricorne hats, with white masks hiding facial features, typical of Carnival costume. The immediate scene before us is an on-going race between single-oared gondolas. Canaletto captures a moment in time, expressing the drama of the clamorous crowd's excitement as from balconies, buildings and boats, they watch, shout and gesticulate.

THE MARRIAGE OF THE SEA

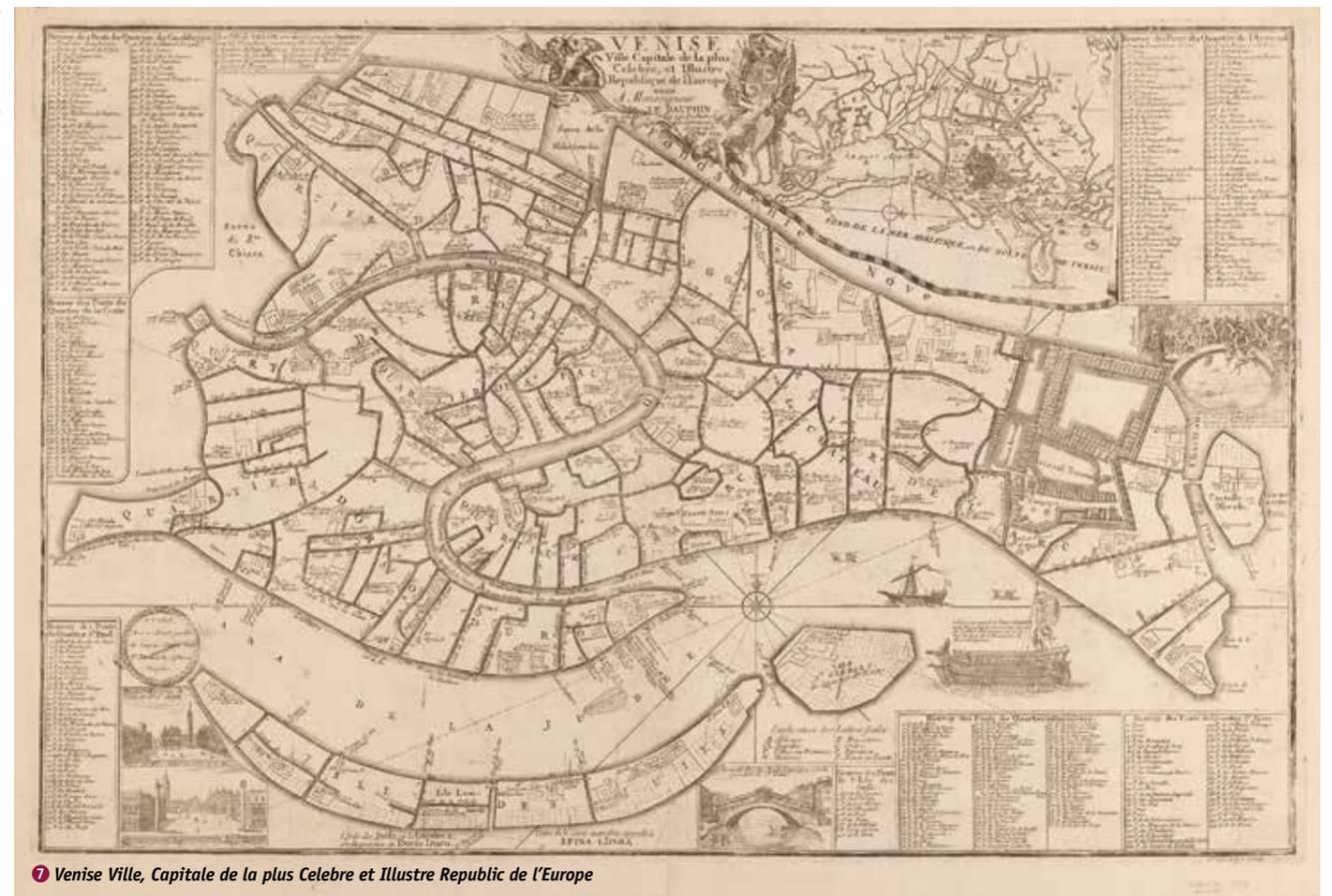
Possibly the most popular spectacle today with residents and tourists – as in Canaletto's era – is the annual *Sposalizio del Mar*, the 'Marriage' of Venice to the sea, which takes place each year on Ascension Day (May 26 in 2022) Its beginnings lie in the early decades of the last millennium, to celebrate a naval victory. Later, in 1177, Pope Alexander III presented Doge Sebastiano Ziani with a gold ring and the right to 'marry' the sea, to symbolise Venetian control of the Adriatic. By 1267 both events

were celebrated together. It is illustrated in Canaletto's large-scale painting known today as *The Grand Canal: Ascension Day: The embarkation of the Doge of Venice for the ceremony of the Marriage of the Adriatic*, c.1733-4 5. At distant centre one can see the decorated, 100-foot long *Bucintoro* galley ship in front of the Doges' Palace. In the ceremony it was rowed out into the lagoon, by four men to each of the forty-two oars, where the Doge would perform the 'marriage' ceremony. Canaletto creates a moving 'snapshot' of a moment, showing the Grand Canal filled with vessels sailing across the picture frame, jostling not to collide with each other. Hundreds of people line the waterside pavements. The Doge's personal galleon, recognised by the red and white striped canopy is just visible in front of the *Bucintoro*. In Canaletto's lifetime his paintings served as mementos of Venice, today they provide a visual history. The 'marriage' ceremony was revived in the 1960s, to continue a Venetian tradition 6.

Canaletto employed assistants to aid the demand for souvenir views of Venice, created by an increase of tourists crowding the city. The beauty of Venice led to requests for topographical views. Buyers of his *vedute* (views) took away the Venice they wanted to remember, of the city, its people and traditions. It made his reputation and his clients became mostly foreign buyers, primarily English. He was known to charge ►

Image 5 ◊ From the Woburn Abbey Collection, Canaletto, 45.5 x 74 in. (115.5 x 194 cm). Oil on canvas

Image 7 ◊ National Maritime Museum, London. Map of Venice with inset views and key, 1718, 21.4 x 28.9 in. (54.5 x 73.5 cm)



7 Venise Ville, Capitale de la plus Celebre et Illustre Republic de l'Europe

8 *The Piazza San Marco looking towards the Basilica San Marco and the Campanile*



them more for his work, the fees fluctuating daily, 'on a whim', as one letter from Owen McSwiny, art dealer to the Duke of Richmond, described it (28 November 1727).

PERENNIAL ATTRACTION

Today, the relaxation of travel rules in Europe – enforced earlier due to Covid-19 – has focused attention on holidays, and city of Venice is a perennial attraction. The beauty of its canals, its graceful buildings and magnificent churches are integral to the cultural history on display in its museums and galleries, and just a few of the incentives that draw visitors worldwide. Nearly five million tourists chose to visit Venice in 2019, prior to the pandemic. But Venice, due to its infrastructure and a changing climate inducing higher water levels, is sinking.

In the 1730s, when Canaletto painted *The Piazza San Marco looking towards the Basilica San Marco and the Campanile* 8, flooding was rare. Today the piazza – the lowest lying area of the city – can expect *acqua alta* events – high water tide peaks above 90 cm – to become a more regular occurrence. In October 2020 Venice inaugurated its MOSE tidal wave barrier, successfully stopping a 129 cm tide from flooding the square, and promising to make inundations a less common occurrence, but sea levels are rising.

The vast ships are gone, the flooding is being managed, and the Venetian authorities

continue to welcome visitors while seeking to maintain the city for its people too. What attracted cultural tourists 250 years ago continues to attract them. But how to create a balance between tourism and cultural identity? The curators of the National Maritime Museum exhibition highlight the magnificence of Canaletto's work with contrasting factual evidence of a city at risk. The images are disturbing. Those of us lucky enough to have visited Venice will want to return. What can be done to visit yet sustain its environment for Venetians? One could plan to visit in quieter months, outside the May-October high season. Travelling to the city by train would reduce pollution.

#EnjoyRespectVenezia is the city's awareness campaign. It is designed to show how visitors can help sustain the city's environment, in harmony with the daily life of residents. Part of it is #Detourism, an information campaign to promote sustainable tourism by presenting a different Venice. It highlights out-of-the-ordinary places and itineraries to experience, asking tourists to look for a more authentic, lesser known Venice, living like a local. It suggests looking for it not only in the city centre but also on the lagoon islands and mainland. This 'step lightly' approach could maintain Venice's cultural heritage, so stunningly captured in Canaletto's paintings, and help save Venice for its people and its visitors. ■

EXHIBITION INFO

- Canaletto's Venice Revisited exhibition (until 25 September 2022), National Maritime Museum, Romney Rd, London SE10 9NF www.rmg.co.uk
- Transport connections to the National Maritime Museum include arriving at Greenwich by boat on the River Thames. UBER boat by Thames Clippers (www.thamesclippers.com) run regular services to and from the Cutty Sark stop, five minutes' walk from the museum.

FIND OUT MORE

- Comune di Venezia websites have advice on where to stay, city passes, what's on, and other useful information for planning a visit to Venice. Unique Venice (www.veneziaunica.it) and City of Venice (www.comune.venezia.it).
- Search #EnjoyRespectVenezia and #DeTourism for more citywide inspiration and off-the-beaten-track itineraries.
- And if you want to see where Canaletto lived in Venice, it is now a comfortable place to stay. Hotel Canaletto is a five-minute walk from the Rialto and St Mark's Square, in the building that was once the home of the painter: Hotel Canaletto, Castello 5487 - 30122 Venezia. Visit the website too for a year-round listing of events in the city (www.hotelcanaletto.com).

Image 8 © From the Woburn Abbey Collection, Canaletto, 19 x 31.5 in. (48 x 80 cm). Oil on canvas