Stanford exhibits art from inside the pleasure capital

by Valerie Patten

In the 18th century, Venice was the pleasure capital of Europe, a sort of exquisite tourist town, producing carnivals, events and art objects in abundance. Although the city's political and economic prominence had degenerated by then, Venice was still rich in musical life, theater, pagentry and the more illicit forms of amusement.

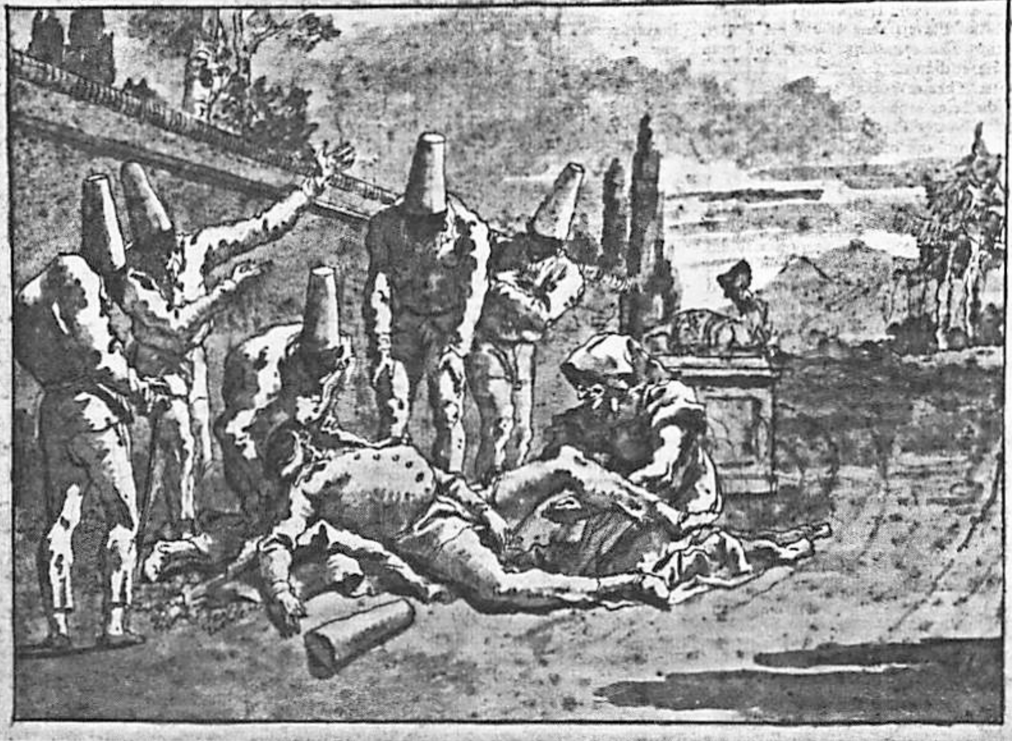
Reflecting this artistic diversity is an exhibit at the Stanford University Art Gallery entitled "Venice in the 18th Century." The exhibit is beautifully curated and provides a wealth of information about Venetian life. Included are etchings, drawings, small paintings, book engravings, mirrors, furniture, glass and lace, as well as a manuscript page from *The Marriage of Figaro*, written in Mozart's own hand.

Extremely popular with tourists in the 1700s were the views of Venetian street life, called *vedute*. Economics aside, vedute became a personal mode of expression for such artists as Canaletto and Guardi. They had the Venetian eye for recording minute realistic detail, including the effects of light, air and water so unique to the city. Their visions extended to the portrayal of fanciful landscapes, which blended fact with imaginary images — nature improved by art.

Two aspects of Venetian art are evident in the exhibit: the near-documentary attitude combined with the love of theater and masquerade and a tendency toward the eccentric and fantastical. The latter culminated in a form of imaginative art called the *Capriccio*. The somewhat impoverished nobility, for whom this art was created, was characterized by an extreme elegance of manner, a sophisticated sense of humor and an overriding cheerfulness. At the same time, they witnessed Venice's inevitable decline. Many of the Capricci express this ambivalence; the beauty of their style is often offset by reminders of the destructive power of time.

The 18th century was a time of reason versus superstition, formalism versus spontaneity in relations, and structure versus personal freedom. An overly rational attitude was often bad for the arts. It forced them into being mere entertainment and decoration for life, while simultaneously criticizing them for their irrelevance.

Pietro Longhi's approach to art is the embodiment of the light-hearted, self-conscious observer of manners. His small, luminous paintings are charming descriptions of daily life and routine events. A playful, erotic element exists in all his work, along with a mild interest in the psychology of his subjects. Longhi never goes so far as to portray poverty or pain. His depictions of casinos, of ladies of quality and their male servants and suitors are amusing but never threatening.



Punchinello Lying on the Ground by Giovanni Demenico Tiepolo, from the exhibition, Venice in the 18th Century at the Stanford Museum through Dec. 19.

Piranesi, on the other hand, was a frustrated, unemployed architect in love with the monuments of antiquity. He channeled his considerable energy into two series of etchings: the "Inventioni Capric di Carceri," imaginary prisons, and the "Grotteschi," comments on the perishability of human life.

To some, these cavernous prison structures and instruments of torture are the epitome of pessimism. But others say they make a strong case for the timelessness of monumental architecture.

Piranesi's etchings consitute the most powerful series in the exhibit. I agree with the curator that these are not negative products of a demented mind but evidence of a great, positive, expressive strength, entirely relevant to the problems of art of that period.

Also presenting a darker side of Venetian art, with more refinement and ambiguity, are some enigmatic etchings and drawings by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. According to the gallery notes, "The more bizarre and macabre aspects of the capriccio were developed by G. B. Tiepolo in the series of 'Vari Capricci' and 'Scherzi di Fantasia' which foreshadow Goya."

Tiepolo's large-scale murals and paintings use grand themes developed in the grand manner. He is a great colorist and a brilliant draughtsman. He creates astounding theatrical effects through the use of light.

Giandomenico Tiepolo, Giovanni Battista's son, worked as his father's assistant until he was 43, when he established his own identity by taking genre painting into an uneasy psychological realm. The Stanford exhibit includes three of his drawings from a series of scenes from the life of Punchinello, entitled oddly "Entertainment for Children."

Punchinello, an ugly, hunchbacked figure of popular Italian comedy, was known as the embodiment of the grosser traits of human character. He was gluttonous, mischievous and always had a sneering grin on his face.

"Punchinello Presides at a Hanging" depicts a hanged man, looking suspiciously like Punchinello himself, minus the pointed hat, grinning down at a crowd of people, including a whole row of Punchinelli, all with their backs to the viewer.

Giandomenico Tiepolo saw the dismantling of Venice by foreign powers in his later years. Are these Punchinelli foreign soldiers? Or are they simply the ironic, predictably jaded side of humanity? The ambiguity of the macabre content leads us away from the cheerful work of Longhi.

Along with Piranesi's visions, Guardi's eccentric landscapes, G. B. Tiepolo's Capricci and the trend of experimenting in art with the psychologically terrifying, this work leads us toward future developments that resulted in a more direct confrontation with the natural world as it really is — untamable, unperfected.

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