Warrington Colescott

Death in Venice: Piazza San Marco, from the portfolio Death in Venice, 1971
Etching

The Art: What’s Going on Here?
Warrington Colescott’s print Death in Venice: Piazza San Marco depicts the famous Piazza San Marco (St. Mark’s Square) in front of San Marco Basilica (Church of St. Mark), the religious and cultural heart of Venice, Italy. The Basilica is at the top of the print, with the piazza shown in extreme perspective, viewed almost as if from a bird’s-eye view. On the right we see the elaborate, arcaded architecture of the Procuratie Vecchie (homes and offices of the Old Procurators of Venice) and on the left towards the top of the print is the Campanile (bell tower) of San Marco. With so much of the print’s borders dominated by architecture, there is a suggestion that the figures in the square, and possibly the viewer as well, might feel as if they are trapped there. In many ways this recreates the feeling of being there in person: a sensation of being slightly overwhelmed and crowded in by the people and the buildings. The appearance of the Procuratie and the Campanile are reversed in the print from where they are located in real life, owing to the nature of print-making where the printed image is the reverse of the image on the printing plate. Looking at San Marco from the same view in Venice today, the building would be to the viewer’s left, while the bell tower would be to the right.

In addition to the architectural setting, the print features crowds of people and pigeons—staples of the Venetian experience. A woman pushing a baby carriage and three pigeons standing on the baseline of the print in the extreme foreground are among the most prominent figures. Other shapes within the piazza suggest more pigeons and people. The piazza is also overlaid with a grid of lines, some parallel, some angled, which resemble a street-layout on a map, although no such lay-out can exist in Venice, where the streets are almost never straight and run like a labyrinth, periodically interrupted by canals. The print’s dominant color is yellow, although blues and greens also play a role, filling in irregular rectangle shapes within the grid of the piazza and resembling the shifting colors of the lagoons and canals. The yellow of the print, seen in the pavement of the piazza and in parts of the architecture, might refer to the brilliant light of Venice, to the gold used in the mosaics on the façade and interior of San Marco, or, more sinisterly, to the color of the flag of quarantine that maritime vessels would fly if any of their crew were stricken with cholera. In a port city like Venice, such a flag would signify an ominous arrival. Even today, a yellow and black flag (called the “Yellow Jack”) is used to indicate that a ship arriving in port is under quarantine.

The works in this series were created by a number of different types of printmaking processes. In this case the print is a woodcut and hard-ground etching. Woodcut is a type of printmaking where a sharp tool is used to cut and gouge away negative space from a wood block; the remaining areas of wood form the lines and shapes of the image. Ink is then applied and paper is pressed into the wood block to create the print.

Key Ideas
• Different/multiple viewpoints creating a distorted picture of the same scene
• The contrast between the openness of this view of the piazza and San Marco, a symbol of the city, and the closed, maze-like structure of the rest of the city’s streets
• The use of color as it appears in nature, for example the blue and green for the canals, but also as a symbol, for example the yellow flag of quarantine
• How this print represents the city as a whole for the entire series

Discussion Questions
1. What in the print draws your attention first? Why?
2. What do the colors make you think of? Why? How do they affect your overall impression of the image, and the place that Warrington Colescott has depicted?
3. Aside from the Church of San Marco the most recognizable objects in the scene are pigeons. Why do you think the artist gave them such prominence?
4. Does your reaction to the print change when you view the version with colors in contrast to the black-and-white print of the same scene? How?
5. Have you been to Venice? Does this view of Piazza San Marco make you want to go to Venice? Why or why not?
Because of the delicate nature of wood, precise, fine lines are difficult to create and wood-block prints tend to have broader lines and more organic shapes, as we see in the architectural forms of San Marco and the surrounding buildings, as well in the simplistic shapes of the figures and pigeons in the scene. By contrast, the more precise lines, such as the lines indicating feathers in the pigeons in the foreground, were created by the hard-ground etching process. In hard-ground etching an acid-resistant coating (the “ground”) is added to a metal plate. The artist then reveals the metal by marking through the ground with a pointed object, often a special type of needle. By using a pointed metal object to scratch into the ground, Colescott is able to make very precise, fine lines. The plate is then dipped in acid and the exposed metal is eaten away, incising where the artist had scratched away the ground. The paper of the print was pressed at least twice with these two different methods—the wood block and a metal plate—to create the elaborate, layered scene visible here.

In contrast, the black-and-white version of the print seems like a simpler image. The use of black-and-white reveals even more clearly the different types of lines visible in the print: the more organic, broader strokes from the wood block process, and the finer, more precise lines of the etching. Additionally, the map-like appearance of the print is especially emphasized when the black-and-white version of the print is considered in comparison to the color version. With nearly all the lines leading towards San Marco, it seems as if Aschenbach, as well as the viewer, has no choice but to be led towards the iconic church, one of the quintessential symbols of the city.

The Artist: Biographical Notes
Warrington Colescott is a Wisconsin printmaker, born in Oakland California in 1921 and currently living in Hollandale. He is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he was chair of the department of art from 1949 to 1978. In 1970, he was approached by Aquarius Press (Baltimore and New York) to illustrate texts of his choosing. He immediately chose Death in Venice, Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella, which had fascinated the artist in college. In 1971, Colescott published ten images illustrating the story, printed in full-color and as a black-and-white monochrome series. To prepare for the project, Colescott travelled to Venice to follow Aschenbach’s journey through the city and provide a modern perspective to the early-twentieth-century story.