

Werner Busch Night Over the Lagoon – Friedrich Nerly's Panorama of Venice

Academic research seems content to break Friedrich Nerly's oeuvre down into two groups: The first one consists of his small oil sketches, which are highly regarded today and derive primarily from Nerly's sojourn in Rome from 1828 to 1835. The other group encompasses his vistas of Venice, which were highly popular in his time with visitors to the "Floating City," and which the artist marketed in various formats and variants. Nerly relocated permanently to Venice in 1837 and lived there until his death in 1878. Before long, he was residing and exhibiting at the Palazzo Pisani as the most sought-after veduta painter in the city. What this approach to Nerly's work fails to ask, however, is what the one group of the artist's work has to do with the other. Nerly's oil sketches, executed in oil on paper or cardboard and occasionally transferred onto canvas or wood, were for the most part captured en plein air, directly in nature. In creating them, the artist studied the natural world in all its manifestations under changing conditions such as the time of day, weather, and light, the aim being to capture the transient phenomena that resulted. Usually, the artists would retain these sketches for themselves, and had enough to paper over the walls of their studios. Rarely would the sketches be sold and, if so, only to fellow artists and a few select collectors and art patrons with whom they were friendly. It is reported that Corot, who was living in Rome at the same time as Nerly, would lend out his oil sketches to other artists. And, with exceptions proving the rule, the oil sketches did not serve as models for formal, large-scale oil paintings. Rather, they allowed the artists to master a personal repertoire of atmospheric moments, which they would paint on the fly without bothering to smooth out the image's surface texture.



Friedrich Nerly. Kloster im Gebirge bei Subiaco. Circa 1830. Oil/paper. Angermuseum Erfurt

The vedutas in which Nerly specialized while in Venice to such amazing public acclaim were created in an altogether different working process. During his innumerable walks through the city, he would draw motifs and panoramas of interest in his sketchbooks. The resulting output was prodigious: The Angermuseum in Erfurt alone owns twenty-two of these sketchbooks, along with roughly 900 individual drawings, while the Kunsthalle Bremen holds some 500 such drawings. Both museums boast large inventories of oil sketches by Nerly, and Erfurt is also where the bulk of his finished paintings can be found. As we know, quickly executed sketchbook drawings often can serve as draft versions for a painting, with the first step being to prepare a large and detailed drawing (cartoon) that largely defines the composition and the foreground of which already features staffage elements. This is followed up with an oil study based on the cartoon, its primary purpose being to serve as a model for the final colored version. This study often is executed in oil on paper and later transferred onto a more stable backing. Only then will the final large-scale oil painting follow.

If a particular composition for an image proved successful, Nerly would create variants, frequently using staffage that was entirely new or slightly different, whereby he would also make minor motivic adjustments or suffuse the scene with the light of a different time of day. His oil sketches offered a plentiful supply of "atmospheric moments" to draw upon. This is also the case for the work under discussion here: a particularly attractive view of Venice's urban core as seen from the Giardini Pubblici, which were created under Napoleon and today serve as the venue for the Biennale Film Festival. Our gaze wanders over the Gardens' gondola jetty at the Giardini, across the canal and the San Marco Basin, coming to rest on a number of Venetian landmarks: On the right, the view



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stretches from the Campanile belltower of the Piazzetta San Marco all the way to the church of San Giorgio Maggiore with its own belltower on the opposite side. Between them, farther back, lies Santa Maria della Salute, right behind the customs building Dogana di Mare. The sun has just gone down, somewhere between Santa Maria della Salute and San Giorgio Maggiore, but gondolas and sailboats are still plying the waters. The sunset has imbued the lower sky with an orange-red glow, while its upper reaches are dominated by yellow and greenish grey. A few seabirds are still flying about. All is quiet at the jetty of the Giardini. On the left, Nerly shows us, a bit winkingly perhaps, a Greek Archbishop engrossed in a book, flanked by two companions. A staircase in the center leads down to the gondolas. Of the two gondolieri, one is evidently hawking two baskets of fruit. On the right, partially indistinct, are another two clerics, their backs turned to us. The entire foreground, the ships in the canal, and especially the urban silhouette that traverses the image already lie in backlit shadow, which swallows up many of the details. A delicate evening mist has draped itself over the whole, forcing us to make a special effort to identify all the various elements while scanning the picture.

Various versions of the executed painting once existed. The principal one, which was immediately snapped up in 1839 by the Austrian Emperor, appears to be lost. Aside from a large cartoon held by the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, additional draft drawings for various details are kept by Erfurt's Angermuseum, which is currently updating its inventory. Nerly captured a wealth of staffage figures during his walks, which he would resort to freely in his images with ever-changing variations. But to return to the question we addressed at the outset: Nerly's oil sketches supplied him with a repertoire of colorful celestial phenomena, so that he had a slew of transitions and variants in various shades of color readily available. Each of these had been acquired by direct observation – precisely the activity which his early mentor, Freiherr von Rumohr, had identified as a precondition for all art, arguing that verisimilitude always had to be preserved in the finished picture. Nerly also studied backlight phenomena in his drawings and oil sketches. A small, quickly made drawing of the Venetian skyline as seen from the vantage point of the Giardini is a case in point. Here, the lateral facade of the Doge's Palace on St. Mark's Square and the San Giorgio Monastery with the adjoining Magazzini Del Sale warehouses are reduced to mere squat blocks and grey stripes except where lights have been lit, with faint residual details discernable at best. Despite all the staffage and the boats moving to and fro on the water, an evening calm hovers over everything. The compelling way in which this atmospheric effect engages the viewer would not have been achievable had the artist not been able to refer back to the prior experiences that his



Friedrich Nerly. Blick auf Venedig. Watercolour/paper. Städel Museum, Frankfurt

oil sketches had captured. Thus, our vista is proof positive of how an atmospheric visual experience can be turned into a picture that actually summons forth treasured Venetian memories in our mind's eye.

Werner Busch taught as a Professor for Art History at the Free University of Berlin from 1988 until 2010. His main fields of study are the history, theory, philosophy, and practice of European art of the 18th and 19th centuries. He has numerous authoritative publications to his credit in these fields. Werner Busch is a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences.

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Erfurt 1807 – 1878 Venice

View of Venice, from Giardini Pubblici. Circa 1838
Oil on paper on cardboard on strainer. 28.8 × 43.3 cm
(11 3/8 × 17 in.). Signed and inscribed lower right: F.
Nerly f. [3195]

Provenance
Private Collection, Brandenburg

EUR 150,000–180,000
USD 165,000–198,000

