

Vaporetti, Venice 1974

Douglas MacDiarmid was both passionate painter and perpetually inquisitive traveller, exploring the world when travel was a more leisurely pursuit. From his Paris base he adventured abroad at least once a year into old age, sketching everywhere he went. Equally a figurative and landscape painter, he also delighted in finding beauty and rhythm in scenes of everyday life.

Venice was a city he first sought out for its splendid architecture, history and culture – the Renaissance art and opera, that labyrinth of narrow lanes to lose one's self in; those magnificent piazzas and the play of light and shadow on the canals.

"It was an enchanting place," Douglas recalled in 2015. "There are now too many tourists."

He stayed in Venice regularly, first in pilgrims' dormitories, then a friend's flat, so was well acquainted with the schedules of the 'vaporetto' (public water buses) that ply between Venice and nearby islands day and night. Douglas rode these ferries to Lido Beach to swim and sunbake, always referring to them as 'vaporini', to use the local language.

The painting originating from an Italian holiday in July-August 1973. While in Venice he wrote home: "One of my friends has a handsome hunk of old palazzo on the Grand Canal where I've come to pull myself together – it is bliss, because it is the only city on earth where there is no motor traffic, and so one walks and walks, and going up and down these endless bridges over canals adds up to 100 miles at the end of the day. All the sights and happy people on every side are good for the spirits – so much so that newspapers full of woe everywhere in the world are hard to make much sense of. After a week or two more of this, I'll be able to face my familiar devils back in Paris..."

From this scene of tourists crowded on ferries, he made two further paintings as details of *Vaporetti '74*. The first was called *Voyageurs* and the second, an even closer vignette titled *Lovers (Conversation with life)*.

Douglas did several paintings of the vaporetto on the Grand Canal: "It taught me a number of things about painting – according to the way I placed the multi-coloured effect of the crowd on the ferry, the ferry went in the direction it should, or went backwards! I've never been able to establish a law for that but it taught me that you have to use colour emotionally, and get it to work emotionally, or it's just going to be dead like a definition."

When the ferries were too crowded, he and his companions took a small, high speed gondola (*motoscafo*) over to the Lido beaches and island haunts. "I can remember there hobnobbing with (*Jean-Paul*) Belmondo the actor, whom I would never consider a friend but I knew him slightly from sharing the beach."

In the 1980s, Douglas was the most remote New Zealander in Wellington art gallery owner Louise Beale's stable of artists. The provenance of this painting is well documented within a decade of correspondence between the two friends, now archived at Te Papa Tongarewa.

Vaporetti, Venice 1974 came to New Zealand for a 1981 solo MacDiarmid exhibition at her Elva Bett Gallery, 147 Cuba Street, Wellington. It was listed as No 8 in the catalogue, with the smaller *Voyageurs* also appearing in the March 16-27 show as No 15 *Detail from Vaporetto (top)*. Although much admired, the larger canvas of the passenger ferries didn't sell at the time.

Apart from her gallery and curatorial work, Louise acted as art consultant for a Wellington architect, which resulted in her placing some MacDiarmid paintings in new commercial

buildings in the city. It was a role she valued, as she wrote to him in the mid-1980s: “. I do like this work very much and am conscious that in doing so it considerably spreads the web for future art buyers from an otherwise ignorant public so has a long-term education aspect.”

When *Vaporetti, Venice 1974* became a colourful presence in an accounting firm in 1985, Douglas remarked...“Glad too to know after how-many-centuries-can-it-be that good old Vaporetti has been moored at last. Odd how some things don’t find the right eye easily.”

(1981 Elva Bett Gallery exhibition catalogue list attached)

Anna Cahill

Biographer | *Colours of a Life: The life and times of Douglas MacDiarmid* (2018)

Director | MacDiarmid Arts Trust

September 2020