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ART REVIEW

'Sargent, Whistler, and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano' Review: An Italian Love Affair

At the Smithsonian American Art Museum, a multifaceted look at the passion of artists, crafters and collectors for the storied city.



Frank Duveneck's 'Water Carriers, Venice' (1884)

PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

By Barrymore Laurence Scherer

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Washington

“Venice. . . . You desire to embrace it, to caress it, to possess it . . . your visit becomes a perpetual love-affair,” declared Henry James in “Italian Hours,” his 1909 collection of travel essays.

Sargent, Whistler, and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano

*Smithsonian American Art Museum
Through May 8*

James was far from the only American visitor who was seduced by the “Queen of the Adriatic.” Currently on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum through May 8, and scheduled to travel to the Amon Carter Museum and Mystic Seaport Museum after it closes, “Sargent, Whistler, and Venetian Glass: American Artists and the Magic of Murano” brings together extraordinary paintings and graphic art by Americans who traveled to Venice. Organized by the museum’s former curator of prints and drawings Crawford Alexander Mann III, editor of and contributor to the outstanding catalog, it produces an enthralling visual counterpoint between their work and choice examples of late-19th-century Venetian glass and lace. While examining contemporaneous pictorial and decorative arts, it also explores the allure Venice exerted over a wave of wealthy American tourists— Isabella Stewart Gardner among them—who returned home laden with precious swag for their collections.

A quarter of the 144 works assembled here come from the Smithsonian American Art Museum’s collection, including many pieces of ancient and 19th-century Venetian glass donated in 1929 by the American businessman and collector John Gellatly. In addition are loans from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, the Corning Museum of Glass and other public and private collections.

Apart from the iconic Sargent oils and Whistler etchings, the show highlights artworks whose beauty bespeaks the technical sophistication of this generation of Americans, many of whom aren’t so generally familiar today as they deserve to be. Such painters as Frank Duveneck and Walter Launt Palmer eschewed the tight, precise academic painting style of the time for the French manner known as the *juste milieu*, in which artists compromised felicitously between academic exactitude and the looser brushwork of Impressionism.



John Singer Sargent's 'A Venetian Woman' (1882)

PHOTO: CINCINNATI ART MUSEUM/SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

These characteristics, long familiar in Sargent's oeuvre, are embodied in his glorious 1882 "A Venetian Woman." Sargent catches the fetching tilt of her head, the proportions of her face with its inviting smile, framed by the center parting of her rich black hair. And he contrasts the swift, virtuoso brushwork of her frilled white skirt with his rendering of the warm, palpable loveliness of her exposed arm and elegantly relaxed fingers. Her shawl emerges as a slash of port-wine color from a series of mere brush strokes indicating the

trailing fringe, offset by the snappy accent of her pointed black slipper thrust forward in white hose.

Similarly, Duvneck's 1884 "Water Carriers, Venice" embodies juste milieu characteristics in a breezy image of quotidian activity along the famed Riva degli Schiavoni. The subject recalls how precious fresh water sourced from rainfall and collecting wells was to a city afloat in sea water. This gracefully bustling composition is complemented by Whistler's 1879-80 etching "The Riva No. 2" in which he leaves considerable blank space in the middle of the plate to achieve the same sense of spaciousness. Duvneck's own etching of the "Riva degli Schiavoni, No. 2" (1880) and Bertha Evelyn Jaques's delicate "April Shower, Venice" (1914) share this Whistlerian sparseness—as does Hermann Dudley Murphy's nocturnal oil "Murano" (1907), which could easily pass for an actual Whistler.



'Vase with Dolphins and Flowers' (c. 1880s-90s), attributed to Compagnia di Venezia e Murano (CVM)

PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

The shifting quality of Adriatic sunlight over the course of a day contributes to Venice's atmosphere. In "A View of Venice" (1891), Thomas Moran captures its midday dazzle, in contrast to the gentle filtered daylight of the workshop interior in Robert Frederick Blum's "Venetian Lacemakers" (1887). Similarly, Ellen Day Hale's shimmering soft-ground etching and aquatint "First Night in Venice" (1890) conveys the velvety twilight in which the great domed Basilica of Santa Maria della Salute rises majestically against the sky.



'Fish and Eel Vase' (c. 1890), attributed to Vittorio Zanetti

PHOTO: SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

No curatorial step has been overlooked in presenting the objects in this show—in particular, the works of glass are beautifully lighted to bring out their individual qualities. For instance, an elaborate "Vase With Dolphins and Flowers" attributed to the Compagnia di Venezia e Murano (c. 1880s-90s) conveys the joyful spirit that was a hallmark of Venetian revival glass, with its lighthearted play of jewel-like colors, its juxtaposition of clarity and opacity in forms that range from sea-creatures and plants to intricate webs of glass for handles. The dragons, sea horses, serpents and floral motifs interwoven with

miraculous tissues of solid gossamer constituting these fanciful vitreous confections bespeak technical virtuosity, an imaginative reverence for history, and sheer playfulness. They not only embody the idealized spirit of Venice at Carnival time, but also the jaunty, upbeat Italian nature that generated Commedia dell'arte, the operas of Rossini and even Italy's venerable, memorably tuneful national anthem, "Fratelli d'Italia."

With its abundant visual pleasures, this delightful exhibition reinforces our understanding of America's longtime artistic ties with Venice while inviting us to revel in aspects of Venice still preserved today. For those pining to visit the city again, it might just be the next best thing to a voyage there.

—*Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.*

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