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Rare Guardi Portrait Illuminates Venetian Identity

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A rare and compelling work by Francesco Guardi (Venice, 1712–1793), Portrait of Lazzaro Zen, is on view at the Doge's Palace in Venice as part of the "Guests at the Palace" series, offering visitors a fresh encounter with a little-known facet of the Venetian painter's oeuvre. On display in the Picture Gallery's Chamber of the Magistrato alle Leggi until 14 April 2026, this exceptional portrait is on loan from I.P.A.V. – Istituzioni Pubbliche di Assistenza Veneziane and highlights a unique narrative within the Serenissima's cosmopolitan history.

Known primarily for his luminous vedute of the city, Guardi's foray into portraiture is both rare and revealing. The painting depicts Ali, an African youth who, after escaping enslavement, found refuge in Venice and was baptised as Lazzaro Zen in 1770, taking the name of his Venetian benefactors. Guardi captures the young man's psychological depth with a measured, precise style, contrasting with his more fluid treatment of landscapes. The elegant attire and inscription commemorating the baptism underscore the work's ceremonial significance.

Beyond its artistic rarity, the portrait embodies Venice's historic role as a multicultural crossroads. The exhibition invites reflection on identity, conversion, and belonging within the vibrant tapestry of the eighteenth-century Republic. Beyond its artistic rarity, the portrait embodies Venice's historic role as a multicultural crossroads. The exhibition invites reflection on identity, conversion, and belonging within the vibrant tapestry of the eighteenth-century Republic. It also encourages contemporary audiences to reconsider the complexities of social mobility, faith, and representation in a society shaped by commerce, diplomacy, and global exchange.

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