



135 James Wilson Morrice

CAC RCA 1865 – 1924

Venice, Regatta

oil on canvas, signed and on verso inscribed *Venice/ No. 2673/745/1395* and stamped Jules Chauvin, dorures et tableaux, circa 1898 – 1901
20 ¼ x 29 ¾ in, 51.4 x 74.6 cm

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Paris

SOON AFTER JAMES WILSON MORRICE permanently moved to Paris in 1890, he started to travel in search of new subjects, with one constant: they had to be near water. From 1896 to 1907, Saint-Malo, in Brittany, and Venice were his favourite places, but Venice—where water is everywhere—inspired twice as many works. When he first exhibited his Venice paintings in Paris and Belgium following his 1901 visit, critics commented that the artist, like so many others, was still under the spell of James McNeill Whistler.

Venice at the Golden Hour (figure 1) dates from this period; and in Morrice's grid-like composition, facades meet street and water at right angles. In the early evening, the last rays of the sun caress the ancient buildings, whose rich reflections are barely disturbed by the shimmering water of the Grand Canal. The boatman standing in his laden *sandolo* is so much a part of the scene—and the grid—that he does not distract the artist comfortably seated at his favourite café on the opposite Riva del Vin. This is a calm, slightly melancholic vision that is quintessentially Morrice. *Venice, Regatta* also features facades bordering the Grand Canal, but everything else is different: buildings line both sides of the waterway, it is an earlier time of day, the view is from the water rather than from above, and we look in vain for Morrice's typical geometric composition. We are quite far from the rich but dark, tapestry-like *Venice at the Golden Hour*.

The spectators in their gondolas, probably tourists (at least those closest to us), are watching a historic regatta, a medieval tradition revived in the 1840s, held (still) on the first Sunday of September. Starting near the Public Gardens and passing the Ducal Palace, the boats follow the Grand Canal westward to the train station and back again to the finish line, where the Rio di Ca'



FIGURE 1: JAMES WILSON MORRICE

Venice at the Golden Hour

oil on canvas, circa 1901 – 1902
25 ¾ x 18 ¼ in, 65.4 x 46.3 cm
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gwendolen Rutherford Caverhill Bequest, 1949.1005
Courtesy of Montreal Museum of Fine Arts

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FIGURE 2: Palazzo Contarini delle Figure (L) and Palazzo Erizzo Nani Mocenigo (R)
Photo: Matthias Scholz, Alamy Stock Photo



FIGURE 3: DANTE PAOLOCCI
Regatta on Grand Canal, Venice, Italy
drawing
L'illustrazione Italiana, year 22, no. 32, August 18, 1895
Photo: Biblioteca Ambrosiana / De Agostini Picture Library via Getty Images

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Foscari meets the wide waterway. Prizes were handed out from a temporary floating structure, the *macchina*, almost directly across from the sixteenth-century classical Palazzo Contarini delle Figure (figure 2), decked out for the occasion. The artist stands beside the *macchina*, but the regatta is hardly the subject. Here at the finish line, we barely see one *gondolino* (a two-oared racing gondola) near the centre of the painting, with its eight competitors nowhere in sight. This painting is all about the joyous atmosphere of a festive, sunny day in Venice; but it is far from Morrice's usual way of picturing the city.

It is hard to imagine this *flâneur* working while standing in a gondola or on a narrow landing; there is no quay—even less a *caffè*—at this point on the Grand Canal, and the angle of vision is much wider than in reality. We know that after World War I, Morrice sometimes based his compositions on printed images such as postcards or book illustrations. Could he have done it earlier? We believe so, as we have found a black and white 1895 Italian magazine illustration by the Roman artist Dante Paolucci (figure 3), not only with the proper alignment of facades, but also with the striped docking posts on the left, even including the gondolier with his long oar! As well, there are other obvious and discrete borrowings.

The illustrator's view—from the Palazzo Balbi at left, to the distant bell-tower of San Bartolomeo di Rialto (shown in *Venice at the Golden Hour*), and then along the right bank to the Palazzo Contarini, reminds us of a *veduta* by Venice's own Canaletto, which was widely known through a 1742 engraving. Paolucci brings the composition up to date, emphasizing the fashionably dressed spectators (likely tourists) rather than the race, although his two *gondoline*, barely visible, are obviously racing. His purpose is not to describe *La Regata*, which is explained in an accompanying article, but to invite the readers of *L'illustrazione* to join the fun in Venice.

Morrice's adaptation owes nothing to marketing. His crowd is quieter, further back and faceless; clever use of colours, more than gestures, conveys its animation, bringing to mind the Venetian watercolours of his friend Maurice Prendergast (figure 4). The artist's palette is restricted to a rich turquoise blue, a pinkish red, some straw yellow, plus black for the gondolas and white, of course, over an olive-brown underpainting. From the creamy Contarini, our eye follows three Mocenigo family palaces, then more, moving from a delicate pink to bright white: pure paint melting under the sun, while the buildings on the left side, and the spectators, are already in the shade. On the right side, a solid patch of water, miraculously empty, and the corresponding new facades bring us further away from the black and white

illustration. The right half of the Contarini, its roofline and its water-level openings could not be deduced from the print, which does not even show the smaller palazzo Erizzo Nani Mocenigo to its right, which is correctly rendered. There was certainly at least one other model; old photographs were easily found in the bookseller boxes lining the Quai des Grands-Augustins—where Morrice lived, and where he had perhaps discovered the 1895 magazine.

Venice, Regatta is Morrice's only known canvas stamped by the Jules Chauvin art materials shop in Paris. Could this be the work referred to twice in his Sketchbook #1 (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Dr.1973.24)? On page 58 verso, we find 10. *Venise Chauvin* in a list of paintings he noted after spring 1902; if so, then "*Chauvin—purchaser W Saint-Cire [Cyr]*," on page 68 verso, could record a sale of the regatta painting around that time. The blue and pink palette, the sunny setting, and the brushwork certainly belong to his Impressionist phase, closer to his Brittany pictures of 1898 onward than to his Venetian paintings (*La petite plage de Saint-Malo*, sold by Heffel on November 22, 2017, lot 107). No drawing or *pochade* relates to it, or indeed to any regatta, in Morrice's abundant Venetian production; perhaps none was needed, given the printed model. While pieces of the puzzle are still missing, Morrice's Venetian *regata* may have inspired his later series of regattas, started in 1902 with *Study for "Regatta, Saint-Malo"* (sold by Heffel on November 27, 2014, lot 149).

We thank Lucie Dorais, who is compiling a catalogue raisonné on the work of James Wilson Morrice, for contributing the above essay, and Sandra Paikowsky, Professor Emerita at Concordia University, First Distinguished Fellow of the Gail and Stephen A. Jarislowsky Institute for Studies in Canadian Art, and co-author of *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*, for assisting with research.

Dorais commented, "I am extremely thankful for Sandra Paikowsky's great help on the research for this essay; she transmitted her love of Morrice to me and my fellow undergraduate students at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia)."

The exhibition *Canada and Impressionism: New Horizons*, which includes several Venetian subjects by Morrice, is currently on at the Kunsthalle München in Germany, until November 2019. The show will travel to the Fondation de l'Hermitage in Switzerland and Musée Fabre in France in 2020, then on to the National Gallery of Canada in the fall of 2020.

This work will be included in Dorais's forthcoming catalogue raisonné of the artist's work.

ESTIMATE: \$700,000 – 900,000



FIGURE 4: MAURICE BRAZIL PRENDERGAST
The Grand Canal, Venice
watercolour and graphite on paper, circa 1898 – 1899
18 1/8 x 14 1/4 in, 46 x 36.2 cm
Terra Foundation for American Art, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1999.123
Courtesy of Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago

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