



National Gallery of Art

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ONE OF OLDEST GONDOLAS IN THE WORLD GOES ON VIEW
JANUARY 6, EAST BUILDING, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON;
WILL COMPLEMENT “VENICE: CANALETTO AND HIS RIVALS”
FEBRUARY 20–MAY 30, 2011

WASHINGTON, DC—One of the oldest surviving gondolas from Venice will be on view starting January 6, 2011, on the mezzanine of the East Building at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. It will complement the exhibition *Venice: Canaletto and His Rivals*, on view from February 20 through May 30, 2011. The gondola dates from the mid-19th century and was once owned by American painter Thomas Moran (1837–1926). On loan from The Mariners’ Museum, Newport News, Virginia, the gondola measures 37 feet long by 5 feet wide.

In addition to visually transporting visitors to the lagoon city, Moran’s gondola recalls the many images of gondolas seen in the Venetian view paintings of his predecessors. The principal means of transit in Venice before the advent of motorized vehicles, gondolas are today chiefly enjoyed by tourists.

Thomas Moran and Venice

Best known for his paintings of the American West, Moran admired the works of Ruskin, J.M.W. Turner, and Byron—the three figures primarily responsible for the resurgence of interest in Venice during the 19th century. While works of art with Venetian subjects have been popular since the 18th century, the subject of Venice finally entered the mainstream of the American art market in the mid-19th century. The economic advantages of portraying the city motivated Moran to travel there. His numerous Venetian views are nostalgic fictions, with the city serving as a dreamy, poetic refuge from the rapid changes of the Industrial Revolution.

History of the Moran Gondola

While in Venice, Moran and his wife, like many tourists, hired a personal gondolier—a skilled boatman named Giovanni Hitz. Moran purchased the gondola from him and brought it back to the United States in 1890 as a souvenir of that visit. Unlike many gondolas of the mid-19th century, Hitz’ boat is very traditional in design, with intricate details. Most likely made by the Casal boatyard in Venice, it is equipped with two carved chairs upholstered in leather with brass sea horses on either side; a gilt coat of arms behind the chairs; a lamp at the bow; and additional brass fittings throughout.

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Moran gondola...2-2-2

The gondola—according to the manager of the hotel where the Morans stayed during the 1890 visit—had once belonged to the poets Robert and Elizabeth Browning. Whether or not Moran actually believed the story—which may have provided further incentive for him to bring the boat back to the summer residence in East Hampton, New York—he was certainly amused enough to recount the tale to friends and visitors to his studio.

The arrival of the gondola at Hook Pond, East Hampton, drew local attention and was written about in the *East Hampton Star* on September 13, 1890. The paper described a small party who “enjoyed a sail around the pond on that novel craft” steered by George Fowler. Moran had hired Fowler, a Montauk Indian, in the belief that he could apply his knowledge of the canoe to the similarly shaped gondola. Moran, his family, and friends spent hours enjoying the gondola. For Moran, it was a token of his beloved city of Venice.

Over time, the gondola began to disintegrate and developed leaks prompting Moran to send it to a boatbuilder in Sag Harbor, New York, where the craft was rebottomed. Eventually, the hull of the gondola was stored in a shed in the artist’s studio garden and the *felze* (a detachable cabin, not on view with the gondola for this installation) and chairs were brought inside his studio to provide Moran with continued inspiration and remembrance of Venice.

After Moran’s death in 1926, his daughter Ruth donated the gondola, letters, other papers, and photographs belonging to her father to the East Hampton Library. For decades the gondola sat on the front lawn of the library. In August 1948, the boat was lent to the Ladies Village Improvement Society, which displayed it at Mulford Farm. Realizing that it could not care for such an old and fragile artifact, the library offered it in 1950 The Mariners’ Museum in Newport News, Virginia. In 1999, The Mariners’ Museum sent the gondola to the Tramontin boatyard in Venice for proper restoration—that is, using traditional Venetian techniques for gondola building. The eldest member of the Tramontin family had apprenticed at the Casal boatyard.

The Mariners’ Museum

The Mariners’ Museum, “America’s National Maritime Museum,” preserves, conserves, and interprets thousands of artifacts, paintings, and photographs spanning more than 500 years of nautical history and culture. The Museum is also home to the USS *Monitor* Center, which houses and conserves the remains of that 19th-century Civil War ironclad. Visit the Museum’s website at www.MarinersMuseum.org.

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery’s website at www.nga.gov. Follow the Gallery at www.facebook.com/NationalGalleryofArt and twitter.com/ngadc.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor’s back. Any bag or item that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 by 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

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