

Minneapolis Institute of Art

# Eyewitness Views

Making History in 18th-Century Europe



Mia

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## Making History in 18th-Century Europe

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### An Introduction for Teachers

Today, many people use cameras and phones to instantly document and record history. We act as reporters, photographers, and historians whenever we save, share, and send. In the 1700s, such moments were captured by view painters. Powerful, wealthy people would commission artists to paint historically significant events first hand. Artists whose work is displayed in this exhibition, such as Giovanni Antonio Canal, Bernardo Bellotto, Hubert Robert, Giovanni Paolo Panini, and Francesco Lazzaro Guardi, were the leaders of view painting in the 1700s. Though they were entrusted to document important moments, it was not uncommon for them to take artistic liberty and adjust the history for the sake of the painting, and sometimes the patron. “Eyewitness Views: Making History in 18th-Century Europe” and its nearly 40 artworks place viewers into history, allowing them—and us—to act as spectator and eyewitness.

Luca Carlevarijs (Italian, 1663–1730), *The Bucintoro Departing from the Bacino di San Marco* (detail), 1710, The J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Cover: Luca Carlevarijs (Italian, 1663–1730); *Regatta on the Grand Canal in Honor of Frederick IV, King of Denmark* (detail), 1711, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

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## Memory and Manipulation

View painters were commissioned by the most elite patrons of the time (doges, ambassadors, kings, and popes) to record the memories they believed were worth commemorating. Often, the artists were painting events that had been held in honor of, or were organized at the request of, their patron. That's why it was not uncommon for that person to be painted right into the scene. The paintings throughout "Eyewitness Views" are examples of how view painters recorded history honestly, but also creatively. Manipulating and altering the memory to please the patron was a common occurrence.

Sometimes it was difficult for viewers to spot the inaccuracies; other times, it was obvious. In Pompeo Girolamo Batoni's 1757 painting, shown

above, the artist includes real and imaginary characters. Three years before this was painted, King Louis XV sent the Comte de Stainville to Rome to meet with Pope Benedict XIV. The pope is surrounded by two cherubs to the left, the Holy Ghost in the upper right-hand corner, and St. Peter and St. Paul floating on a cloud. This, obviously, was not what the actual moment looked like; nevertheless, the actions resulted in an actual papal decree from the pope to the French bishops.

Pompeo Girolamo Batoni, Italian (Rome), 1708–87, *Pope Benedict XIV Presenting the Encyclical "Ex Omnibus" to the Comte de Stainville, Later Duc de Choiseul*, 1757, oil on canvas, The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 61.62  
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## Civic and Religious Ritual

Numerous times throughout the year, people of varying social classes would come together to celebrate: anniversaries of historical events, religious feast days, and even public rituals. No matter whether the event was religious or civic, each moment was full of pride for its celebrants. Civic rituals were often commemorative—for instance, observing an anniversary of the end of an epidemic, like the bubonic plague. Cities would regularly host festivals of thanksgiving for fear that the devastation would return. Religious rituals often included a procession focused around an object, e.g., the Eucharist and wine, a relic, or a statue. People would carry the object in a parade full of elaborate displays and excited crowds.

At the end of his career, Bernardo Bellotto was a court painter in Warsaw, a very devout, Catholic city. He was commissioned by the court to create a series of paintings that depicted the city's major monuments. In doing this, he captured a procession held in honor of Our Lady of Grace as it passed in front of Krasinski Palace. In it, a wooden statue of the Virgin Mary—ornately decorated, with a gilded and stone covered crown and gold colored robe—is carried through the streets, which are lined with Warsaw's faithful community. Regardless of their social status, from the poor to the nobility, people came out in masses on days like this.

Bernardo Bellotto, Italian, 1722–80, *Procession of Our Lady of Grace in Front of Krasinski Palace*, 1778, oil on canvas, The Royal Castle in Warsaw–Museum



## Festival and Spectacle

In the 1700s, the heart of Europe's party was Venice. Regardless of its political and financial problems, the city spent lavishly to ensure the continuation of its ceremonies, which also succeeded in drawing visitors to the floating city. The most important visitors were kings and princes, and in their honor the city would spend copious amounts to entertain them. Chief among entertainments was the ceremonial regatta—boat races that originated in the 1300s as a means of showing off Venice's naval capabilities.

The regatta depicted by Luca Carlevarijs took place on March 4, 1709, a day before King Frederick IV of Denmark was scheduled to leave

Venice. The king wears a bright red coat and sits at the bow of the central barge, which is being powered by eight oarsmen in gold jackets and red pants. The barge is decorated with rich gold fabric, soon to be ruined by the saltwater. It was this type of extravagance that drew crowds from near and far. Venetians fill every available space in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the royal visitor. In return, the large crowds and impressive race pleased and entertained the king.

Luca Carlevarijs, Italian, 1663–1730, *Regatta on the Grand Canal in Honor of King Frederick IV of Denmark*, 1711, oil on canvas, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum



## Disaster

Depictions of tragedy, disaster, and turmoil were, as they are today, incredibly popular. They ignite people's imaginations and allow for recollections that begin with "I remember when..." Whether the destruction was caused by war, politics, fire, or nature, a thrill came from recalling it through art. Other areas of this exhibition focus on the patron and nobility; yet, images of disaster more commonly depict lower social classes. Not intended to identify anyone in particular, the ambiguous figures allow viewers to step into the painting and relive the chaos.

There was a large demand for paintings of disasters, especially of moments like the eruption of Mount Vesuvius; indeed, many artists made

a career from it. In this painting by French artist Pierre-Jacques Volaire, a handful of onlookers are illuminated by the volcano's glow. They watch from a distance, relatively relaxed and unafraid. Volaire was one of several view painters to capture the historic eruption on canvas: nevertheless, what distinguished his efforts was that he was indeed a true eyewitness. This version is Volaire's most famous, and it comes with the inscription: "View of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius on 14 May 1771 painted on-site by Chevalier Volaire."

Pierre-Jacques Volaire, French, 1729–99, *The Eruption of Vesuvius*, 1771, The Art Institute of Chicago