

Maurice Prendergast

A Modernist View of Venice



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Art History 450E

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April 8, 2008

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, American artists, along with many of their European contemporaries, travelled to the city of Venice to create new visions of this picturesque city. Industrialization and the ensuing rise of the middle class were paralleled with the artistic movement of Impressionism which by the late nineteenth century was well established. Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1858-1924), a Canadian-born American artist known for his beautifully arranged compositions and mosaic-like watercolours, found himself at a pivotal moment in art history. The focus of atmospheric colour, light and mood of the Impressionists begins to shift to more abstract and formalist properties, and in his unique way, Prendergast's own evolution can be seen in his watercolours, monotypes and later oils. This paper studies one of Prendergast's early watercolours called the *Venetian Canal Scene*. This study will also show Prendergast's evolution as an early American modernist through the comparison of this image to paintings later in his career, including work from his second trip to Venice twelve years later, work from one of his American contemporaries, and an analysis of his watercolour technique achieved through my reproduction of his *Venetian Canal Scene*.

Early in his career, Prendergast's primary and favored motif was the colourful, playful transient scenes of everyday life. He "expressed his joyous response to humanity with a breadth of observation firmly rooted in concrete reality, with no narrative overlay, no deflection in the realm of the sentimental; he was never interested in the unadventurous illustrative naturalism that confined the Impressionism of so many Americans at the end

of the last century.”¹ With the exception of an experimental period that included still lifes, flowers and portraits, Prendergast’s signature theme focused on urban crowds. And not simply crowds in static composed scenarios but the movement of these crowds in everyday leisure out-of-door activities. In the beginning he would depict this growing middle class in leisurely promenades along the natural landscapes of the beaches, piers and parks of the surrounding Boston area as illustrated in one of his earliest works, *Rocky Shore, Nantasket*. (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Rocky Shore, Nantasket*, 1896, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 17 x 12 1/2 in., Private Collection

¹ Richard J. Wattenmaker and Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Maurice Prendergast* (New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1994). Pg. 11

In this image we can see that Prendergast was already working with space and flattening principles. Despite this technique of seeing the paper as a flat surface being new to him, his early ability to absorb and apply the theoretical discussions on composition from the Boston art circles at that time, especially those influenced by Arthur Dow,² allowed him to rearrange and compose his figures towards his natural sensibilities. Prendergast's leisure crowd motif remains with him throughout his career even as his artistic development and pictorial language continues to evolve. Once he visits Venice, he will also learn how to incorporate his motif into other settings and landscapes.

What is most interesting about Prendergast's iconography is that like most crowds they remain anonymous but at the same time they take on a very particular character. There is very little detail in the figures within his mass of people and yet each individual, with his carefully applied touch, take on their own personality. Based on a close study of his underlying pencil drawings which captured subtle gesture, we can see that Prendergast had developed a keen eye of observation. His watercolour overlays, interesting enough, do not always match his drawings, implying that they are just there as compositional guides for his elaborate reorganization of form and colours in his work. With incredible knowledge of movement and a few controlled strokes, Prendergast's creates this sense of a living breathing body of people across his sheet. "His figures appear stick-like, stylized, reduced to formula, and without any distinction of line or of drawing in itself. ... And yet his figures are personalized, visually identifiable for what

² ,Nancy Mowll Mathews et al., *Maurice Prendergast* (Munich, Williamstown, Mass. New York, NY, USA: Williams College Museum of Art; Prestel, 1990)., Pg 16

they are in dress, movement, and gesture, and physically and psychologically interrelated existentially within the same space, even though not in an anecdotal sense.”³

In 1898, Prendergast traveled to Italy for the first time. Even according to him, his exposure to Italian art, and more specifically the Venetian artists Carpaccio, the Bellinis and Canaletto, was an overwhelming experience.⁴ Like Prendergast, Carpaccio loved pageantry and processions and it was here that one can observe a shift from his Paris and Boston work to the warmer and richer colours of the Venetian light. Like many of his contemporaries Prendergast would most likely have read John Ruskin’s *Stones of Venice* and like most visiting American artists would have come with some preconceived ideas of this mythical city. What Prendergast did not know was that Venice itself was a social space completely defined by the topography of the city. While Venetians live within an urban space, they use the outside as their indoor space. They spend the majority of their time out-of-doors and for the most part, walk everywhere. There really was no other choice. This played very naturally towards his favorite motif. The challenge that he faced was how to paint his urban crowd in a less natural landscape that he had become accustomed too? How would he paint this space? How would he be able to take advantage of this man-made landscape of canals and bridges? Carpaccio’s work would have again offered suggestions for this compositional problem. By treating this beautiful urban setting like any other landscape and using the grid like structure of the buildings,

³ Maurice Brazil Prendergast et al., *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast : A Catalogue Raisonné* (Williamstown, MA: Williams College Museum of Art; Prestel: , 1990)., Pg 16

⁴ Hedley Howell Rhys and Museum of Fine Arts Boston., *Maurice Prendergast, 1859-1924* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960)., Pg. 30

along with the moving Venetian crowds, as equal and simple elements of the overall composition, Prendergast was able to take his first large step towards more modernist principles. The Venetian's outdoor living space was now his perfect landscape. In a very short period of time he took the very vivid pageantry of street life in Venice and ever so lightly flattens it into a collage of colourful mosaic-like forms. He created a slight tension between traditional perspective and modernist ideas of flattening. His horizon line is high and in some cases disappears entirely by the fragmentation of monumental buildings. Prendergast combined this with a distorted elevated view to create open space for the vertical layering of his carefully organized dabs of colours that make up his moving urban crowds as can be seen in *Ponte della Paglia*. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Ponte della Paglia*, ca. 1898-99, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 10 1/4 x 14 3/4 in., Hirschl & Adler Galleries, Inc., New York

Many of Prendergast's watercolors of Venice during his first visit depicted the movement of people promenading around tourist locations. One exception, and the focus of this paper, is his watercolour *Venetian Canal Scene*. (Figure 3) This painting is a view of the Ponte Lion in the Castello Sestiere from the Ponte dei Greci looking up the Rio di San Lorenzo towards the Church of San Lorenzo. (Figure 4)



Figure 3. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Venetian Canal Scene*, ca. 1898-99, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 13 7/8 x 20 3/4 in., Private Collection of Arthur G. Altschul, New York.

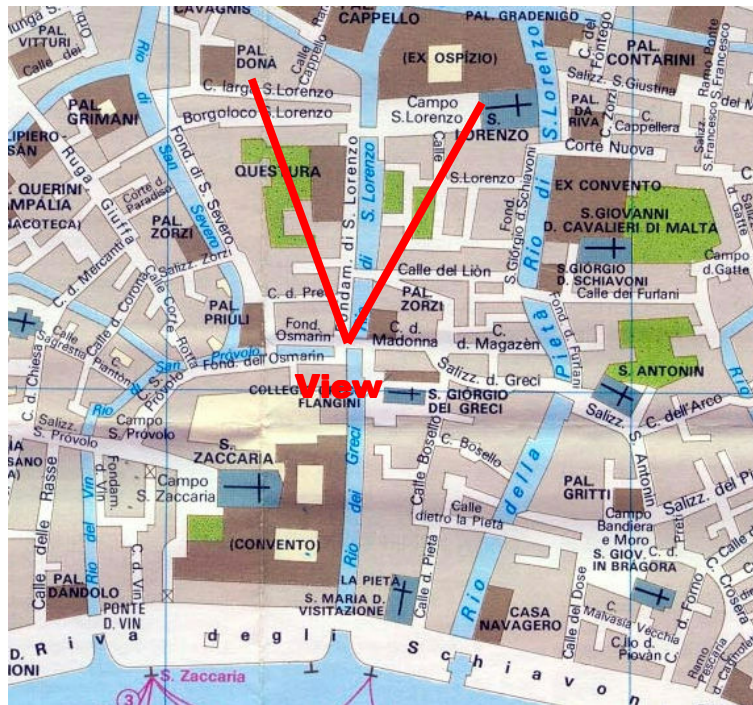


Figure 4. The vantage point for Maurice Prendergast's *Venetian Canal Scene*

In the image there is a parade of people walking along the *fondamenta* on the left side and over the two bridges. Two gondoliers in the center of the image are moving away from the viewer and up the Rio di San Lorenzo. In the gondolas moored against the left side; one gondolier is taking a nap and the other appears to be talking to a couple in the crowd. Behind the viewer from this vantage point are the Rio dei Greci, the San Giorgia dei Greci and the Grand Canal. The Church of San Lorenzo's, off to the right in the background of the image, is one of the most ancient religious buildings in Venice and was originally constructed in the 6th century. The San Lorenzo bridge we see in the background of Prendergast's painting is also the scene of Gentile Bellini's famous painting "The Recovery of the Relic of the True Cross at the Bridge of San Lorenzo" painted in 1500 that depicting a 1360 religious procession that was carrying a piece of the True Cross from San Giovanni Evangelista to the church of San Lorenzo.

Like many of Prendergast's paintings, he would have started this watercolour on-site either as an initial sketch in a sketchbook or directly on the sheet only to complete it later in the solitary atmosphere of his pensione.⁵ Prendergast strays from conventional composition by off-setting the first bridge (Ponte Lion) in the painting to the right and then balancing it with the second bridge (Ponte San Lorenzo) to the left. The bridges, along with the buildings in the background, are flatly parallel to the picture plane and if it were not for the *fondamenta* and the mass of buildings to the right which provides the image with some sense of depth, it would look even flatter. It is this slight perspective tension that is often seen in Prendergast's early work that shows his evolution towards more modernist principles that we will see in his later work. As in most of his watercolours during this period, Prendergast's "vantage point is high, much higher than ordinary human height ... it is clear that (his) repeated preference for this high point of view constitutes not an acceptance but rather a manipulation of the familiar convention ... (and he) repeatedly uses it in conjunction with a very high horizon line. Any expanse of open space or sky is almost eliminated as the distant buildings bump their roofs along the top of the frame."⁶ The natural lighting in Venice provided a perfect opportunity for Prendergast to experiment with deeper, more saturated hues of yellow ochre, raw sienna and burnt sienna. The colouring of browns, yellows and blues in the water along with the white highlights from the underlying paper that he allows to show through only add to the overall colour cohesion that he is trying to create. The colour hues used in the buildings

⁵ Prendergast et al., *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast : A Catalogue Raisonné.*, Pg. 72

⁶ Margaretta M. Lovell, *A Visitable Past : Views of Venice by American Artists, 1860-1915* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989)., Pg 87

are warm and rich with only slight changes in values and tone to distinguish the various buildings. Prendergast takes artistic liberty to colour the windows and buildings in such a way as to create a curtain-like tapestry and harmony. One can see how his rocks from his Boston beach scenes have now become elongated buildings that provide an envelope for his choreographed arrangement of promenading people.

Venice, unlike any other city during modernization, remained essentially unchanged. The movement of people when Prendergast visited it was no different than it had been for centuries. People walked for the most part or would have taken a gondola. This everyday activity, as we stated earlier, played right into Prendergast's preferred and favorite motif, the movement of urban crowds. In *Venetian Canal Scene*, he has strategically placed and colored his figures to create a pleasing and cohesive harmony of colours. The white of the paper is allowed to show through to create the dresses of some of the women and the two gondoliers in white in the middle of the canal are crucial in this arrangement to hold the viewers gaze towards the center of the painting. From a distance, the overall colours are clear and harmonized. Upon closer inspection, the viewer can see that Prendergast has meticulously employed individual brush strokes that, when placed side by side, create interesting value and color contrasts.⁷ The faces are void of details to maintain anonymity of the mass of people. The small group on the bridge have their backs to the viewer to make this scene more engaging and intimate. We now feel as the viewer that we are somehow part of this site-seeing or little social promenade occurring on this day in

⁷ Naomi Ekperigin, "Watercolor Masters," <http://www.myamericanartist.com/2008/02/watercolor-mast.html#>.

Venice. As is typical of most of his work, the women and children are placed in the front with the men along the sides and the background. And once again Prendergast employs a “climbing perspective” to the moving crowd as if they are seen from an elevated view, thus spreading the figures over the surface to achieve his signature tapestry effect.⁸ Even with all the movement that is so typical of his watercolours, there is still a certain tranquility and calmness about the painting. There is movement but it feels quiet in this ancient city on water.

In my study *Prendergast's Venetian Canal Scene*, I discovered even more about Prendergast's approach and watercolour technique. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Kevin Dykstra, *Study of Prendergast's Venetian Canal Scene*, 2008, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 13 7/8 x 20 3/4 in. Private Collection

⁸ Prendergast et al., *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast : A Catalogue Raisonné.*, Pg. 17

He would likely have used heavy off-white wove paper which was popular and readily available at this time. It can be assumed that he utilized heavy grade paper because on more than one occasion Prendergast painted on both sides of his sheets, something that would have been impossible to do with lighter grade paper. For this study I used Fabriano cold-pressed 300 lbs paper. From Prendergast's sketchbooks and color notations we know that his colour palette was approximately 40 colours and he had a preference for Winsor and Newton colours because he often referred to them by name.⁹ From observation of the image, I reduced this palette to a palette of about 15 basic colours including primarily raw and burnt umber, raw and burnt sienna, yellow ochre, lemon yellow, cobalt blue, ultramarine, viridian, alizarin crimson, and permanent red deep. I used no whites, blacks or grays. For brushes I used small rounds, flats, a rigger and a couple of mop brushes. The actual size of my study is identical to that of Prendergast's *Venetian Canal Scene*, which is 13 7/8 x 20 3/4 inches. Initially, I pencil sketched the image. Similar to Prendergast, my application of watercolour was wet-on-dry in dabs and long strokes. As one can observe from some of his unfinished works, I started this painting with most of the colour highlights - the blues, reds and oranges - and then similar to a large colouring book, I worked on each element of the arrangement at a time paying close attention to the colour hues that he applied. At first this was a little difficult because I was working from two different images that had not only different tonal values but also slightly different hues. I quickly corrected this by focusing on just one image. I also found in relation to choosing and mixing colours that watercolours dry a different colour from when they are wet. If I wanted my study to look like the finished work of

⁹ Ibid., Pg 72

Prendergast, I needed to test each hue by letting it dry on my paper palette before applying it to the painting. This highlighted my first discovery of watercolours. In general, they are very unforgiving. Once a colour is applied it is essentially finished and there is no opportunity to change or alter that stroke or colour. I quickly learned that I could layer other colour washes over a previous colour to change the hue or tone. This of course led to another discovery that layering too many times, and certainly before it has the chance to dry, only creates muddied colours. Next, I found that by applying a light wash of water, I could remove some layers of a hue to lighten the colour. From there I determined that by adding water to the middle of a colour I could “push” it out to the edges creating the effect that we see in many examples of Prendergast’s watercolours, especially in his parasols or umbrellas. He used this technique to create subtle outlines versus actual brush stroked outlines. This became an invaluable technique as I completed my study. Unlike Prendergast, my preferred and most used medium is oils, so having this opportunity to experiment with watercolours has been extremely educational and rewarding. I learned an enormous amount about the medium itself and his colouring and compositional choices. I would add that there is naturally some loss of Prendergast’s spontaneity when one attempts to copy anything so closely but that it has been replaced by my own dabs of spontaneity.

After leaving Italy, Prendergast’s unique pictorial language continues to evolve. In 1907 he went to Paris to find a new impulse but observation of his work just prior to his

sojourn in France shows that a transformation had already taken place.¹⁰ In *Salem Willows* (Figure 6) and *Park Street Church, Boston, Winter* (Figure 7), we start to see more and more oil paintings, his brush strokes become broader, shorter and more free flowing, his colours are more saturated than before, and in some cases one can note the subtle outlining of figures.



Figure 6. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Salem Willows*, 1904, Oil on canvas, 26 x 34 in., Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago

¹⁰ Eleanor Green et al., *Maurice Prendergast : Art of Impulse and Color* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland Art Gallery, 1976).



Figure 7. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Park Street Church, Boston, Winter*, ca. 1905-07, Watercolour and pencil on paper, Private Collection

While in France, Prendergast visited exhibitions and the Salons. He took this opportunity to note and sketch artwork that moved him and illustrated the direction of avant-garde art. From Prendergast's later work one can see the influences of Cézanne and Matisse as well as everything else he could absorb. Despite all this, "Cézanne's watercolors and paintings, the bright Neo-Impressionist and Fauve works, were but a verification of the direction in which he was already headed. ... What he found when he got to Paris was that other artists were thinking along the same lines he was already pursuing, and his contact, immersion one might term it, reinforced rather than cause his orientation. ... It was his own method and independence that he saw reflected ..." ¹¹

¹¹ Wattenmaker and Prendergast, *Maurice Prendergast*., Pg. 89

By the time Prendergast traveled to Venice for the second and last time in 1911, his new approach for his preferred motif was a further step away from the representational character of his previous visit. Less interested in the monumental urban genre scenes around the piazza San Marco and Ducal Palace, Prendergast during this period focuses almost entirely on the many canals and bridges in Venice, often painting them several times. He returns to his favored medium, watercolour, and there is an even greater freedom of scale within his compositions.¹² As we can see in his paintings *Canal* (Figure 8) and *Scene of Venice* (Figure 9) the colour and scale of the figures and gondolas are determined by the demands of the design and overall composition and not of representation.



Figure 8. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Canal*, ca. 1911-12, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 15 3/8 x 22 in., Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute Museum of Art, Utica, New York

¹² Rhys and Museum of Fine Arts Boston., *Maurice Prendergast, 1859-1924.*, Pg. 48



Figure 9. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *Scene of Venice*, ca. 1911-12, Watercolour and pencil on paper, 14 1/2 x 20 in., Private Collection

A quick comparison to *Venetian Canal Scene* (Figure 3) from his first visit to Venice in 1898-99, shows how far Prendergast has evolved as an American modernist painter. In these paintings, *Canal*, which is a view of Ponte Apostoli from Sotto Portico del Magazen and *Scene of Venice*, which is a view of Ponte Loredan with Campo San Vio to the right, there is a change in defined space and the patterns of his brush strokes are decidedly more rhythmic and linear in character.¹³ In general these pictures are less delicate, there is a looser handling of a more decorative colouring palette and they appear to be even more composed than from his previous visit. One can also see at this point a clearer example of how Prendergast outlined his figures in colour, not necessarily corresponding to the local colour of the apparel worn, a technique of broken rhythmic

¹³ Green et al., *Maurice Prendergast : Art of Impulse and Color.*, Pg. 132

colour outlines he had studied from Cézanne while in France.¹⁴ Along with this outlining, Prendergast has removed the shadows and reflections flattening the image even further. This change from his traditional theme towards more formal components of colour, line, form and paint strokes shows how he, like Cézanne, strove to balance the more formal elements of his compositions, sometimes achieving pictorial equilibrium before the narrative details were complete.¹⁵

Around the same time, John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) paints his *Venetian Canal* in 1913. (Figure 10) Born just two years earlier, Sargent is an almost exact contemporary to Prendergast and yet their styles are very different. “These two men personify the artistic divergence occurring during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Both stood at a pivotal point in the history of art and turned in different directions. ... Though Sargent benefited from the ideas of the Impressionists, his interest stopped short of Post-Impressionism and the early paintings of artists such as Matisse and Picasso”¹⁶ In *Venetian Canal*, Sargent deploys a very classical composition. In the center of the image a bridge arches over the waterway connecting two vertical ranges of buildings which disappear into the perspective. In the background, the tower of San Barnaba overlooks the scene and provides a focal point for the viewer. Although there is a very light scattering of people on both sides of the canal, they do not hold our attention in any way. As we have seen, this is very different approach from Prendergast.

¹⁴ Wattenmaker and Prendergast, *Maurice Prendergast.*, Pg 90

¹⁵ Ellen Glavin, "Maurice Prendergast's Second Visit to Venice: Disaster or New Impulse?," *Archives of American Art Journal* 42, no. 1/2 (2002).

¹⁶ Larry Curry et al., *Eight American Masters of Watercolor* (Los Angeles: 1968).



Figure 10. John Singer Sargent, *Venetian Canal*, 1913, Watercolour and graphite on off-white wove paper, 15 3/4 x 21 in., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

“One is repeatedly struck with the avoidance most other artists felt for people in their pictures of Venice. When figures do appear, they are often disappointingly overlaid ... In Prendergast’s images both Venetians and visitors possess an enviable grace and naturalness.”¹⁷ Sargent’s technique of rapidly establishing form and finishing off with quick strokes to catch the effects of the Venetian golden light and shadows are apparent in the contrast between the bright sunlit areas of the buildings and water reflections with the violet shadows. In general, this is a familiar pictorial composition and non-problematic in nature.¹⁸ In contrast to not only Prendergast’s earlier work in Venice between 1898-99 but especially in his work from 1911-12, we see how these two

¹⁷ Lovell, *A Visitable Past : Views of Venice by American Artists, 1860-1915.*, Pg. 31

¹⁸ Margareta M. Lovell and Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco., *Venice : The American View, 1860-1920 : [Exhibition Catalogue]* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1984.), Pg. 125

contemporaries not only apply different watercolor techniques but also how they differ in approach and attitudes. We have already examined how Prendergast was evolving his use of space, colour and composition and more recently at the time when Sargent paints *Venetian Canal*, Prendergast is moving towards formalism leaving many of his American contemporaries still working with the atmosphere and mood of the French Impressionists.

Prendergast makes his final shift towards more abstract, decorative, and formalistic properties after his return from Italy and the Armory Show of 1913 which firmly placed him in the forefront of Modernism in America. He abandons the pretext of traditional perspective and realistic representation, preferring the more formalist principles of distortion, elongation and flattening. An example of this shift can be seen in his work called *The Idlers*. (Figure 11)

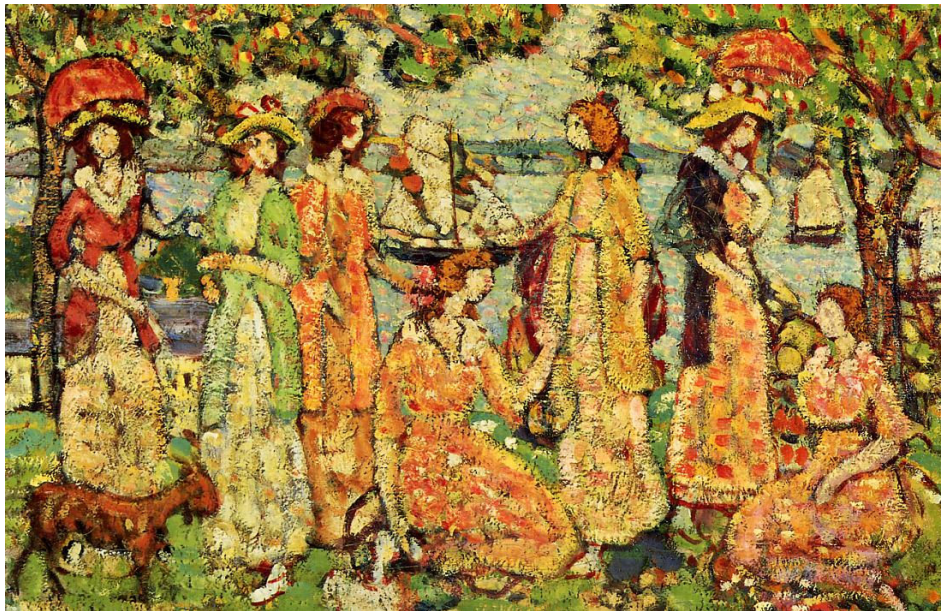


Figure 11. Maurice Brazil Prendergast, *The Idlers*, ca. 1918-20, Oil on canvas, 21 x 32 in., Maier Museum of Art, Randolph-Macon Women's College, Lynchburg, VA

His value contrasts become sharper, the colour is more brilliant and frequently broken, and in many cases the application of colour in rectangular strokes forms a mosaic-like pattern. Prendergast solves the problem of using broken tones and pure colour simultaneously and one can see how his mosaic-like or tapestry pattern may have evolved from Signac and Seurat theories.¹⁹ The frieze of elongated figures creates a decorative band and by applying a system of “trellising”²⁰ they almost fill the entire vertical plane of this horizontal composition. The surface of shortened strokes of rugged impasto hues adds to this flattening effect that he has created through the distortion of the figures. Prendergast’s work during his last decade of his life showed a profound shift in both attitude and manner as we see a change toward a general Fauvist loosening but also, and most importantly, an increased formalism.²¹

After researching Prendergast’s work and upon studying more closely one of his watercolours by creating one of my own, I learned a tremendous amount about the watercolour medium and at the same time gained a great amount of respect for one of America’s early modern artists. Throughout his career, Prendergast’s greatest strength was his ability to absorb everything he saw or read to create his own unique pictorial language and vision. His undeviating loyalty to his favorite motif of urban crowds at leisure in the out-of-doors may have often obscured both the originality of his

¹⁹ Rhys and Museum of Fine Arts Boston., *Maurice Prendergast, 1859-1924.*, Pg. 46

²⁰ Prendergast et al., *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast : A Catalogue Raisonné.*, Pg. 17

²¹ *Ibid.*, Pg. 20

innovations and the significance of his aesthetic achievement²² but “by the 1920’s, with the growing shift in taste, he was already accepted as a ‘modern master’ and the dean of avant-garde. With the years, his reputation has continued to grow in critical stature and his art in market value.”²³ His colour sensitivity cannot be overstated when one examines the range of his work that illustrates how he explored, expanded and eventually mastered multiple colour harmonies. His forms were simplified and his figures stylized and yet he successfully captured the uniqueness of each gesture and action providing the viewer with a sense of a constantly moving crowd. Prendergast’s compositions were typically in horizontal bands and he applied various modernist flattening techniques that emphasized the richness of the surface texture. From beginning to end there is an almost unexplainable freedom and joy captured in his paintings and he brought his favorite motif of moving crowds with a unique pictorial language to create his own vision of Venice. As William Glackens comments in 1913, “Maurice Prendergast is prominent as one of the men who has been consistently and thoroughly modern. Years ago he was making patterns in joyous colors that gave delightfully the impression of the light, the happiness, the rhythm, the harmony of life”²⁴

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²² Rhys and Museum of Fine Arts Boston., *Maurice Prendergast, 1859-1924.*, Pg. 60

²³ Prendergast et al., *Maurice Brazil Prendergast, Charles Prendergast : A Catalogue Raisonné.*, Pg. 15

²⁴ Wattenmaker and Prendergast, *Maurice Prendergast.*, Pg. 112

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