

## Canaletto dreaming

I knew Canaletto ("Little Canal," more fully, Giovanni Antonio Canal) even as a primary school-boy. One of my great loves was reading about great artists and their works. His paintings of the canals of Venice enthralled me so that I thought that he got his nick-name from drawing them. In due course, I found out that he was the greatest view-painter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Canaletto appeared in my dream last night. In the dream, he gave me one of his panoramic paintings, "Grand Canal: Looking Northeast from the Palazzo Balbi to the Rialto Bridge."<sup>1</sup> I had actually thought of buying it (in the dream) but he said that I could not afford it, as it is priceless. So he gave it to me free of charge!

Then he told me the reason for his generosity. The painting needs cleaning up. It was covered with centuries of thick dirt and alien pants. These had to be removed so that the painting is restored to its original colour, vision and glory.

The dirt collected naturally as no one thought of properly cleaning it away. People kept on looking at it with great admiration, but failed to notice the tiny specks of vaporous dirt from their breathing (they often came too close to look at the details) as they breathed into the painting. Hidden under centuries of bad breath, the painting's colours appeared dull and odd. No one really noticed this, except for a few art-lovers with an eye for colours.

Then there was something more troubling. There were professional painters called "restorers" who were also good in reproducing the paintings of the masters. In fact, their works were so good that often others mistook them for the works of the masters themselves. Somehow sooner or later, the wise art experts who examined these forgeries exposed them for what they were.

These restorers thought that they could restore the colours of Canaletto's painting that looked faded and dull. Not knowing that films of dirt had hidden the original layer of art, these master reproducers painted over the masterpiece in a way they thought would make it look right. Anyway, it was a profitable thing to do as they were paid a handsome sum for this by generous art-lovers, equally ignorant of the real problem.

Canaletto then carefully instructed me how to properly remove the films and patches of dirt, and dissolve away the extra layer of gaudy paints. It was a tedious task. With the best of effort humanly possible, I could only clean up and free an area of the original painting about the size of a small postage stamp each day. As these tiny windows of truth revealed the true colours and beauty of the original paintings, the zest it exuded grew greater.

As I gently and gingerly clear away the dirt and the paints from the great painting, everything else seem to fade into the background. There is just the painting and cleaning. A tiny spot of dirt is cleared, the colours below now breathe anew. A tiny spot of paint is removed, the hidden vision floods into my mind's eyes. It is as if I am painting the masterpiece myself! The whole painting comes alive. It *is* the Grand Canal, looking northeast from the Palazzo Balbi to the Rialto Bridge.

The joy of "painting" the Grand Canal took my breath away, literally: I seem to have stopped breathing, but feel fully joyfully alive. I have no need of breath, and there is no more eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, or even mind. There is just the removing of dirt, removing of paint, and yet it seems as if I am doing nothing at all, as if it all were taking place with a life all its own.

I could not say that I know what is going on, nor could I say what there is to know. All thoughts seem to have evaporated. There is only this boundless spacious feeling of being here, there, everywhere, and yet I cannot say I am coming, or going, neither here nor there. It is bliss beyond

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.canalettogallery.org/163898/Grand-Canal--Looking-Northeast-from-the-Palazzo-Balbi-to-the-Rialto-Bridge-large.jpg>

words, beyond speech: just bliss, total and overpowering bliss. There's nothing to do; for, there's no I, no me, no mine; just infinite bliss.

Then I heard a voice. I had emerged from that bliss and came to my senses again, as it were. It was Canaletto's voice. People don't know how to look at paintings, he said. They don't know how to enjoy art. They measure painting and every work of art; they put a price on them. They frame them, and hang them on their sad blank walls. They might look at these trophies a few times in their lives, and then die. Then others convert it again into a huge pile of tiny pieces of paper at an auction, to be taken away by someone who could give the most pieces of paper for this priceless space of joy and beauty.

Then, continued the master, in his melodious Italian lilt, some people actually worship paintings, treating them like idols of wealth, power and sensuality. They do not see them as works of art, as visions of beauty and peace. They endlessly talk about them, talking about hues and paints, styles and techniques, space and perspective, thingifying wordless beauty into technical terms and philosophies of art.

See how people look at pictures for entertainment, Canaletto complained. They might as well go to the puppet shows: see, laugh, go home. They remain the same unhappy people; so they come for more entertainment. But each of my painting is my self: each point of colour my heartbeat, every hue my breath, all the beauty my life. I give you my joy and love in my painting so that you may be joyful and be free.

You cannot look at my painting with your eyes alone: then you only see colours, but not the heartbeats, the breaths, the life, the joy and love. You must see it with your heart, feel it. You cannot and must not do anything more than that: never worship it, for it is you yourself in that painting. See the painting, see yourself, know yourself.

Gods and Bodhisattvas die when we stop worshipping them. Painters and paintings die when we start worshipping them. A painter is a creator of beauty, a seer of visions. In the moments we lose our selves in beauty and see the vision, we are painting ourselves, we are the painting ourselves. The reality is that there is no painter, only the painting. Canaletto was silent for a long while, smiling at me as if to highlight this vital surprising point.

Then, holding me by both my shoulders and looking right into my eyes, he said: Why do they keep chanting, "Canaletto, Canaletto..." I am but my paintings, confessed the master. Gaze at the painting, he said, his eyes looking right into my heart: Enjoy its beauty; feel its peace! A painting is not merely a piece of coloured canvas: it is how we look at it that makes it priceless.

We might own a painting, but we can never *have* it. If we truly enjoy a painting, then we truly *are* it.

Oh why am I saying all these things Canaletto seemed suddenly to despair no matter what I say, people would still hear only what they want, but deaf to my heart that the words window. They word up what they know not, what they do not, what they are not. They would putty up the silence amongst my words, and even doubt and fault what I have said. I think I've said enough, said the master. And he vanished just as he had appeared.

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