



Félix Ziem  
1821-1911

Grand Canal, Venice  
Oil on panel / signed lower right  
Dimensions : 72 x 92 cm  
Dimensions : 28.35 x 36.22 inch



## Biography

Born in 1821 in Beaune, on the Côte d'Or, of Armenian father and mother from Burgundy region, he worked for the architect Lemaire between 1834 and 1836. He won first prize for the architecture composition competition in 1838 at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Dijon, but was expelled shortly afterwards for lack of discipline. He then left the family home and went to Marseille to oversee the canal construction work. He enjoyed drawing the old Marseille residences, and he actively sought his first major clients and decided to live solely from his artwork. In 1840, he opened a studio in which he welcomed painters such as Monticelli or Auguste Aiguier. He stayed in Martigues and Nice where he frequently saw top European aristocracy to whom he taught drawing.

In 1842, he left for Rome on foot, exchanging sketches for food, then he discovered Venice. A "revelation" as he said himself. This city became his second homeland, since he went there regularly, often for several months of the year, between 1845 and 1892. As an artist, Ziem is placed in a transition period of the pictorial practice of the 19th century. Motif work is essential, as can be seen in numerous sketch books, as well as the pochades sur bois or on cardboard, even if the final painting comes from the studio. It was in this way that he lived in Venice in 1847, in a studio installed on a "topo" flat-bottomed boat, then later in a "traghetto" which he converted into a live-in studio.

All his life Félix Ziem never stopped travelling. Constantinople, Beirut, Cairo, Algiers but also Russia, the Netherlands, Belgium and England were other travel destinations. He also made frequent trips to Barbizon, where he set himself up in a gypsy caravan, with the aim of painting motifs even better. Here he rubbed shoulders with some of the most famous landscape painters of his time, such as Millet, Rousseau, Diaz or Daumier.

The 1860s were productive years for him : numerous exhibitions (Paris, the Universal London Exhibition in 1861,...) and a slow down of peregrinations which were now limited to Paris, Venice, Martigues, Nice and Barbizon. In 1870, he is nominated member of the jury of the Salon, which he had been exhibiting regularly since 1849 and won a third class medal in 1851, and a first class medal in 1852 and 1855. In 1857 he is nominated Knight of the Legion of Honour, Officer in 1878 and finally Commander in 1908. From 1880 to 1900, his life is still punctuated by a feverish activity, a large clientele, escapades to Venice and round trips between different studios in Marseille, Martigues, Nice and Paris. In 1905, he bequeathed more than fifty paintings to the Musée du Petit-Palais, as well as several studies, sketch books and watercolours. In 1910, the Musée Ziem is opened in Martigues. In this same year, he is also the first living artist to enter the Musée du Louvre, on the occasion of the Chauchard heritage. He died in Paris in 1911, after having spent the summer in Barbizon.

Félix Ziem's technique is very varied, particularly in his choice of mediums. Indeed, he even used marble, whilst having, however, a partiality for mahogany panels; the glazed effect and the "reserves" on the wood enabled him to have an additional colour and gave an accentuated perspective. The oil paintings on paper, which were treated like watercolours, that's to say, with no touching up, but in a more pronounced manner and using more colour, are however, lighter than the gouaches, which was a technique which apparently never interested him. If, during the course of the years, the architecture of the painting is less apparent and less marked, it endures in spite of this. Mixed techniques are used: glaze, applying paint using a knife, juxtaposed touches. His style continues to evolve with time.

But Ziem is above all one the last craftsman painters, using natural pigments to create colours himself, particularly lapis lazuli for blues. Much of his life was focused on finding the sun, as, for an artist, sunlight generates colours. In places such as Venice, Constantinople, or the south of France, the colours are thus more pronounced. The yellows are touched with gold, the oranges with copper, the reds become rubies, the blues are cobalt, the greens are adorned with lemon and white is no more than light. Such are the terms that can be used to describe Ziem's palette. The colours he uses vibrate as if in perfect understanding of the effects of the light, thus foreshadowing



the work of the impressionists almost 30 years before. In fact, Vincent Van Gogh was envious of his blues, saying: "I would like to make blues like Ziem does, which don't change as much as the others".

Théophile Gautier, who compared Ziem's work with that of Turner, defined his talent: "Each artist has an ideal homeland, often far away from his own country. Ziem's homeland is Venice. It is there that his painting legally resides. With a drop of water a fragment of colour dissolves, with a few brushstrokes, he creates a house of roughcast cherry red. But what he is able to express even better is the green water of a lagoon, broken into a thousand fractions of light, reflecting the whim of the sky through the wake and the swirl of the gondolas as their movement breaks the reflections of the palace on the water". Known as the painter of Venice, Ziem also painted more exotic scenes during his numerous trips; views of the Eiffel Tower, but also portraits, genre scenes, still life... But nothing seemed more fitting for him than to paint Venice during this period, as he understood and interpreted that the city was torn between the real world and myth.

#### Museums

France: Musée Ziem, Martigues - Musées de la Marine, Paris - Musée du Louvre, Paris - Musée du Petit Palais, Paris

international: Wallace Collection, Londres - Musée de Moscou, Russie - Musée des Beaux-Arts, Berlin, Allemagne - Musée des Beaux-Arts, Liège, Belgique - Musée de Montréal-Learmont, Québec, Canada

#### Bibliography

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G. Schurr, Dictionnaire des petits maîtres du XIXème (1820-1920), Edition de l'amateur, Paris, 1996

A. Burdin-Hellebranth, Catalogue raisonné de Félix Ziem