

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

THE STONEMASON'S YARD
CANALETTO



'THE STONEMASON'S YARD'

Full title: "Venice: Campo S. Vidal and Santa Maria della Carità
("The Stonemason's Yard")"

BY CANALETTO (1697–1768)



The actual size of the picture is 123.8 x 162.9 cm. It was painted in oils on canvas in 1726–30.

These notes and a large print of Canaletto's 'The Stonemason's Yard' are for primary teachers attending the one-day course 'Creative Spaces' at the National Gallery during 2002/3. Cross-curricular work produced in schools as a result of these courses will be shown in an exhibition at the National Gallery in 2004 as part of the Gallery's **Take One Picture** project. In these notes you will find: information about the painting; information about the artist; suggestions for classroom activities; curriculum links.

Take One Picture is generously supported by Mr and Mrs Christoph Henkel.

What is the subject of this painting?

The view

Canaletto has painted a view in Venice, looking across the Campo ('campo' means small square) San Vidal over the Grand Canal to the church of Santa Maria della Carità and the façade of the Scuola della Carità. The square has been transformed into a workshop for repairing the nearby church of San Vidal (not seen in the picture), with blocks of stone from Istria (today part of Croatia and Slovenia) that would have been brought by water to the square. The view is still recognisable today although there have been some dramatic changes: the campanile (bell-tower) of the church of Santa Maria della Carità fell down in 1744 and destroyed the two white houses in front of it. The Scuola della Carità now houses the Galleria dell'Accademia and today the view is dominated by the wooden Accademia bridge which touches down where the two white houses are shown in the painting. The Campo is now paved over, but the house on the right still stands, with an extra storey, and even the well-head from which the woman on the right is drawing water still exists at the centre of the Campo.

Activity

The view is brought to life by the figures who go about their lives in its spaces. Masons cut and shape stone in the yard. One can be seen working inside the workmen's hut on the right. On the left a mother leaves her sweeping to rush to her crying (and peeing!) child who has fallen backwards, and a woman peers down from the balcony above her to see what the commotion is about. On the balcony of the house on the right a woman spins yarn in the early morning sun shining from the east. A cockerel crows from the window in the left foreground. In the middle background gondoliers work on the canal, women hang out washing, and others sit watching and chatting. As in all his work, Canaletto gives great attention to the details of this ordinary space: plant pots, the masons' tools or a patch of shabby plasterwork.

Who was the artist?

Canaletto, view-painting and the English

This painting is often regarded as Canaletto's masterpiece although it is not the type of view for which he is best known. Canaletto (he was born Giovanni Antonio Canal) started his career as a scenery painter working for his father. This occupation taught him draughtsmanship and perspective and also enabled him to visit Rome where he assisted his father painting scenery for operas by Alessandro Scarlatti. His success in this field was recognised when he was commissioned to paint imaginary architectural backgrounds for paintings by other established artists.

At the same time Canaletto began to paint realistic, individually commissioned views of Venice and by the mid-1720s he was already much in demand. His patrons admired his skill at 'making the sunshine in his pictures' and attributed this partly to the fact that he prepared his paintings 'on the spot' and not 'at home after an idea'. 'The Stonemason's Yard' was painted in this period.

By the 1730s he had a thriving business painting mainly for the English who wanted mementos of their stays in Venice made during the Grand Tour (in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries highly ranked families would finish their sons' education by sending them on a cultural tour through France, Switzerland, Italy and Germany, usually in the company of a tutor). Canaletto needed many assistants to meet the demand and this led to the mass-production of the kind of 'tourist views' of Venice demanded by the patrons. 'The Stonemason's Yard' differs from these because it is an intimate and informal view of a less well-known part of the city. But Canaletto's success at painting the 'tourist views' of Venice for the English encouraged him to travel to England where he spent several years painting views

of London and places along the Thames to the west of the city. He returned to Venice for the last years of his life and left over 500 paintings and many more drawings.

Why was it painted?

'The Stonemason's Yard' was probably painted for a local patron, perhaps someone involved in the building project, since it shows a view most likely only known to a Venetian resident.

Painting places

People often think of Canaletto's paintings as topographical views (that is, pictures of identifiable places, faithfully and exactly depicted) but in fact he constructed them with artifice: he would often use more than one viewpoint, he altered the proportion and shape of individual buildings and sometimes included buildings that were not there. But the pictures are all based on a sound knowledge of the city's appearance and character.

Using 'The Stonemason's Yard' in the primary classroom

Introducing it

There are many ways to do this. Here are some suggestions:

- Put it up in the classroom without drawing attention to it; ask children to write about it in a comments book, or record children's discussion about it.
- Introduce it, say at story time. Allow children a minute to look at it, then cover it up and ask them what they remember.
- Cover it with a piece of card in which you have cut windows as in an advent calendar. Open a window each day to reveal an interesting detail.
- Allow one or two children to look at the picture and get them to describe it to the rest of the class. Each child could do their own picture based on this description. Or blindfold one willing child and ask the rest of the class to describe the picture to her or him.

Discussing it

All these ways of introducing an image can provide a good basis for the more formal discussion that might follow. The contextual information in this leaflet may be a useful back-up to the discussion but it is usually more effective if, through questioning, children use the clues provided by the artist to work out what is going on in the image itself. The questions might be: 'Where do you think this place might be?' (clues: gondola, canal) 'What is happening in the foreground?' 'What sort of building might the stone be used for?' (clue: there is another building built from white stone in the background on the right) 'What work is being done?' 'Who is not working?' 'What time of day might it be?' (clue: sun low in the sky, many people working). Allow plenty of space for speculation and for personal responses: 'Do you like this picture?' 'Why/why not?'. The discussion is also a time for children to think about the difference between the print and the original painting. Ask them to guess the actual size and mention that it is framed.

Using art across the curriculum

Using the work of artists to enrich and stimulate children's own artwork is a requirement of the National Curriculum for Art. But pictures can also be linked fruitfully with both core and foundation subjects as part of the delivery of a broad and balanced curriculum. The links need not be laboured: it can be a question of using a picture imaginatively, where possible fitting it

into existing schemes of work. Some of the links may simply arise in passing as part of a general discussion about the picture; others may lead to extended pieces of work.

The desired outcomes here are for children to:

- become familiar with the image
- discover the wealth of ideas and feelings it represents
- learn about the skills and techniques that went into the making of it

and then perhaps also:

- to like it or dislike it, developing critical thinking around their basic responses

Some suggestions

Literacy/Drama

Many schools now use pictures to enrich existing texts, to stimulate writing in different styles and as a source for word-level work particularly at Foundation level and at KS1. Writing activities might include:

- Simple 'What can you see?' books with a different detail from the picture on each page
- Factual descriptions of the view in this picture and of a view in the child's own locality
- Speech-bubble conversations between the figures in the picture –these could lead to scripts for plays

Numeracy

- Shapes: 2D and 3D
- Plotting: coordinates – make a grid over the picture and ask children to locate objects

Science

- Materials and their properties: floating and sinking
- Living things

History

- Local studies: cities in the past – transport, work, building materials and methods, domestic life

Geography

- Local study: urban and rural environments
- Transport
- Canals

Art/Design and Technology

- Make a 3D model of this view
- Painting/drawing/collage of a spot in the children's own rural/urban environment: choosing their own favourite place which may not necessarily be the best known view. Include details of buildings/clothing/transport/people working, which would help locate the picture historically and geographically.