

LE CLAIRE

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KUNST



FRANCESCO GUARDI

1712 - Venice - 1793

Capriccio with Antique Ruins, a Pyramid and two Figures

Black chalk, pen and brown bistre ink, brown and grey wash on laid paper; on its old mount; executed in the 1760s or 1770s. Inscribed by a later hand in brown ink on the mount: *Francesco Guardi*
298 x 222 mm

PROVENANCE: Professor Werner Gramberg, Hamburg (until 1985; acquired in Berlin c.1934)¹ – Thence by descent

EXHIBITION: *Zeichnungen alter Meister aus deutschem Privatbesitz*, exhib. cat., Hamburger Kunsthalle, Oct. - Nov. 1965, and Kunsthalle Bremen, Feb. - Apr. 1966, Hamburg 1966, no. 47

The present drawing is a characteristic example of Francesco Guardi's *capriccio* compositions. It depicts an imaginary landscape with the ruins of a Roman arch. The arch is flanked by a pair of Corinthian columns, their architraves overgrown with shrubs and foliage. The shadowy form of a small bridge is glimpsed through the arch and beyond, bathed in sunlight, the façade of a temple and a campanile. In the middle distance at the left is a sharp, steep-sided structure that recalls the Pyramid of Cestius in Rome, and further to the left, the ruins of an arcade. In the foreground a man is digging, while a second figure shown from the rear appears to be pointing at something with his outstretched left arm. Usually called 'treasure seekers', these figures are recurrent in Guardi's *capricci*. They are witnesses of the search for antiquities at archaeological sites. Finds would subsequently be sold to private collectors.

A *capriccio* is a composition that combines imaginary and realistic architectural features in a picturesque setting. It emerged as a genre in the early eighteenth century and became popular during the era of the Grand Tour. The Italian landscape, with its abundance of classical ruins, was especially suited to this new genre. Its development was particularly marked in Venice where it was favoured by artists like Marco Ricci (1676-1730) and his uncle Sebastiano Ricci (1659-1734), and by Giambattista Pittoni (1687-1767), Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1682-1754) and Canaletto (1697-1768). In Rome, Giovanni Paolo Panini (1691/2-1765) was the best-known exponent of the *capriccio*.

¹ Werner Gramberg (1896 Elk, East Prussia - Hamburg 1985) was an art historian and collector. He studied in Freiburg im Breisgau, where he was awarded a doctorate in 1928 for a thesis on Giovanni Bologna. He went on to work as a research assistant at the State Museums in Berlin. From 1932-3 he was a research scholar at the Bibliotheca Hertziana (Max Planck Institute for Art History) in Rome. In 1934, he was forced to leave his post in Berlin because his wife was part Jewish. He settled permanently in Hamburg in 1945. In 1949 he was named curator of the Numismatic Collection at the Hamburger Kunsthalle. From 1951-60 he was head of the Sculpture Collection and Deputy Director of the Kunsthalle. He took up a post as Honorary Professor of Art History at Hamburg University in 1957. He was an expert in Italian Renaissance art and published widely – important titles included *Die Düsseldorfer Skizzenbücher des Guglielmo della Porta* (1964). He was a co-founder of the Stiftung zur Förderung der Hamburgischen Sammlungen and worked actively within the foundation up to his death in 1985. His extensive personal collection included an important body of sculptures, paintings and drawings, many of which were bequeathed to the Hamburger Kunsthalle.

A characteristic of Guardi's artistic practice was his repeated use of identical motifs in different works. It is therefore hardly surprising to see a number of elements of the present drawing recurring in other Guardi drawings. The motif of the architrave supported by columns appears in three further drawings. One of these drawings also shows the ruins of a Roman arch and another depicts a similar pyramid.² The bridge, the temple behind it and the campanile appear in two other *capricci* sheets.³ And the two staffage figures in the foreground are identical with the figures of the fishermen in a *capriccio rustico* drawing now in the Museo Correr in Venice.⁴

A comparison of the present drawing with the painting titled *Capriccio architettonico con piramide e architrave* [Capriccio with Roman Ruins, a Pyramid and Figures] now in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London⁵ [Fig. 1] shows that the number of identical motifs used in the painting is particularly large. This is perhaps no coincidence. It is dateable to the years 1760 to 1770, a period in which Guardi developed the much freer style of brushwork that is an essential characteristic of his mature period. According to Morassi it is one of Guardi's most elaborately composed *capricci*, particularly in terms of the pictorial rendering of light.⁶ The drawing and the painting are clearly very closely related, both compositionally and stylistically, although there are a small number of differences in terms of detail. Somewhat surprisingly, the classical campanile depicted in the drawing has been replaced by a Gothic church tower. The overall proportions of the painting are larger, allowing for the addition of a marble statue on a pedestal in the middle distance near the pyramid. The arcade ruins at the left have been moved further into the image. And numerous staffage figures have been added to enliven the composition. The free graphic style of the present drawing with its lively notations is entirely consonant with Guardi's mature style and a probable dating of circa 1760-70. It is therefore not inconceivable that the sheet constitutes a preparatory study for the London painting.

This *capriccio* composition provides persuasive proof of Guardi's virtuoso personal interpretation of the work of earlier Venetian masters such as Canaletto and Marco Ricci.

² Antonio Morassi, *Guardi. Tutti I Disegni di Antonio, Francesco e Giacomo Guardi*, Venice 1975, cf.: *Capriccio con rovine romane*, 305 x 280 mm, Museo Correr, Venice, no. 487, fig. 484 – *Capriccio con piramide*, 125 x 72 mm, Count A. Seilern, no. 500, fig. 501 – *Capriccio con arco rovinato e tempio*, 252 x 376 mm, auction sale, Sotheby's, London 1972, lot 637, fig. 610

³ *Ibid.*, 1975, cf.: *Capriccio con arco rovinato e mura di paese*, 173 x 259 mm, Colnaghi, London, no. 641, fig. 612 – *Capriccio con arco trionfale e sfondo di paese*, 280 x 190 mm, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, no. 647, fig. 619

⁴ *Ibid.*, 1975, cf.: *Capriccio rustico con due pescatori*, 196 x 283 mm, Museo Correr, Venice, no. 654, fig. 625

⁵ See the Victoria and Albert Museum digital collections: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O132460/capriccio-with-roman-ruins-a-oil-painting-guardi-francesco/> (accessed 29 July 2019)

⁶ Morassi, *Guardi. I Dipinti*, I-II, Venice 1973 and 1975; repr. 1984, p. 447, no. 734, fig. 669

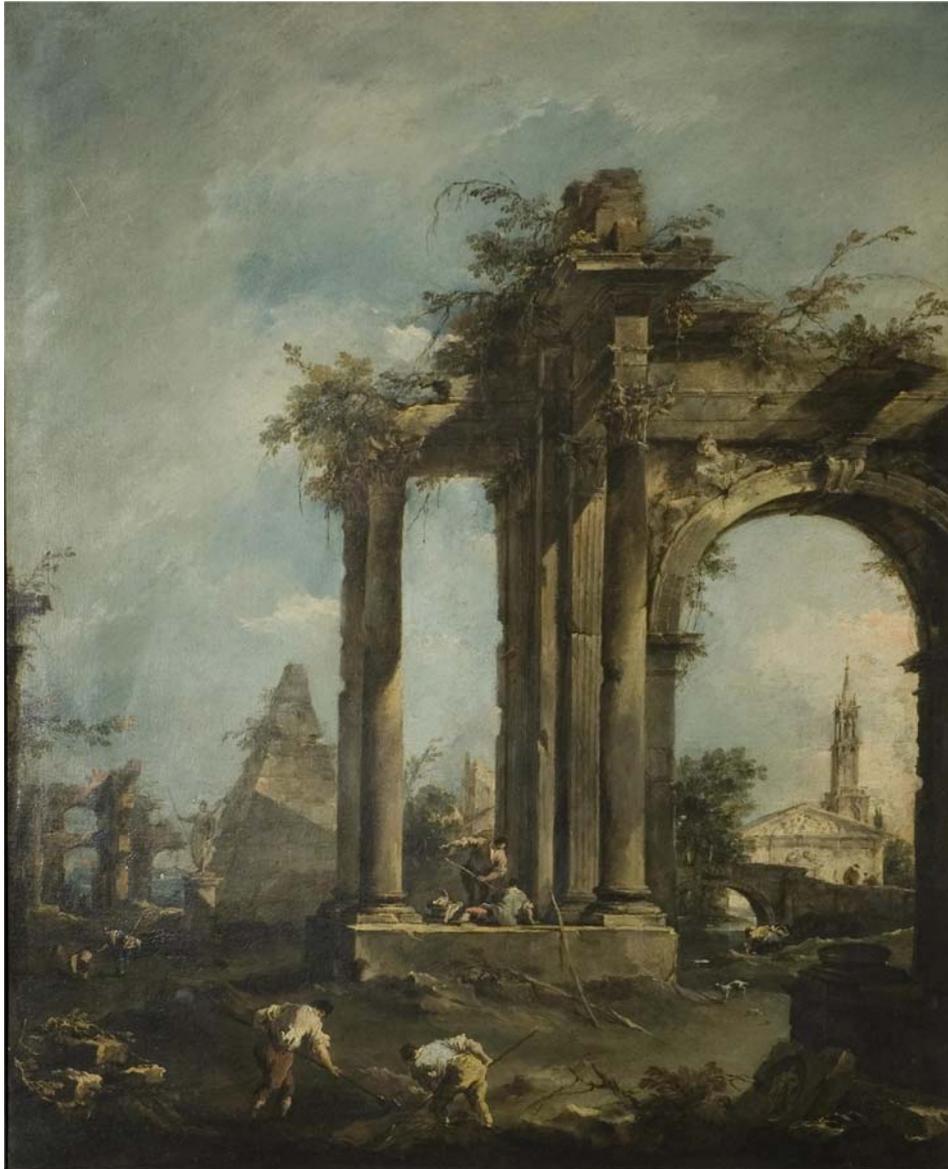


Fig. 1: *Capriccio with Roman Ruins, a Pyramid and Figures*, 1760-70,
oil on canvas, signed lower right: *Fran.co Guardi*, 92.7 x 72.5 cm.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London [inv. 490-1882]