

PRIVATAIR

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Venice in oils

For centuries, Venice has inspired more artists than any other city with the unique effects of its light and water.

The French painter Roger de Montebello, who has loved Venice since childhood, knows its secrets. He talks to

Teresa Levonian Cole



All paintings by Roger de Montebello. Above: the artist at home in Venice.



Above: View of Venice. Opposite: San Michele

IT IS VENICE I HAVE to thank for my career as an artist. Before graduating in 1991 from art studies in Harvard and Paris, I was unsure whether to dedicate my life to painting. Then I came on holiday to Venice with friends. We spent all day wandering around remote parts of the city – I remember the light was fantastic – and that night, as images of the city flooded my mind, it was as though the decision was made for me. I suddenly realised I had what I needed. I moved to Venice in 1992 and became a full-time painter. I now spend half the year here.

I have been coming to Venice since childhood. Although I am French, my grandparents have a house on the Grand Canal, and I used to visit them. My great-great uncle, Prince Edmond de Polignac, married Winnaretta Singer, of sewing-machine fame, and they bought the Palazzo Contarini in around 1900. It is a late fifteenth-century building over Gothic foundations. The well in the courtyard is one of the city's earliest examples of Renaissance art.

Winnaretta was a great patron of the arts, particularly of music. Ravel, Fauré, Debussy, De Falla all used to come and stay, as did the young Arthur Rubinstein. Winnaretta had a four-octave portable piano made for Fauré. He used to load it on to a gondola and play while he was rowed down the Grand Canal.

Edmond and Winnaretta had no children; when Winnaretta died in 1943, she left the Palazzo to their nephew, my grandfather, who is the honorary president of the Comité français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise. I now have my studio here – but it is not at all palatial – just a garret.

I live just across the Accademia Bridge, in the Palazzo Barbaro. It sounds frightfully grand, but my apartment is but a modest island in this splendour. The Palazzo used to belong to the Curtis family of Boston, also patrons of the arts. Henry James stayed here while writing *The Wings of the Dove*. My apartment used to be the studio of the painter John Singer Sargent.

I love the international aspect of Venice, it makes me feel at home. But although the Grand Canal is beautiful, it is not what I think of as 'my' Venice. I don't like crowds, and prefer the less well-trodden parts of the city. The Arsenale, for example, with its gates as though into the unknown, is one of my favourite places, as is Burano with its coloured houses, and the cemetery island of San Michele. These form recurring themes in my paintings. I always paint from a distance – one island as seen from another – making the lagoon central to my work. I even learnt to row, gondolier-style, the better to explore the lagoon, and used to own a little boat. This way, I discovered the then-abandoned island and monastery church of San Clemente, which has since been turned into a luxurious hotel. I recommend that anyone new to Venice takes a boat into the lagoon, where they can get a view of the whole city, and put it in context. Or hire a gondola and explore the small canals. Those on the North shore are particularly beautiful, and are often overlooked.

There is also a 'magic square' for me, formed by the churches of San Giorgio, Il Redentore, San Marco and Santa Maria della Salute – I will paint one from the perspective of another, and will suppress detail in the interests of the ideal. I never paint

gondolas, for example – they are just a distraction. The essence of Venice lies in its symmetry and balance. Through reflection, water resolves the dichotomy between earth and sky, and these three elements are in turn united through the fourth – light, or fire. This sense of completeness, of a perfect world, is central to my work. And as important as the subject itself are the different ways of interpreting and representing it, in different conditions and times of day.

And so my working day is dictated by the light. Just after dawn and before dusk are the best times. I often work *en plein air* rather than in the studio, and aim to complete a painting in one session. I have a portable easel-cum-paintbox – a *chevalet* – made for me by Piero Carraro near S. Barbara. I will choose my spot for the day and set up my easel. People in Venice are very civilised: they are curious, but they leave you in peace.

In Paris, I find the shops very exciting, but in Venice, I am much more sober. Here, my shopping revolves around my work: my carpenter, my framer Tony, who makes my leather portfolios, my photographer Francesco Barasciutti and my catalogue printer. I try to support local artisans.

Venice is early to bed and early to rise, which suits me very well. I don't cook, so always dine out – usually in neighbourhood restaurants, with friends. Piazza S. Margherita has a good selection, and is not too touristy. Harry's Bar is not my scene, though I would be happy to eat at the restaurant of the Hotel Monaco any day.

I have an agent, Bernard Chauchet, in London, and exhibit regularly in London, Paris and New York. But two of the most

San Marco



avid collectors of my work live in Venice. Jérôme-François Ziesenis and Matteo Corvino are both active on the Comité français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise, and Matteo worked on the gala evening for the reopening of La Fenice, Venice's opera house. As a designer, he has incorporated my contemporary canvases into his classical home to dramatic effect. Until now, he is the only person from whom I have accepted commissions, though these days I am more open-minded on that score – provided, of course, that I have carte blanche ■

INSIDER INFORMATION

- Roger de Montebello's agent is Bernard Chauchet (+44 20 7370 2467).
- Comité français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise, Palazzo Balbi Mocenigo, 2580 Dorsoduro, 30123 Venezia (+39 41 52 22 2725); 34 avenue de New York, 75116 Paris (+33 1 47 23 09 08).
- Hotel Monaco, Calle Valloresso, San Marco 1325, Venezia (+39 41 520 0211).

■ San Clemente Palace, Isola di San Clemente, San Marco, 3124 Venezia (+39 41 244 5001). This opened in April 2003 on its own island in the lagoon, the latest five-star hotel to appear in Venice. Founded in 1131, San Clemente served as the departure point for pilgrims and soldiers on their way to the Holy Land. Since Napoleon's suppression of the religious orders in 1810, it had been used variously as a lunatic asylum and a sanctuary for cats until the Turin Hotel Group restored the deconsecrated church and monastic buildings to create a 205-room hotel. Most rooms overlook the city, the Giudecca and the Lido, and the hotel also boasts a garden, swimming pool, tennis courts, three-hole golf course, health spa, four restaurants and conference facilities in its 17-acre grounds. A 24-hour private shuttle boat takes guests on the ten-minute trip to and from San Marco.

Reservations: +39 41 241 3484; www.snclemente.thi.it. Kirker Holidays can tailor trips to Venice: +44 20 7231 3333; www.kirkerholidays.com.