

# GIUSEPPE BERNARDINO BISON

(Palmanova 1762 - 1844 Milan)

*Views and Capricci in oil and gouache  
from Private Collections*



JEAN-LUC BARONI

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## INTRODUCTION

We are delighted to present this superb group of works by Giuseppe Bernardino Bison. They have come to us from important Private and Noble Collections and are published here for the first time. The paintings in this catalogue, both oil on canvas and gouache on paper and all in an exceptionally fine state of preservation, exemplify Bison's impeccable skill and also the liveliness of his vision. Each view, even those of the most frequently depicted monuments, is masterful in execution and delightfully vivid, full of anecdotal elements such as market traders, depictions of costumes, flags and boats, carriages, beggars and shopfronts, all giving a remarkable sense of the period. Bison combines this with an astonishing accuracy of architectural detail and a magical ability to mimic the effects of light: sunlight on a façade, the intersecting brightness and shade of a church interior, or the play of shadow on a sculpture. Billowing flags, many-masted boats, glittering mosaics and airy masses of clouds, all observed with clarity and exuberance.

One of the last and certainly the best exponents of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century tradition of view painting, Giuseppe Bernardino Bison received his artistic training in the Accademia of Venice, where he studied perspective through the work of Antonio Visentini and the painting of Staffage in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century manner. Having qualified in 1789, Bison embarked on an increasingly hectic career as a decorative painter; he was taken to Ferrara to collaborate on the decorations of the Palazzo Bottoni, and from there he moved to Treviso and to Padua, where he worked at the Teatro Nuovo. In around 1800, he returned to Venice — at that time in Austrian hands — where he worked in the Palazzo Dolfin before settling in Trieste. There, Bison became extremely successful for his murals but he also worked tirelessly as an easel painter. He received numerous public and private commissions, the most prestigious being the scenes in tempera from the Iliad of 1803-04 in the *Sala rotonda* of the Palazzo Carciotti and the vast ceiling of about 1805 in the new Stock Exchange. In 1831, at the age of sixty-nine and for reasons which remain obscure, he moved to Milan. Whilst he exhibited frequently at the Accademia di Brera and produced stage designs for the Teatro della Scala, during this last period of his career he worked chiefly on small scale paintings and probably began travelling again, to other cities in the Northern regions and possibly also to Rome and to Florence. Like his contemporary, Giacomo Guardi, his diminutive views were greatly admired by visitors from abroad doing the Grand Tour, but his superior technique, delight in detail and pictorial eloquence suggests that he worked only to the highest standards and for a discerning audience.

# 1 *The Doge leaves on the Bucintoro on Ascension Day*

Oil on canvas.

28.2 x 39.3 cm (11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: An Italian Noble Family.

In this pair of exuberant oils, Bison, following in the steps of Carlevarijs, Canaletto and Guardi, celebrates a quintessentially Venetian tradition in all its hectic, picturesque glory, the Ascension Day ceremony of the Bucintoro, the state galley, carrying the Doge out to the Adriatic to perform the marriage of the city of Venice to the sea, the *Sposalizio del Mare*. The last Bucintoro built in 1729 was a magnificent gilded barge, 35 metres long and 8 metres high with a throne in the stern and figurehead of Justice with her sword and scales. It needed 168 oarsman and 40 sailors and she crossed the Grand Canal almost seventy times before being destroyed in 1798 on the orders of Napoleon, a cruel demonstration of his victory over the city. The subject of the Bucintoro departing or returning was a highly popular theme, and is known in many examples, such as Luca Carlevarijs's magnificent depiction of 1710 in the Getty Museum, Canaletto's superb painting of 1732 in the Royal Collection at Windsor, and Grancesco Guardi's metre long version from 1766-70, now in the Louvre. Here, Bison, working on a more delicate but highly theatrical scale, has focused on the flamboyant colours and choreography of the attendant gondolas, spectacularly decorated, with their splendid, costumed *gondolieri*, and behind them, the city is rendered as a backdrop to the gaiety and glistening of the boats.



Reduced

## 2 *The Bucintoro Returning to the Molo on Ascension Day*

Oil on canvas.

28.2 x 39.3 cm (11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 15 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: An Italian Noble Family.

In this pair of flamboyant oils, Bison, following in the steps of Carlevarijs, Canaletto and Guardi, celebrates a quintessentially Venetian tradition in all its hectic, picturesque glory, the Ascension Day ceremony of the Bucintoro, the state galley, carrying the Doge out to the Adriatic to perform the marriage of the city of Venice to the sea, the *Sposalizio del Mare*. The last Bucintoro built in 1729 was a magnificent gilded barge, 35 metres long and 8 metres high with a throne in the stern and figurehead of Justice with her sword and scales. It needed 168 oarsman and 40 sailors and she crossed the Grand Canal almost seventy times before being destroyed in 1798 on the orders of Napoleon, a cruel demonstration of his victory over the city. The subject of the Bucintoro departing or returning was a highly popular theme, and is known in many examples, such as Luca Carlevarijs's magnificent depiction of 1710 in the Getty Museum, Canaletto's superb painting of 1732 in the Royal Collection at Windsor, and Grancesco Guardi's metre long version from 1766-70, now in the Louvre. Here, Bison working on a more delicate but highly theatrical scale, has focused on the flamboyant colour and choreography of the attendant gondolas, spectacularly decorated, with their splendid, costumed *gondolieri*, and behind them, the city is rendered as a backdrop to the gaiety and glistening of the boats.



Reduced





### 3 *View of the Arsenale in Venice*

Gouache on paper laid down on board.  
144 x 193 mm (5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.





Actual size

4 *View of the Vestibule of the Basilica di San Marco, Venice*

Gouache on paper.

192 x 145 mm. (7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.

Bison has chosen to depict the Basilica from an unusual viewpoint, bringing us into the building through the vestibule and allowing us to glimpse the great nave leading towards the Altar Screen.





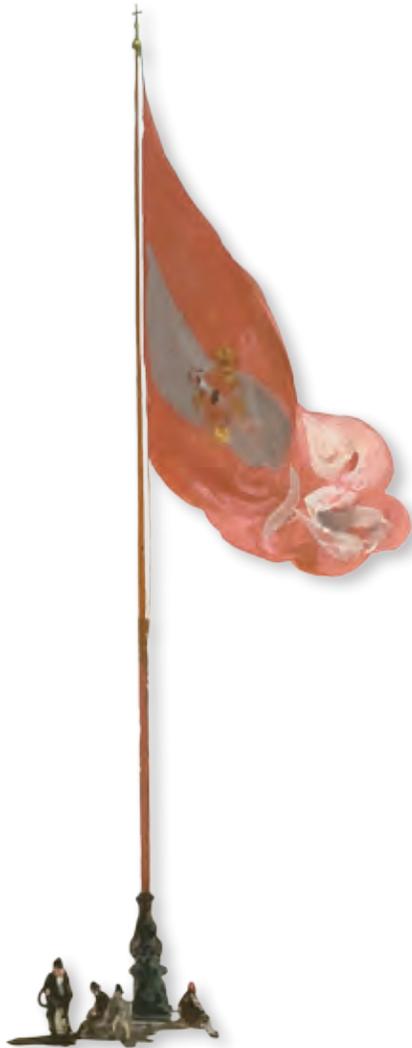
*Actual size*

5 *View of the Campanile and the Piazza San Marco, Venice*

Gouache on paper.

145 x 193 mm (5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.





Actual size

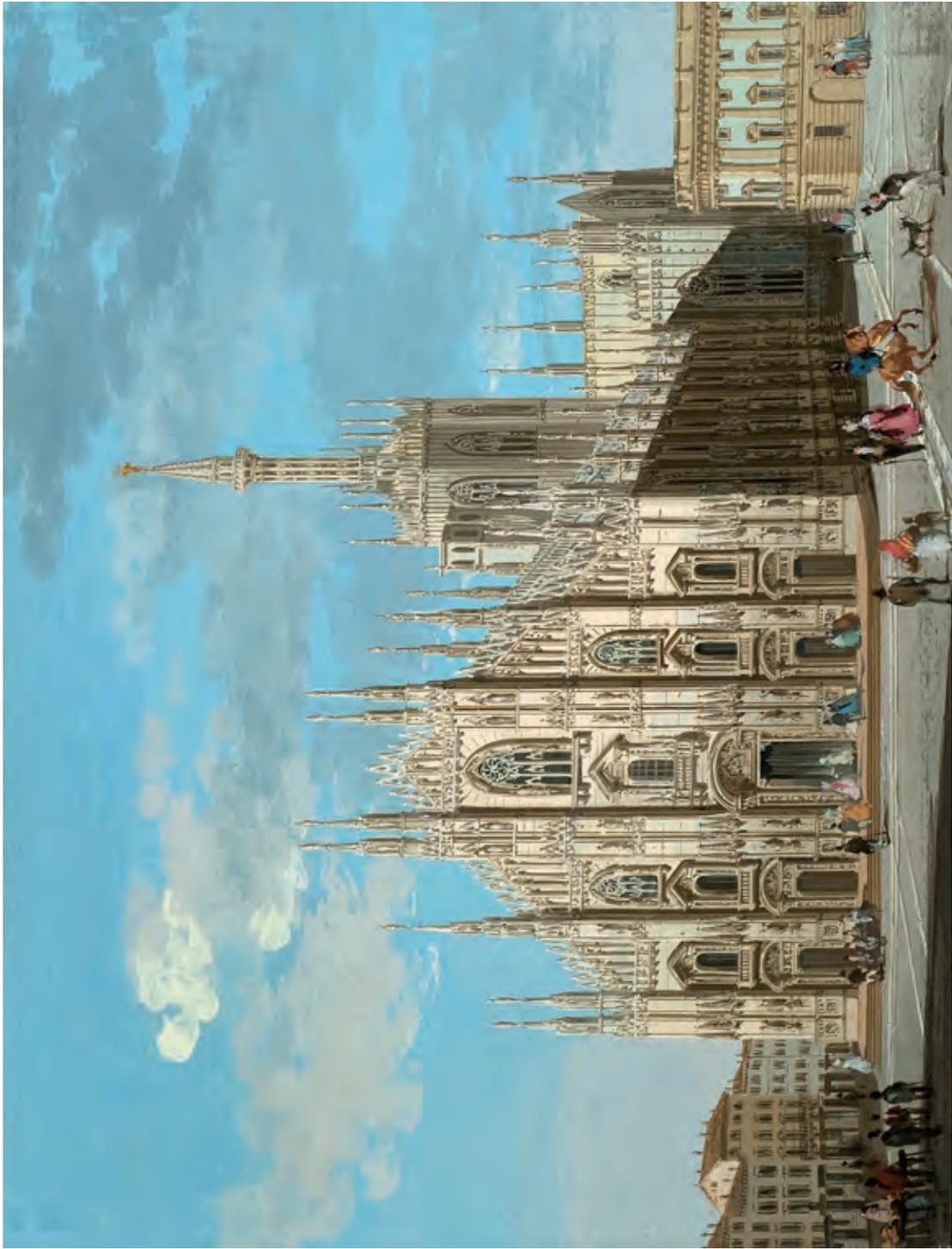
6 *View of the Duomo of Milan*

Gouache on board.

145 x 193 mm (5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.





Actual size

7 *Interior of the Duomo of Milan*

Gouache on board.

193 x 145 mm (7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.





*Actual size*

## 8 *View of the Colonnade of San Lorenzo in Milan*

Gouache on board.

193 x 144 mm (7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.

The Colonnade dates from the 3rd century and probably originally formed part of a Roman Baths. The columns were transported to their present location in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century to form part of the site of the Basilica di San Lorenzo. In 1935 the adjacent buildings which had sprung up on both sides of the Colonnade over the centuries and are visible in this gouache, were destroyed to provide more space around the church. The columns, even today, are held in particular affection by the people of Milan as evidence of the classical city of Mediolanum and a rare survivor of the destructive fury of the Goths, of Barbarossa and the terrible bombardments of the Second World War.



*The Colonnade before the demolition of the adjacent buildings in 1935.*



*Actual size*

## 9 *View of the Porta Sempione and the Arco della Pace in Milan*

Gouache on paper. Inscribed by the artist on the verso: *Arco del Sempione o della Pace.*

144 x 193 mm (5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.

Construction of the *Arco della Pace* was begun in 1807 at Napoleon's instigation. A second period of work started in 1826, under the patronage of Francesco I, Emperor of Austria, wishing to commemorate the peace of 1815, however it was only completed in 1838 and inaugurated by his successor, Ferdinand I. This date therefore gives a *terminus post quem* for the execution of the present gouache.



*Porta Sempione and the Arco della Pace  
in the 1950s.*



Actual size

## 10 *View of the Certosa of Pavia*

Gouache on paper.

145 x 194 mm (5 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>12</sub> x 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>12</sub> in.).

PROVENANCE: A French Noble Family.

This Carthusian monastery complex was commissioned by Gian Galeazzo Visconti, first Duke of Milan, in 1396. The location was strategically chosen half way between Milan and Pavia, second city of the Duchy and where the Duke held his court. The façade, which is famous for its extravagant decorations, was finally completed in 1507.



*The Certosa of Pavia around 1880.*



Actual size

11 *A Picturesque Rivery Landscape With Ruins, a Sailboat, Hills in The Distance and Various Figures.*

Gouache on paper.

432 x 591 mm (17 x 23 in.).

PROVENANCE: An English Private Collection.

The grand scale and romantic atmosphere of this fine gouache reflect Bison's work as a set designer. Whilst being highly decorative, the view also conveys a dream-like quality. Is the landscape flooded? It appears almost as if Bison has transformed his composition to this effect: the water appears to have risen above the entrances of the building on the left, while the figure in the foreground stands with his stick in the pose of a gondolier and the prow of a barge is actually visible as a *pentimento* behind him. It is a mysterious work and gently gothic in taste, as befits the period – this is also the time of Caspar David Friedrich and Lord Byron. The milky colours of the gouache medium are ideally suited to this form of *capriccio*, the contrast between the light-filled sky and the dark foreground creating both depth of field and range of mood. The shadows in the archways of the ruins, and the dark branches of the trees highlight the airy movement suggested by the rapid brushwork of the leaves, while the thin lines of white highlight glide across the surface and animate the still water as it laps against stone. This painting is cleverly realised and beautifully executed and is an excellent example, on a relatively large scale, of Bison's work as a much-vaunted painter of *capricci* and *vedute ideali*.





*Reduced*

12 *A Capriccio with Boatmen by a Lake, a Church and other Buildings on the Shore and Mountains in the Distance*

Gouache on paper.

430 x 592 mm (17 by 23 1/4 in.).

PROVENANCE: An English Private Collection.

The grand scale and romantic atmosphere of this fine gouache reflect Bison's work as a set designer. Whilst being highly decorative, the view also conveys a dream-like quality. The milky colours of the gouache medium are ideally suited to this form of *capriccio*, the contrast between the light-filled sky and the darker foreground creating both depth of field and range of mood. This beautifully executed and very well preserved painting is an excellent example, on a large scale, of Bison's work as a much-vaunted painter of *capricci* and *vedute ideali*.





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