

VENICE ON PAPER

Everyone in real estate will tell you, “Location, location, location.” From its foggy beginnings in Byzantine times, Venice was ideally positioned to become a maritime power at the heart of international trade and travel. At the head of the Adriatic Sea, it had direct access to important trade routes, the River Po to the south, and Alpine passes to the north. Venice achieved supremacy in the Middle Ages, and by the turn of the sixteenth century was poised to be a leading center for the printed word and image. With its mainland sister city, Padua, emerging as an early producer of paper, Venice had ready supplies for the invention, recording, and transmission of artistic ideas. Both native and visiting artists were inspired to create exceptional and unprecedented works of art on paper for the next five hundred years.

This exhibition features prints and drawings that bear witness to Venice’s role as a crucible of artistic interaction and creation. The exchange of styles, techniques, and aesthetic ideals led to the development of a distinctly Venetian flavor in the graphic arts. Among the seminal achievements are the lyrical engravings of Jacopo de’ Barbari and the Campagnola family. Titian’s monumental woodcut, the *Submersion of Pharaoh’s Army in the Red Sea*, opened new horizons in the freedom of execution in the graphic media. Similarly, the anatomical illustrations in the large medical treatise, *De humani corporis fabrica libri septem*, by Andreas Vesalius, are a triumph of both art and science. The prints and drawings

of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and his sons hint at the weightless splendor of soaring fresco paintings of eighteenth-century Venice.

La Serenissima: the “most serene” city

Described as the “Queen of the Adriatic” for its confluence of Byzantine, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque architecture on islands connected by a maze of canals and walkways, Venice has been a favorite subject for artists, who have been inspired by the city’s unique character and beauty, especially the ever-fluctuating interplay of light and water. Many of the prints and drawings on display here feature the city itself, beginning in the eighteenth century with etchings by Canaletto that reflect exquisite radiant sunlight in both real and imaginary views.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the passing of its power and glory in the nineteenth century, Venice remained a popular destination for foreign artists. In his treatise, *Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin described the city as a “ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak, so quiet, so bereft of all but her loveliness, that we might well doubt, as we watched her faint reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was the City, and which the Shadow.” The spirit of Ruskin’s poetic narrative suffuses *Nocture: Palaces*, which James McNeill Whistler artfully printed to show glowing Venetian edifices lingering between water and sky, as apparitions in the night.