

# A Gift to America

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## BERNARDO BELLOTTO

Venice 1721–1780 Warsaw

*Bernardo Bellotto came from a distinguished Venetian family of artists. He was the son of the painter Lorenzo Bellotto and Fiorenza Domenica, the younger sister of the painter Giovanni Antonio Canal, called Canaletto (see cats. 40, 41). Bernardo was born on January 30, 1721—1720 by the Venetian calendar—and by as early as 1735 was working in the studio of his uncle, the greatest and most famous view painter in Venice.<sup>5</sup> The young Bellotto showed great promise: he entered the Guild of Painters in Venice in 1738; by the early 1740s he had absorbed Canaletto's style and had created a personal manner in which the deeper colors and the more intense effects of light and shadow that mark his mature work could already be distinguished. Traveling to Rome in 1742, via Florence and Lucca, Bellotto encountered the art of such contemporary view painters as Giovanni Paolo Panini (see cat. 44). In Panini's work Bellotto would have first seen the imaginary views of monuments that were to reach their full grandeur in his paintings of the 1760s (cat. 43).*

*Although he is considered one of the great figures of the Venetian landscape tradition, Bellotto's name is not primarily associated with views of his native city. Through the 1740s, as Bellotto matured and gradually separated himself from his uncle, he spent more and more time away from Venice. In the summer of 1747, a year after Canaletto quit Venice for England, Bellotto went north to Dresden, where at the court of Augustus III of Saxony he launched a campaign that was to last eleven years, painting series of views of the city and its environs on commission from the king or his prime minister, Count Heinrich von Brühl, or independent canvases for other patrons. For part of the period of the Seven Years' War Bellotto worked in Vienna (1759–61); he returned to Dresden for five years before his departure in 1767 for Russia. On the way to St. Petersburg, however, he was invited by King Stanislas II Augustus to join his court in Warsaw, and there he remained as court painter until his death. Bellotto's independence from his uncle notwithstanding, it is worth noting that he often signed his work "Bellotto detto Canaletto" or "Bellotto de Canaletto," and in Germanic countries he is still called by his uncle's name.*

*Bellotto's magnificent paintings of the late Baroque capitals of northern Europe—particularly his scenes of Dresden, Vienna, and Warsaw—display the artist's acute sense of topographical realism, conveyed through their apparently unaffected compo-*

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### *The Marketplace at Pirna*

c. 1760

Oil on canvas, 19 x 31 $\frac{1}{16}$  in. (48.4 x 79.6 cm)  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston 61.71

#### PROVENANCE

Catherine II, Empress of Russia; given by her to Frederick II, King of Prussia; <sup>1</sup> Prussian Royal Collections until 1919; *Niederländisches Palais, Berlin*, purchased there by Hugo Moser, 1919; <sup>2</sup> Duke of Anhalt-Dessau?; with Caspari Gallery, Munich, 1930; with K. Haberstock, Berlin; Samuel H. Kress Foundation, New York, 1952 (K1914); on loan to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1953–61; gift of the Kress Foundation to The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 1961.

#### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Munich 1930, no. 5; Detroit 1952, no. 6; Washington 1961–62, no. 6.

#### SELECTED REFERENCES

Waagen 1850, no. 8350; <sup>3</sup> *Pantheon* 1930, 483, 487; Fritzsche 1936, VG 87; Houston 1953, no. 31; Munich 1967, no. 66; Kozakiewicz 1972, II, 173 no. 215; <sup>4</sup> Shapley 1973, 165–66; Camesasca 1974, 100 no. 110; Houston 1981, 74 no. 131; Houston 1989, 19, 154–55.



sitional structure and their detailed and technically flawless draftsmanship. Above all, however, it is Bellotto's artistry in rendering subtle effects of light and atmosphere that distinguishes his work from that of any of his rivals and that makes his paintings, whether topographical or imaginary, among the most compelling in the history of landscape art.

Bellotto's great work during his first, eleven-year residence in Dresden was a series of large-scale views painted for Augustus III, King of Saxony. The paintings delivered to the king, which are now in the collection of the Gemäldegalerie, comprised fourteen views of Dresden and eleven views of the suburban town of Pirna and its castle, Sonnenstein.<sup>6</sup> In the Dresden series, some of the paintings show sweeping panoramas of the city seen across the Elbe; more of the group record the fine architecture of the central city or broad public squares crossed by distant crowds. Working later at Pirna, Bellotto chose to emphasize the rural or suburban quality of the site: three views capture the appearance of the town seen at a distance from Posta and Kopitz on the right bank of the Elbe,<sup>7</sup> another four describe the outskirts of the town, including its gates and outlying quarters,<sup>8</sup> and three concentrate on Sonnenstein, the fortified castle that overlooks the town.<sup>9</sup>

Only one view shows the interior of Pirna itself, focusing on the marketplace at the town center.<sup>10</sup> In this composition, a version of which is presented here, the imposing building to the left of center is the Rathaus; beyond it rises the spire of the church dedicated to Mary. On either side are private residences and, at the right edge of the view, the courts, before which stand public water troughs. The composition converges on two buildings: Sonnenstein Castle is seen on a distant hill, and opening onto the marketplace is the facade of the Canaletto-Haus, so called because Bellotto, "genannt Canaletto," lived there for a time.

From the beginning of his work on the Dresden series, Bellotto was busy making replicas of his royal commissions for other clients. A partial set at full scale was begun for the prime minister, Count Brühl, and reduced versions, in greater or lesser numbers, were produced for other patrons. Houston's *Marketplace at Pirna* is one of three reduced autograph replicas of the view painted for Augustus around 1753–54 and is particularly close in its details to this prime version.<sup>11</sup>

A drawing by Bellotto relating to the group (*fig. 1*) corresponds almost exactly with the Dresden version of the composition and may have been made in preparation for it.

Scholars have speculated that Bellotto here made use of a *camera obscura*, a mechanical device employed by landscape artists to focus a view through a lens onto a surface from which it could be traced.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the drawing may be a later record of the earliest version of the composition. If historians are correct in dating the Houston canvas to 1760, the drawing, or one of the two other reduced versions, must have served the artist as a model, for he was then in Vienna and did not have access to either the king's painting or Count Brühl's version.



fig. 1 Bernardo Bellotto. *The Marketplace at Pirna*. c. 1752. Pen and brown ink, 14 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 25 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (37.7 x 65 cm). Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw

Pirna and the nearby Castle of Königstein played a key role in the history of the Seven Years' War. In late October 1756 Augustus III and his sons Xavier and Charles left Pirna and Königstein, where they had been headquartered, following by several days the surrender of their forces to the invading army of Frederick the Great of Prussia, which eventually wreaked havoc in the city. Sometime later, Frederick was given the Houston reduction of *The Marketplace at Pirna* by Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, who had acquired fifteen of Count Brühl's Dresden and Pirna views for her own collection.<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to speculate that the gift may have been made to commemorate Frederick's triumph over the House of Saxony and his capture of Pirna.

G.T.M.S.



1. Kozakiewicz (1972, II, 173 n. 215) asserts the provenance from Catherine the Great to Frederick II; although Shapley (1973) knew of this information, she does not include it in her entry on *The Marketplace at Pirna*, nor does she refute it.
2. See a letter of February 28, 1952, from Moser in the Kress Archives of the National Gallery of Art: "I bought the painting at the 'Niederlaendisches Palais' Unter den Linden 36 in Berlin, where all the paintings from the different Hohenzollern castles were stored after the revolution in 1918. Besides the label 'Preussische Koenigskrone' which is still on the back of the painting it had the 'General-Katalog' No. 8350. This Katalog was made by Waagen in the middle of the XIX. century."
3. This manuscript catalogue, cited by Hugo Moser (see n. 2 above), was destroyed by fire during World War II.
4. Kozakiewicz 1972 inverts the photographs of nos. 214 and 215. In the Kress composition, catalogued as no. 215, the tall house at right has two chimneys; in no. 214, formerly with M. Knoedler & Co., the same house has only one chimney. (This is confirmed by a photograph from the Knoedler archives kindly provided to me by Melissa De Medeiros, Librarian of M. Knoedler & Co., New York.) Thus on page 170, fig. 214 is actually no. 215, and on page 171, fig. 215 is actually no. 214. Kozakiewicz's identification of the Kress canvas (no. 215) with the version handled by Caspari and Haberstock remains valid.
5. Kozakiewicz 1972, I, 15 n. 1.
6. A further four views, depicting the Königstein Castle, may actually have been painted for Augustus, though they were never delivered to him; see Kozakiewicz 1972, I, 100.
7. Kozakiewicz 1972, II, nos. 188, 193, 196.
8. Kozakiewicz 1972, II, nos. 200, 205, 207, 217.
9. Kozakiewicz 1972, II, nos. 220, 225, 230.
10. Kozakiewicz 1972, II, no. 211.
11. The three reduced replicas are approximately the same size. They are Kozakiewicz 1972, II, nos. 213-15. No. 212, painted for Brühl about the same time as the royal version, was sold to Catherine II, as was the Houston version, and is now in Moscow.
12. See E. Scholze's remarks in Dresden 1964, 16.
13. See Kozakiewicz 1972, I, 102-3.



BELLOTTO, *The Marketplace at Pirna*





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