First Impression: Monet and Venice

BY ERIC UHLFELDER

One can only wonder what Claude Monet first thought when he finally set foot in Venice in 1908 so late in life.

A possible clue comes from an unrelated architectural traveler, Claude Bragdon, who had first visited the city a decade earlier. Reporting back to the States, he wrote, "Everything I had read was clean forgotten, swallowed up in wonder—and during my first moments on the Grand Canal I suffered from a sort of indignation that no one had in any way prepared me for what I found there. How should one convey the idea of light to a blind man or of such color as is there to dwellers in the grey-brown cities of the North? Venice is a shattered rainbow, built into a city."

The Brooklyn Museum, in collaboration with the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, insightfully explores these questions about the artist's initial reaction and artistic response to the city through its current exhibition, "Monet and Venice."

The first formal show devoted to Monet's Venice in over a century, the exhibition brings us alongside the artist during his only visit to the city by weaving the Venetian works of Canaletto, Manet, Sargent, Turner, and Renoir around Monet's. They are complemented by postcards, letters and personal remembrances of the trip, serenaded by a commissioned symphonia inspired by the exhibition.

CHIESA SAN GIORGIO MAGGIORE

PALAZZO CONTARINI

More than half of Monet's 37 finished Venetian canvases have been assembled from various institutions.

Lisa Small, senior curator of European Art at the Brooklyn Museum, is thrilled "to reunite so many of Monet's radiant paintings of Venice, including Brooklyn's own Palazzo Ducale, which was acquired in 1920."

Small, who co-curated the show with Melissa Buron, observed that "Monet found the lagoon city an ideal environment for capturing the evanescent, interconnected effects of colored light and air that define his radical style . . . conjured in prismatic touches of paint, (that) dissolve in the shimmering atmosphere like floating apparitions."

Despite how closely we link Monet and Venice, this connection almost never was. We learn from the exhibition that Monet didn't want to go to Venice.

His only trip to the Laguna was born from a need to escape from his obsessive struggles with Giverny's water lilies. Knowing her husband, Alice suggested a trip to Venice. Monet, then 68, lamented "the city is too beautiful to be painted" and he was "too old to paint such beautiful things."

How could one originally render this historic city that has been endlessly rendered to the point of romantic cliché, echoing the thoughts of Bragdon: a city impossible to envision from a distance. (And it surely didn't help that Monet arrived to a rainy and windy September.)

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Small provides an answer, "Monet renewed the city by dematerializing its history—in fact, by making it appear ahistorical—reclaiming for it in delicate touches of paint its essential reality: shifting light on stone and water." Monet as modernist.

In forging this original path, he conceded the city had indeed cast its spell on him. And this experience expanded his sight, having helped him see things anew, and reenergized his work after returning to Giverny.

Co-curator Buron, who had been in charge of curatorial affairs at the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco and is now head of collections and chief curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, wrote that "Without Venice, the work for which Monet is best known today might not have reached the height of its creative expression."

For those who know the city well, this splendid celebration of Venice, however, is tinged with a melancholy about what might have been: had Monet come to Venice as a younger man and had returned in different seasons…with different light… and an ever-evolving vision.

J'imagine.

MONET AND VENICE.
The exhibition runs through February 1, 2026 at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway. For more information, see brooklynmuseum.org.

PALAZZO DARIO