

Artwork of the Month November 2025

Bernardo Bellotto: *Piazza San Martino, Lucca*

Charles Martindale, Chair of the Friends, writes about a favourite painting from the collection and why he admires it, and concludes with some thoughts on the personal dimension of the experience of artworks.



Bernardo Bellotto (1722-80), *The Piazza San Martino, Lucca*, early 1740's, oil on canvas, 50.8cm x 72cm. Photo credit: York Museums Trust

I chose this painting because it is one of my personal favourites in the collection. The work has just been returned to us after a year away on a tour of Japan by an exhibition mounted by the National Galleries of Scotland entitled 'Canaletto and the Splendour of Venice'. The Gallery's policy of making such loans, at a time when many provincial galleries are discontinuing this practice pleading lack of resource and staff, should be highly commended. It is right to share our treasures, and carry the name of York Art Gallery around the UK and the world. There are also specific gains for York from the practice. Take Etty's fine copy of the Louvre *Concert Champêtre*, traditionally attributed to Giorgione, and now on display in the Burton Gallery. This was lent to a blockbuster exhibition at Forlì about the relationship between British 19th-century artists and the Italian Renaissance; the painting was cleaned and the frame restored at

the expense of the Foundation mounting the exhibition. Or take the celebrated *Portrait of Signor Agucchi*. In York it has long been attributed to Domenichino. When recently lent to the prestigious Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome for the exhibition 'Guercino: The Ludovisi Years', it was reattributed by the curators there, without any indication of uncertainty over the matter, to a greater Bolognese master, Annibale Carracci. The question of the authorship of a major work in the York collection is clearly of some moment, and deserves further scrutiny. Our Bellotto was loaned to an exhibition at Lucca in 2019 as a star exhibit, and was regarded by the curators there as the finest painting ever made of the city; the work was conserved at no cost to us, to our great benefit.

How did York Art Gallery acquire this painting?

The work was gifted in 1955 to the Gallery by F.D. Lycett Green, always known as Peter, along with another 135 Old Master paintings covering much of European art history from the 14th to the 19th centuries. Lycett Green came from a wealthy manufacturing Yorkshire family. They produced Green's Fuel Economiser, which allowed waste heat from steam engines to be re-used. He was the nephew of Frank Green, the man who restored, lived in, and eventually gave to the National Trust the Treasurer's House in York. Before deciding on York Lycett Green had flirted with other possible venues for his massive gift, including Wakefield, where the family had a factory, and the National Gallery of South Africa in Cape Town. Fortunately, he fell out with the South African curator, to York's great benefit. His gift changed York Art Gallery from an interesting local gallery to one of national importance, so Lycett Green should be held in the highest regard by anyone who cares about the Gallery. Lycett Green was a comparatively wealthy man, but he was no plutocrat, like some of the American collectors of the day. So no A-listers like Titian or Rembrandt, no Botticelli or Piero. Lycett Green chose his paintings cannily: smaller-scale works; fine works by less well-known artists; less popular subjects (so religious and classical subjects rather than superficially prettier things). So in our case a Bellotto, not a Canaletto, and a relatively small one at that (he also gifted a very attractive but even smaller Venetian work by Francesco Guardi, *The Rio dei Mendicanti*).

Who was Bernardo Bellotto (1722-80)?

He was the nephew of a painter much more famous today, Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697-1768), known to us by his diminutive: 'Canaletto' 'little canal'. Confusingly Bellotto was also often called Canaletto in his lifetime, and also sometimes by the double diminutive: Il Canaletto 'tiny little canal'. Bellotto joined his uncle's workshop in his teens, and, in view of his rapid development and enormous gifts, soon became his principal

assistant. In 1740 the 18-year-old Bellotto made a journey to Tuscany, and our painting is a very early work deriving from this visit, its exact date uncertain, that shows the strong influence of Canaletto, from whose style he increasingly diverged as he matured and moved from Venice to other parts of Europe. From his trip to Lucca five drawings also survive of places around the Cathedral and the Romanesque Church of Santa Maria Forisportam, now in the British Library.

Bellotto was a very quick learner, and he learned from Canaletto not only topographical accuracy (in achieving which both made sophisticated use of the camera obscura) but also sensitivity to light, and to atmosphere and weather conditions – in his maturity his depiction of water is arguably superior to Canaletto's. Bellotto's topographical accuracy was so great that the rebuilders of Dresden after its destruction in the Second World War by British air-power used his later paintings of Dresden as sources for the restoration of particular buildings. And the same process happened again in Warsaw massively damaged by both the Nazis and the Soviets.

Canaletto of course is known above all for his views of Venice. Bellotto by contrast painted a wider range of Italian cities – Turin, Verona, Venice, Milan, Florence, Rome, but more importantly also the European cities of Dresden, Munich, Vienna, Cracow, and Warsaw where he received royal patronage. For many years until the outbreak of war with Prussia, part of the Seven Years War, he was court painter to Frederick Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and King of Poland, and was the highest paid artist in the Saxon Court at Dresden; for the King he produced 30 views of Dresden, as well as a further 21 for the Prime Minister. The war ruined him, depriving him of his livelihood and most of his property, though he later obtained gainful employment again from Stanislaw II, King of Poland, at Warsaw where he died.

Bellotto was extremely celebrated in his lifetime, so how did he come to be so eclipsed by Canaletto, particularly in Britain? The differing investment in their work is reflected in the very different figures of paintings in public collections given by Art UK: currently 187 for Canaletto, 23 for Bellotto. There may have been a positive advantage for Canaletto in being so closely associated with views of Venice, a much loved and visited city by the British. He did not invent the Venetian view, *veduta*, but no other artist did so much to fix what we might call the iconography of Venice and the look of the city. Canaletto's Venice becomes, as it were, the canonical one, at least in Britain. There have been other influential depictions of Venice in art of course – Turner, Whistler (my personal favourite), Sargent, and Sickert, among many others – but none that have displaced

Canaletto's in the public's esteem. Moreover, there was a special connection between Canaletto and the wealthy British aristocracy. British milordi visited Venice throughout the 18th century when on the Grand Tour, and many of them bought or commissioned views of the city from Canaletto. And Canaletto strengthened his deep commercial association with Britain by coming to live here for 10 years from 1746, in consequence of war in Europe; he made numerous paintings of London and other places in the country, Warwick Castle, for example. Bellotto by contrast was associated with German, Austrian, and Polish royalty and aristocracy.

The painting, its character and merits

I first visited Lucca in my teenage years, when before university I worked in a little opera house in Barga in the hills nearby. At that time Lucca had an air of romantic desolation, but was somewhat dejected and seedy; today it is elegant and prosperous, as a result of Italy's membership of the EU, more attractive as a city in my view than nearby Pisa, even though it contains nothing on the scale of the glamorous Campo Santo. There are three splendid Romanesque basilicas, Romanesque meaning using the round arch inherited from the Romans, not the pointed Gothic arch. We have very little Romanesque architecture in this country, most of our churches and cathedrals being primarily Gothic, but France and Italy are both full of splendid examples. In Lucca the grandest of these is the cathedral church of San Martino, with a memorable sculpture on the façade of Saint Martin giving his cloak to a beggar (this does not feature in Bellotto's painting, so presumably was not in this position at that time). This is in fact a replica, like most such sculptures you see on the outside of ancient buildings today; the restored original statue from the 13th century is kept inside. The cathedral and its square is the subject of Bellotto's painting. It all looks a little run-down, in a rather romantic way, and it is interesting that the square is not fully paved, as it is today, but mainly bare or grassy ground. On the left-hand side there is the Palazzo Micheletti with its terraced gardens, designed by the 16th-century Tuscan sculptor and architect Bartolomeo Ammannati (who also worked in Florence on the Pitti Palace and designed the Ponte Santa Trinità). The palace is also a little run-down, with a shop incorporated into it; today it is restored to its original grandeur, the shop removed, and the whole let out in apartments. Further to the left we have part of the Church of San Giovanni and Reparata, the original Cathedral of Lucca before San Martino received that status.

This depiction of Lucca is almost unique, certainly for the 18th century; shown in the city at the exhibition in 2019 it was described as 'a work of extraordinary beauty and harmony', 'a masterpiece...the most important

painting in history having as its subject the city of Lucca'. Already in his late teens Bellotto had achieved a full mastery of perspective, both linear and aerial (for the latter see the group of houses fainter and blurrier at the back of our painting). The rapid perspective recession is measured by the figures and the strong shadows. The vanishing point is at the centre so that we are looking as it were into a void; we are positioned off-centre as is the Cathedral. The perspective gives an exaggerated sense of space, that makes the piazza seem larger and grander than when experienced in reality. The design is balanced but not symmetrical, which is very visually satisfying, with the Cathedral dominant because face-on unlike the other buildings in the piazza, but not in the centre. The surface texture of the weathered walls of the buildings is beautifully realized, something Bellotto learned from Canaletto. The colour is cooler than is often the case with Canaletto, with the lovely blue of the sky and green of the vegetation, in the late afternoon sunshine, with the light from the right. There are a variety of figures of different classes sharply differentiated and a coach. The mood is tranquil, not bustling, Lucca at that date is more a town than a city like busy Venice or Rome.

Our painting is a very lovely thing, and we are lucky indeed to have it in York. But one must admit that Bellotto in his maturity produced grander and more ambitious works, and drew further away from the manner of his uncle. In 2021 there was a magnificent exhibition in Room 1 of the National Gallery in London of all five of Bellotto's massive canvasses of the Fortress of Königstein 25 miles from Dresden, painted between 1756 and 1758.ⁱ By chance four of these have ended up in Britain, two in Manchester Art Gallery secured by Timothy Clifford when Director there in the early 1980s, one in the National Gallery itself, acquired as recently as 2017 with the support of many donors, one belonging to the Earl of Derby, the final one now being in Washington DC. These magnificent paintings were never delivered to the Saxon King as a result of the outbreak of war with Prussia, so perhaps on this occasion were being displayed together for viewing for the very first time. They evince the topographical precision and the rich human interest in the activity of the human figures (for which the technical term is *staffage*) characteristic of Bellotto from the first. By this date Bellotto produces much more interesting figures than Canaletto, many of them satirical in manner and showing an almost Hogarthian wit. But these features are combined with a highly romantic and moody atmosphere in the wider setting that prefigures Romanticism. In the sublime landscape backgrounds around the fortress we find the strong *chiaroscuro* (strong contrasts of light and dark) so characteristic of the mature Bellotto and some way from the normal quieter, less dramatic manner of Canaletto. In works such as these Bellotto not only stakes a

claim for his own originality and distinctiveness as an artist but also, in my view at least, surpasses the work of his uncle, excellent as that is.

The issue of personal taste

I started this short essay by saying that this was a favourite painting of mine. And I want to end with some reflections on our experience of works of art, and the senses in which they are subjective and personal. I admire this painting in the first instance because I find it beautiful. In doing so I am making what the philosopher Immanuel Kant, in the work that for me is still the most important treatment of aesthetic judgement ever written, his third Critique, *The Critique of Judgement*, of 1790 calls the 'the judgement of taste', the judgement that this painting I am looking at, this poem I am reading, this piece of music I am listening to, this pot I am holding in my hands, is beautiful. Beautiful here is a shorthand for the complex pleasure I take in the experience, which for Kant involves a delight-inducing free-play of my sensuous, perceptual equipment and mental faculties, a free-play of imagination and understanding. I would say too that part of the pleasure is in the fact that the object in question is well crafted. Kant himself underplays that aspect of art, partly because he rightly argued that there are no rules for beauty - you can't predict in advance what you will experience as beautiful. In practice anything may turn out to be beautiful, and this made him suspicious of what we might call the academic or craft aspect of artmaking. And, of course, it is true that something can be well-crafted and still not beautiful. Most importantly the judgement of taste is necessarily subjective and personal, the pleasurable encounter between an experiencing subject and an object. No one can experience beauty for you, you have to experience it for yourself, and no-one and nothing can force you to find something beautiful if you don't. But Kant crucially also argues that the judgement of taste is 'universal' in the sense that it, to use his word, 'imputes', though of course in practice may well not meet, the agreement of others. So the judgement is shareable, intersubjective as we might say, open to productive discussion, which may of course take the form of contention and disagreement. Beauty, though subjectively experienced, is not merely a private matter but also a social one; the judgement of taste is communicable.

But there is also a second, different sense in which our preference may be personal, and to an extent legitimately so, which I know is operative in the case of my response to the Bellotto. Like so many Englishmen before me, from my teenage years I have loved Italy beyond all other European countries: the historic cities, towns, villages; the abundance of great architecture and works of art; the lovely landscapes, perfect meeting place

of nature and man, with cypresses, vines, olives; and so forth. I still remember the frisson – like a *coup de foudre* - when I first emerged from a tunnel under the Alps into the warm South. In those days we usually went to Italy by train through Switzerland, so much more adventurous and exciting than a quick flight. That's a moment perfectly described by the early 20th-century art critic Adrian Stokes in his book *Inside Out*. So I love this picture in part because I love Italy and love Lucca as a place, because of experiences I have had which are exclusive to myself, and these things fuel my enthusiasm for this work. For Kant this wouldn't be a judgement of taste, more what he calls a judgement of the agreeable. You like spinach, I don't, I like the colour green, you prefer blue – that's just how it is, there is nothing to disagree about profitably here. Also, for Kant a judgement of taste must be 'without an interest'. If I respond favourably to a painting because it was painted by my daughter, or because I hope to make money out of it, that's clearly not a pure judgement of taste. Of course, in such a case one can make a thought experiment, and try to discount any interests one may have, in making the judgement, but that does not make such interests necessarily irrelevant or illegitimate – there is nothing wrong in liking the work of a family member. Since this essay is a public work, my focus throughout the discussion has been on the Kantian judgement of taste, as something shareable, subject to agreement or contention. But my fondness for this painting is personal in these two quite distinct senses, and I don't think one can rule out either part of what is a complex and vital human experience, which today we usually call the aesthetic.

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ⁱ See the excellent catalogue: *Bellotto: The Königstein Views Reunited*, ed. Letizia Treves, National Gallery 2021.