

7. *Venice: Campo San Vidal  
and Santa Maria della Carità  
(‘The Stonemason’s Yard’)*



*Artist* Giovanni Antonio Canal known as  
CANALETTO (1697-1768)

*Medium* Oil

*Support* Canvas

*Size* 123.8 x 162.9 cm

*Date* 1726-30

***In this picture we find an early use of a newly synthesised colour –  
Prussian blue.***

*The subject* The view is of the open space (the campo) in front of the church of San Vidal. Work is in progress on the new façade of the church, and we see a temporary workmen’s shed and various large pieces of masonry. The view is recognisable today and the well-head in the foreground still exists. From here we look across the Grand Canal to the church of Santa Maria della Carità. The

campanile (or bell tower) of this church fell down in 1744. The scuola to the right of this church became the Accademia di Belle Arti in the early 19th century, and it was in this building that Cima's *Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (no.5 in this pack) was being stored when it suffered its unfortunate immersion in the waters of the Grand Canal.

### *Underpaint used to date the picture*

The date of this picture is not known and there are no records of it before 1808. It is of uniquely high quality and may well mark a moment between Canaletto's early and mature styles. There is grey underpaint below the sky and yellow-brown under the buildings. It seems that this is what Canaletto did until about 1727-28; after that date he tended to use a uniform pale beige underpaint. So this painting probably dates from the late 1720s.

### *At the National Gallery*

The first record is in 1808, when it was in the collection of Sir George Beaumont. It came to the National Gallery in 1828 and it was cleaned in 1852. Critics of the time said that it had been 'literally flayed', 'scoured', 'scrubbed', and 'smudged'. During cleaning, damage was noted in the right hand upper corner. No further examination or cleaning happened until 1955, when discoloured **varnish** and repaintings were removed. At that time the condition was reported as 'quite good', although some areas of sky appeared to be damaged.

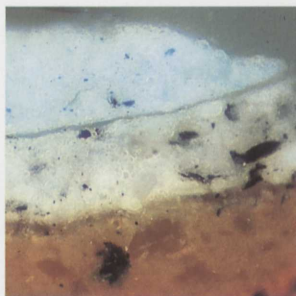


By 1989 the 1955 varnish was already significantly 'discoloured'. Also, the retouchings in the sky had been made with artificial **ultramarine**. This did not match the original **Prussian blue** – the two blues displayed **metamerism**. So all colour photographs of this picture taken before 1989 show purple patches in the sky!

Some blurred clouds in the sky, near the upper right corner, were found to be painted over old paint losses, so could not be original. This overpainting could not be dated as the pigments were traditional and in use continually since Canaletto painted the picture. It is quite possible that the work was done by

Constable at Sir George Beaumont's home in 1823. Constable wrote in his *Memoirs* (for 21 November 1823): 'I have then an old picture to fill up some holes in'. It could be that Sir George wanted the painting tidied up before he gave it to the Nation. These repaints were not removed, in view of their probable historic interest, so it was decided to cover them again.

*A cross-section of the sky. It shows the damage between the the pale blue top layer containing the Prussian blue and its grey underpaint. Below that is the yellow-brown layer from the upper ground.*

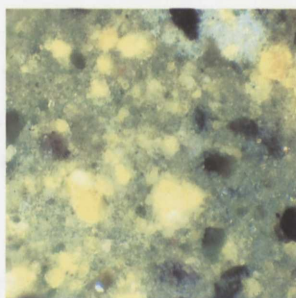


Apart from this the picture was in quite good condition, although many small flakes were missing from the sky. Cross-sections of paint samples showed that the Prussian blue had partly come away from its grey underpaint, and the same had happened between the underpaint and the **ground**.

Cross-sections revealed a lower, orange-brown, layer of ground and an upper yellow-brown one. Cool grey underpaint was below the blue sky, but the buildings were painted direct onto the upper ground, which imparts the terracotta colour to some of them.

The sky, as usual with Canaletto, contains Prussian blue mixed with **lead white**. This is painted as a single layer over the grey underpaint, which consists of lead white and wood charcoal. Cross-sections of samples show some light-induced fading of the Prussian blue at the top of the paint layer, with less fading lower down in the layer where penetration of light diminishes. It has been suggested that the early Prussian blues – the pigment only became available in about 1710 – are liable to fading, especially when mixed with large amounts of lead white. The fading can lead to a greenish colour. The darker tints of the blue pigment (those with less white added) are more stable. A slightly unnerving feature of Prussian blue, discovered when it was used as an outdoor paint, is that some varieties can be decolourised by strong sunlight and regain their colour during the night!

*A cross-section from the green grass which is on the far side of the Grand canal in front of the church. The paint is green earth, Naples yellow and yellow ochre with a little white.*



Another pigment regularly used by Canaletto is **Naples yellow**. In this painting he used it pure for the yellow jerkin of the stonemason in the centre foreground, and mixed with other colours in – eg the grass on the far quayside in front of Santa Maria della Carità, and in the warm terracotta of the building on the right.