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**Eyewitness Views: Making History in 18th-Century Europe**

This is the first-ever exhibition to focus on view paintings—paintings of major European cities, towns, and villages—as reportage. These works are visual records of contemporary events ranging from royal celebrations to state visits, religious ceremonies, sporting contests, and natural disasters. Their time span corresponds to the golden age of European view painting from the beginning of the 1700s to the eve of the French Revolution (1789–99). Through immersive compositions and a wealth of acutely observed detail, artists skillfully created the illusion that the viewer is present on the scene as history is made.

This exhibition has been organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Minneapolis Institute of Art, and the Cleveland Museum of Art and is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

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### **Memory and Artistic License**

People from the highest levels of European society, from kings and popes to doges and ambassadors, commissioned view painters to commemorate the spectacular events staged at their command or for their benefit. In many cases, the noble patrons are themselves portrayed in the resulting canvases. While artists cultivated the impression that they were faithful chroniclers capturing an event on canvas just as they had witnessed it, they were in fact not above manipulating or “improving” upon reality in order to meet the expectations of their status-conscious clientele.

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### **Civic and Religious Rituals**

In Europe's major cities, people gathered throughout the year to commemorate local historic events, celebrate religious feast days, or participate in public rituals. Whether sacred or secular in character, these occasions were always filled with civic pride. They were also among the few times when the different social classes interacted with each other and shared a common experience. Religious processions typically involved a revered object—such as the Blessed Sacrament, a relic of a saint, or a statue—that was carried through the streets with pomp and fanfare. Many cities celebrated the fact that they had survived the bubonic plague in the 1300s. They held recurring festivals of thanksgiving, since the threat of a reoccurrence remained in the 1700s.

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### **Festival and Spectacle**

In 1700s Europe, Venice was the undisputed capital of pageantry and entertainment.

Even though it was in political and economic decline, the Serene Republic and its aristocracy invested vast sums in maintaining its traditional ceremonies and dazzling its visitors. For example, they commissioned a new version of the Bucintoro, the lavishly gilded state barge used only on Ascension Day. All financial considerations were also thrown to the wind when a program of entertainments was devised for kings or princes staying in the city. The grandest of these special events was a ceremonial regatta, or boat race. In Rome, a comparable level of opulence was in evidence only during the celebrations of royal births and marriages by the French embassy.

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### **Disaster and Destruction**

Images of tragic events satisfied a desire for paintings that stimulated the imagination.

Whether they showed devastation caused by warfare, fire, natural disaster, or political turmoil, these works offered the viewer the thrill of witnessing a catastrophe. They stand apart from most other reportorial paintings in that they downplay the presence of rulers and nobility in favor of the lower classes. Such figures were rarely intended to be recognizable likenesses of actual people. Instead, they serve as proxies through which viewers are able to funnel their own reactions to the unfolding calamity.