

Eyewitness Views: Making History in 18th Century Europe

Audioguide Transcript

01

Introduction

KAYWIN FELDMAN: In eighteenth century Europe, view paintings were made to document and commemorate momentous occasions. They were often commissioned by or for rulers, princes, and ambassadors to serve as displays of status and power. Wealthy patrons wanted a record of an important event, but they also wanted to communicate their standing to others, so they sought out artists to produce grand and vibrant works imbued with a sense of drama.

In some ways, these artists were the photojournalists of their time. But instead of seeking to remain neutral in order to tell an objective story, artists of the 1700's worked to please their patrons. Sometimes artists modified crowd size and architecture, and once in a while entire geographies were shifted to make a more pleasing image.

On this tour, you will explore some of the many details in these intricate paintings. Plus you will hear contemporary accounts of the events captured on these canvases.

I am Kaywin Feldman, the Nivin and Duncan MacMillan Director and President of the Minneapolis Institute of Art. I am pleased to welcome you to Mia. Enjoy your visit to *Eyewitness Views: Making History in Eighteenth Century Europe*.

02

Francesco Guardi

The Fire at San Marcuola,
1789–90



NARRATOR: Momentous occasions in Europe in the 18th century were recorded and commemorated with “view” paintings – works often commissioned by or for rulers, princes, and ambassadors as records of seminal events. These prominent patrons motivated artists to produce grand and vibrant works imbued with a sense of drama. Even disasters were worthy subjects.

This painting by Francesco Guardi shows a specific, dramatic event in Venice: a fire in the Campo San Marcuola. We’re thrust into a group of bystanders, watching with horror as people on the rooftops try to protect their buildings from a raging inferno. The painting is alive with frenzied movement, licking flames, and billowing smoke.

A local newspaper reported:

ACTOR: “The sad spectacle of Saturday 28 November and of the subsequent night was the most terrible and destructive fire to have ravaged our city in this century.

Witnesses have spoken of their unspeakable fear in the face of its horrors. Only the flowing lava of Vesuvius, whose dreadful image is used in poetic fantasy to describe the scourges of Hades, could approximate such chaos, when the elements themselves could no longer be distinguished.”

NARRATOR: While this depiction employs the visual tools of eyewitness reporting, it also stimulates the imagination. We join the most dramatic moment of the fire, when attempts to save buildings are at a fever pitch. When Guardi made this painting he would have been aware of the futility of these efforts, knowing that sixty houses were destroyed by the raging fire.

03

Giovanni Paolo Panini
*King Charles III Visiting Pope
Benedict XIV at the Coffee House of
the Palazzo del Quirinale, 1744–45*
(oil sketch)



Giovanni Paolo Panini
*King Charles III Visiting Pope
Benedict XIV at the Coffee House of
the Palazzo del Quirinale, 1746*



NARRATOR: At first glance, the most important figure in this oil sketch seems to be either the youthful king Charles of Naples just right of center, dressed in red and gold and wearing a tri-corner hat... or Cardinal Aquaviva, facing him in flowing red robes. But take a peek through the open doorway at upper left. The figure sitting on a golden throne, bathed in sunlight, is none other than His Holiness Pope Benedict the Fourteenth. Yet King Charles, not the Pope, commissioned the finished painting for which this oil sketch is a study. You can see it hanging nearby.

A contemporary newspaper report describes what happened on this bright November day in Rome.

ACTOR: “[They] proceeded along the garden’s grand boulevard towards the [Coffee] House, where His Holiness awaited them. The King was met by the Master of the Papal Household together with all the Secret Advisers, and many prelates and members of the Roman nobility, including Cardinal Aquaviva [...].

NARRATOR: We’re seeing the moment just before Charles actually meets Pope Benedict. The young ruler carries himself with a royal bearing, but you can also sense the hesitancy he must have been feeling before meeting the pope for the first time. The newspaper records what happened next:

ACTOR: “He was led to the threshold of the main room, where Cardinal Valenti, Secretary of State, and Cardinal Colonna, the Majordomo, were standing. On seeing [the pope], His Majesty knelt for the first time and then, having come closer, he knelt again to kiss the feet of His Holiness.”

04

Michele Marieschi

Doge Pietro Grimani Carried into Piazza San Marco after his Election, about 1741



NARRATOR: As we look at this painting, we're absorbed into a crowd of jostling, brightly dressed spectators. They're gathered in Piazza San Marco to catch a glimpse of the newly-elected Doge as he is carried into the square on a float to be greeted by his subjects. You might expect the ruler of Venice – also referred to as “his Serenity” – to be the focal point of the scene, but in fact, he's hard to spot – a tiny dab of yellow making his way out of the far background along the white line at right, tossing coins into the crowd. Some bolder members of the populace dive for the gold, while guards try to hold them back from the approaching procession with long red staffs.

Oxford professor Joseph Spence was in the viewing stands for the event on July 1st, 1741. Riveted by the ceremony, he described it in a letter to his mother:

ACTOR: “The whole place (which is very large) was so full of people, that about six foot above the ground it looked all as if it were paved with heads. Several of the Arsenal-men, each with a red baton, kept the whole line clear where the triumphal chariot was to pass. The Doge had a sack of money open by him, and all the way, as he passed along, tossed out handfuls of crowns and half-crowns among the mob: which gave me much more diversion than the sight of his Serenity. From the Church of St.

Mark quite down to the bottom of the place, and then all along to the door of the palace, it was all one scramble: and I believe one may say with great veracity that the Venetians are the best scramblers in the whole world.”

05

Giovanni Paolo Panini
*Consecration of Cardinal
Pozzobonelli in San Carlo al
Corso, 1743–44*



NARRATOR: The scene before us – the consecration of a new archbishop – took place in the church of San Carlo al Corso in Rome in 1743. Just to the left of center, you’ll see three bishops wearing pointed hats called mitres. The man in the golden mitre is Archbishop Pozzobonelli – he has just been consecrated by the bishops to either side, and by Pope Benedict the Fourteenth. You can find the pope all the way in the background at the high altar, a small, seated figure in white robes. Here’s how an eyewitness described the event.

ACTOR: Since the Pope was responsible for the formation of such a worthy archbishop, he wished to consecrate him by own hands. This took place on 21 July in the church of San Carlo, with the assistance of Patriarch Pallavicini, and Archbishop Cavalchini, attended by all the Prelates of the highest rank, and a great number of the nobility and the general populace.

NARRATOR: You can see the nobility – the finely-dressed men and women in front of the arches on the right, next to a row of Swiss guards in the colorful uniforms they still wear today. The “general populace” refers to all social classes, from the young men who spill out of the bays at left, pushing forward to get a better view, to the kneeling beggars in the foreground, hoping to

receive alms. There weren't many opportunities for rich and poor to mingle in the eighteenth century, but,

ACTOR: "All came together for this magnificent occasion held with the musicians of the papal household, under the happy auspices of his benign esteem towards the city, and his demonstration of affection towards the new Archbishop, to whom [the Pope] spoke these very words: 'Take heart, Monsignor, you have safely arrived in the Holy of Holies'."

06

Antonio Joli

*The Abdication of Charles III
as King of Naples in Favor of
His Son Ferdinand, 1759*



NARRATOR: In October of 1759 King Charles of Naples abdicated the throne because his half-brother, King Ferdinand of Spain, died without an heir. Charles was next in line to the Spanish throne, and because he was barred from ruling two countries at once, Charles transferred the kingdom of Naples to his eight-year-old son.

In the center of the image, King Charles is about to hand the boy a ceremonial sword. His exact words have been preserved:

ACTOR: “Louis XIV, King of France, gave this sword to Philip V, your grandfather. I received it from him, and I now resign it to you, that you may use it for the defense of your religion and your subjects.”

NARRATOR: The Prime Minister, Bernardo Tanucci, stands below, reading out the official decree. Tanucci reminisced in a letter:

ACTOR: “It was truly moving, causing tears to flow from the eyes of His Majesty and the others around him.”

NARRATOR: Antonio Joli's painting has an almost "photographic" quality to it, giving us the chance to observe a moment from the abdication as if we were standing in the back of the room.

Joli produced a series of paintings recording the departure of King Charles from Naples to Spain, replicating the composition several times to send to various European courts. While Joli painted many highly detailed scenes of court life in Naples, he also produced panoramic landscape views, architectural paintings and stage sets.

07

Antonio Joli

*The Departure of Charles III
from Naples to Become King
of Spain, 1759*



NARRATOR: After King Charles abdicates the throne in Naples to rule in Spain, a fleet of ships are ready in the Bay to take him to Spain. Neapolitans crowd the harbor to say goodbye to their popular king. Charles' mother, who was very proud of her son's new role, commissioned this canvas. So it's no coincidence that Spain's naval power is on display. Prime Minister Tanucci, waving the king off from his carriage, reported that he was:

ACTOR: "...unable to hold back the tears."

NARRATOR: Here, the painter Antonio Joli is able to convey the massive scale, pageantry and expanse of the departure. We are given a monumental vantage, witnessing the huge fleet along with the populace below.

The work makes a permanent visual account of a transitory moment, which later served as the historical record. Commissions on this scale allowed artists like Joli the opportunity to serve a prestigious clientele of royalty, often resulting in rewards and follow-up commissions.

08

Hubert Robert

The Fire at the Opera House of the Palais-Royal, 1781



Hubert Robert

The Fire at the Opera House of the Palais-Royal, 1781



NARRATOR: These two paintings show very different perspectives on the fire of June 8, 1781 that gutted the opera house of the Palais-Royal in Paris. In the large nocturnal scene, we see the blaze at its most ferocious, with flames that reportedly shot 100 meters up into the sky. One eyewitness compared the conflagration to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, which would have been the worst catastrophe an 18th-century person had heard of.

ACTOR: “I never saw a more perfect image of Vesuvius or Etna...From up close, the spectacle of the fire was horrifying. What power nature has through this terrible element! How frightening a blazing volcano must be!”

NARRATOR: The smaller painting shows the morning after the fire. A fashionably-dressed crowd has gathered in the Palais Royal’s gardens, gawking at the smoke still billowing out from the remains of the opera house, although its burnt-out shell is hidden from view by the palace itself... They’re viewing the aftermath from a safe distance, no doubt with a sense of relief – and perhaps a guilty shudder of excitement.

09

Francesco Guardi
*The Nocturnal Good Friday
Procession in Piazza San
Marco, about 1755*



ACTOR: “Nothing in the world is as beautiful as Venice during this night, lit by a million torches.”

NARRATOR: An eighteenth-century French geographer described the dazzling scene in Piazza San Marco during the Good Friday procession of the Blessed Sacrament, a custom unique to Venice.

ACTOR: “The Piazza San Marco offers an enchanting spectacle at this moment. There are two large torches of white wax at each window of the Procuratie. This double row of torches, arranged with regularity, and those lit on the church portal create a very beautiful effect and illuminate all the processions of the confraternities and neighboring parishes that expressly pass through the square.”

NARRATOR: The lighting of the square is achieved entirely with candles. In an age before electric light, Guardi masterfully rose to the challenge of painting an illuminated nocturnal scene, capturing even the golden glow that bounces off the mosaics on the façade of Saint Mark’s Basilica.

ACTOR: “During this time, the entire city seems to be ablaze:

white wax is used so liberally that Venice is thought to burn as much of it in this one evening as the rest of Italy in an entire year.”

10

Michele Marieschi

*The Regatta in Honor of Prince
Friedrich Christian of Saxony,
1740*



NARRATOR: Michele Marieschi depicts a regatta – a boat race – held in Venice in 1740, during the visit of the crown prince of Saxony. We, the viewers, would have to be sitting in a boat to see the event from this angle. We are, in fact, experiencing the race from the viewpoint of the contestants as they reach a tight bend in the canal. Two accounts written at the time help us understand how extraordinary this occasion was. The first is from a letter by the author Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s father. The elder Goethe had already made plans to leave for Rome when he found out about the regatta, and he lamented that he couldn’t stay in Venice.

ACTOR: “If I have ever had the mad wish to be able to divide myself into two bodies, it was on this occasion as it would allow me to send one body to Rome and stay with the other one in Venice in order to enjoy so famous a ceremony.”

NARRATOR: The second report comes from an English writer, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who watched the once-in-a-lifetime event and described it in her letters home.

ACTOR: “[The regatta] was really a magnificent show, as ever was exhibited since the galley of Cleopatra...It is a race of Boats:

they are accompanied by vessels which they call Piotes and Bichones, that are built at the Expense of the nobles and strangers that have a mind to display their magnificence. They are a sort of Machines adorned with all that sculpture and gilding can do to make a shining appearance.”

NARRATOR: You can see one of the decorated vessels that Lady Mary mentions in the left foreground, with oarsmen in yellow and pink. It's strayed into the path of the racing gondolas that are coming out of the shadow on the right.

You'll find a detailed image of one of the barges that sailed in the regatta, nearby.

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo
*Ceremonial Barge for the Regatta in
Honor of Prince Friedrich Christian
of Saxony, 1740*



NARRATOR: This early design drawing of a barge that sailed in a regatta held in honor of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony in 1740 was made by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. It's a working drawing for a barge that pays tribute to the Kingdom of Poland, which was governed by the prince's father. If you look closely, you can see the pencil lines indicating the intended décor.

The personification of Poland (a standing knight wearing a suit of armor) and a female figure seated at his feet sit on the prow, the front part of the barge. The figure of the king and a ceremonial canopy (known as a baldachin) are faintly sketched on the stern, or back of the boat. In the center, a boy holds two large fishes symbolizing the rich bounty from the rivers of the kingdom of Poland. He swings his leg over a curved cornice, a motif familiar from other Tiepolo frescoes.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu pronounced herself impressed with the results in their entirety: "Signor Soranzo represented the Kingdom of Poland with all the provinces and Rivers in the Dominions, with a concert of the best instrumental music in rich Polish Habits; the painting and gilding were exquisite in their kinds."

The extravagant barges were rich with symbolism, and spectators struggled to comprehend every aspect of their meanings.

11

Luca Carlevarijis

*The Bucintoro Departing from the
Bacino di San Marco, 1710*



NARRATOR: Here we see the Venetian government's grand two-story ceremonial boat, called the "Bucintoro." The vessel was the focal point of a symbolic wedding between the city and the Adriatic Sea that took place every year on Ascension Day. Carlevarijis' painting, drops us right into the middle of a throng of boats. You can almost smell the smoke of a cannon salute that's just been fired from the ship on the left, and hear the creak of oars and excited shouts of the crowd.

A contemporary observer, Edward Wright, describes the vessel.

ACTOR: "The Bucentaur has forty-two Oars, four Men to an Oar; there is a Seat at the upper end for the Doge, others on each side for the Council of Ten: below is a double Row of Benches for the Senate. On the outside there is a Border or Frieze of pretty good Basso-Relievo that goes round it."

NARRATOR: By "basso-relievo," Wright is referring to the splendid decoration carved in low relief, all around the boat.

12

Giovanni Paolo Panini

The Flooding of the Piazza Navona,
1755



ACTOR: “On every Sunday in the month of August, after Vespers, the drains of the fountains are blocked and the water spills into the square, which is a little concave in the shape of a shell. Within two hours, almost the whole length of the square is flooded, and in the center the water is two or three feet deep. Then there is a promenade of coaches around the square. The horses walk in the water and its coolness reaches even the passengers sitting in the coaches.

NARRATOR: This is how a French mathematician described the flooding of the Piazza Navona in his travel journal. The scene takes place during a sweltering hot afternoon in Rome. Onlookers around the perimeter of the square try to get as close as possible, enjoying the sensation of getting splashed by the cool water.

13

Giovanni Paolo Panini

The Ball Given by the Duc de Nivernais to Mark the Birth of the Dauphin, 1751



NARRATOR: Everyone who was anyone in Rome attended the ball to celebrate the birth of a French royal heir in 1751. The French ambassador, the duc de Nivernais, staged the event in the Palazzo Farnese, transforming a cavernous empty space into an ornate, but ephemeral, ballroom. All the opulence you see – from the crystal chandeliers to the sumptuously decorated walls – were temporary, installed for just this one occasion.

Here’s how the Roman newspaper at the time described it.

ACTOR: “Everyone was in gala attire, wearing richly made masquerade dress but without covering the face. Particularly the ladies ... were wearing precious fabrics and silks. ... The ball was opened by the wife of the Ambassador of Venice with the Ambassador of France.”

NARRATOR: You can see the French ambassador at the far end of the dance floor. Facing him, with her back to the viewer, is the Venetian ambassador’s wife in a splendid yellow gown. In the foreground, the musicians are poised to start playing.

14

Giovanni Paolo Panini

The Musical Performance in the Teatro Argentina in Honor of the Marriage of the Dauphin, 1747



ACTOR: “Tonight and on the next two evenings, a solemn cantata will be given in Teatro Argentina, which has been adapted by the cardinal ambassador of France for use as a hall in honor of the wedding of the dauphin, and we went to see the noble decorations.”

NARRATOR: That’s how Pope Benedict the Fourteenth described the theater in a letter in July 1747. The pope himself couldn’t attend the event for reasons of protocol, but a French student who was in the audience at the concert wrote to his parents that it was impressive, but sweltering:

ACTOR: “The illumination of this theatre was proportionate to the richness of the decoration, but it generated too much heat.”

NARRATOR: In a time before electric lighting, a newspaper report described how the radiance you see in the painting was achieved.

ACTOR: “The splendid illumination with wax candles distributed across numerous wall sconces and chandeliers added up to around one thousand candles, which decorated the entire

theatre.”

KAYWIN FELDMAN: I hope you enjoyed this exhibition and through these works gained a deeper understanding how artists have depicted and shaped history. This exhibition is 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. We would like to thank Thomson Reuters, the Crosby Family Fund for Exhibitions, Delta Air Lines, and the Star Tribune for their generous support of this exhibition. This exhibition is also made possible, in part, by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund.