

Bridging the Romanticized and the Realistic in Thomas Moran's *View of Venice*

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Thomas Moran (1837-1926) is an American painter, best known for his landscapes of the American West, especially the striking vistas of Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. However, in the late nineteenth century, Moran became inspired by the architecture and scenery of Europe as he traveled abroad. His newfound inspiration led him to begin painting and exhibiting Venetian scenes that later became more popular than his depictions of the American West.¹ One example of this is his 1894 oil painting, *View of Venice* (Figure 1), which today hangs in the Maier Museum of Art in Lynchburg, Virginia. In this artwork, Moran uses the visual contrasts of color, movement, and line, as well as the overall organization of the composition to show an appreciation for the scenic beauty of Venice. He also creates a contrast between the romanticized view of the city by hinting at realistic aspects of Venetian life.

As the title suggests, *View of Venice*, depicts the Italian city as seen from across the canal. Specific, real-world structures are seen in the middle-ground including the Doge's Palace (left), the Bridge of Sighs (middle), and the Palazzo de Prigioni, Venice's prison (right). The buildings are wedged between blue bands across the back and foregrounds that are the sky and sea, respectively. Also in the foreground, extending into the right side of the picture plane, are bustling boats and docks filled with vague, almost abstracted depictions of ambiguous activity. Finally, painted in the sky is a low-hanging moon suggesting the ascent into morning as the light from the sun illuminates the facade of the buildings.

¹ "View of Venice." Collections.maier museum.org. Maier Museum of Art, n.d.

<http://collections.maiermuseum.org/mDetail.aspx?rID=M.2005.3&db=objects&dir=MAIER&osearch=thomas%2520moran&list=res&rname=&rimage=&page=1>.

Thomas Moran “was highly entranced by Venice and its artistic history”² and the use of form in this painting is a reflection of his romantic idea of the city. The first evidence of this is the use of color that creates a strong sense of serenity. The light-blue of the sky and sea has a calming effect that is especially effective because the blue expanses are mostly clear, not cluttered with excess architectural forms or miscellaneous objects. The pearly white of the marble facades of the buildings (Figure 2) are almost incandescent as the sunlight strikes them.

However serene and dazzling the blue and white of the sky and buildings are, they are still heavily contrasted with the docks on the lower right-hand side (Figure 3). The muddled mass of wooden browns, lively reds, and warm yellows continually distracts the eye from the Venetian architecture, dragging it down to outside of the city. This is the first hint of reality that Moran uses to suggest that, although he is enamored with Venice, he recognizes its real-life inhabitants and the less-refined aspects of their lives.

This section of the right-hand side contains the energetic and ambiguously described movement of the Venetian citizens (Figure 3). Although ambiguous at first glance, upon closer inspection the viewer can make out throngs of workers bustling around, loading and unloading goods. The movement is also continued in the water both below and to the left as there are gentle horizontal ripples in the water and people-filled gondolas gliding toward the middle ground. This sense of movement indicates to the viewer that the happenings of everyday life occur in this space in a way that contrasts the quiet and still refinement of the regal architecture in the midground. Not only does the movement from the docks contrast the immobile buildings, it also drags the eye away from the beauty of the building that first captured Moran’s attention.

² Bill Fiddler. “An 1899 Painting of Venice by Thomas Moran at Doyle Auctioneers & Appraisers.” Bill Fiddler, specialist of American Art (2019; New York City, Doyle Auctions). Youtube Video.

<https://youtu.be/9oJWvK8UtYU>

The visual construction of the buildings also yields the importance of line to Moran's creation of idealized Venetian elegance. The buildings, which can be seen in greater detail in Figure 2, are elegant both in decorative detail and in their architectural language. The columnar features on both buildings serve to elongate them vertically. Additionally, the subtle reflections of the buildings in the water below add to their illusionistic length. The decorative elements such as the frieze along the top of the Palazzo de Prigioni, the crenellations on the Ducal Palace, and the balustrades on both create elegant horizontal elements of decoration throughout the scene.

As with the other elements of form in this painting, the use of geometric and architectural lines are contrasted within the docked section. The depiction of hanging cloth sails, human figures, and the curves of boats and other objects are described by organic lines. The use of line here is also less structured as it is in the architectural descriptions. Here, Moran places less emphasis on defining the objects precisely and instead on describing masses of objects and clusters of people in a disorganized fashion. This contrasts with the highly regulated, formulated Renaissance buildings, to emphasize the disorganization of life in a highly populated city.

Finally, the organization of the composition reveals insights to both Moran's idealized and his realistic views of Venice. As mentioned previously, much of the subject matter of this painting is contained to the middle ground, framed by the sea and sky. The framed section, which contains the romanticized architectural structures and the gritty representations of city life, is again compositionally divided into two segments. The left side is primarily composed of the elegant aspects of the painting: the smooth, decorated, clean, and highly lit Doge's Palace. The right contains the dock and the majority of its laborers, as well as the shadowed Palazzo de Prigioni. Although the right half is notably busier and more massive, the composition is balanced by the extension of the Doge's Palace by the water's reflection. In between the two buildings

there are two bridges that serve as connections between the divided composition: the famed Bridge of Sighs and a pedestrian footbridge. Symbolically, this connection may suggest that the contrasting representations Moran presents of Venice could be linked because of their shared locale. This is also supported by the proximity of the subject matter and its collective containment to the middle ground.

In *View of Venice*, it is clear to see why Thomas Moran was inspired to paint beautiful Venetian scenes. The Renaissance architecture is beautiful on its own, yet Moran is able to elevate its depiction by idealizing the form through the use of pearly, luminescent colors, still scenes, and elegant decorative and architectural lines. However, it is also clear how Moran was able to ground the scene to reality by depicting aspects of everyday life such as bustling, energetic crowds that are livened by warm colors and organic line. His use of a divided composition that is still connected by both literal and metaphorical bridges links the two Venices that Moran represents in the paintings. The link suggests that both the romanticized and the realistic ideas of Venice can exist within the same locale.



Figure 1. Thomas Moran, *View of Venice*, 1894, Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg³

³ Moran, Thomas. *View of Venice*. 1894. oil on canvas, 30 x 20 inches (76.2 x 50.8cm). Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg, Virginia <http://collections.maiermuseum.org/Mhomed.aspx?dir=MAIER>. Same for Figures 1-3.



Figure 2. Detail of the Bridge of Sighs and Doge Palace. Thomas Moran, *View of Venice*, 1894, Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg



Figure 3. Detail of docked area. Thomas Moran, *View of Venice*, 1894, Maier Museum of Art, Lynchburg

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