

ART & ARCHITECTURE

VENICE

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1300 years: a brief overview

From the beginnings to the end of the Republic

Goethe was reminded of a gigantic beaver lodge when he saw Venice for the first time on September 28, 1786. The jumble of waterways, paths, alleys, bridges and cul-de-sacs that make up Venice becomes understandable, however, only once you know how the city came into being.

Early history

The lagoon at the northwest edge of the Adriatic, which was known as Venetia as far back as Roman times, used to be larger than it is today. It was slowly silted up by the many rivers that flow here from the Alps into the Mediterranean. In the brackish water of the open lagoon, there were small, muddy islands and larger sandbanks (known as *lidi*). They were inhabited by fishermen and salt producers, and used as summer residences by wealthy Roman citizens.

The quiet, isolated life of the lagoon dwellers gradually changed during the 4th century, as increasing numbers of people from northern Italy settled here, fleeing the wars. The biggest wave of refugees came when Attila the Hun invaded Rome in 452–53. New cities such as Chioggia, Jesolo, and Torcello flourished, while, in the place where Venice would stand, the

first larger settlements started to develop in the region of Olivolo (today's Castello), around Rivo Alto (today's Rialto), and on various other pieces of high ground that emerged from the lagoon.

From the 6th century onwards, Venice was in the sphere of influence of the Ostrogoths, who ruled from Ravenna. With the death of King Theodoric in 526, however, their authority collapsed, and Venice fell under the rule of the Roman emperor, Justinian (482/3–565). The invasions of the Lombards in 568 succeeded in dismembering the Roman empire, and again new refugees flooded to the lagoon. Torcello and Malamocco evolved into major centers of trade and culture, and the population of the islands also started to grow.

For a while, each island remained a world unto itself. When, in 680, the Roman emperors finally withdrew to Constantinople, leaving northern Italy to the Lombards, Rome and a few other regions, including the exarchate (ecclesiastical state) of Ravenna, of which the Venetian lagoon was part, remained under the Roman emperors. The islands gradually developed. In addition to farming and fishing, trade (particularly in salt and fish) grew in importance. Because of the constant threat from the Lombards,

The slow death of the Republic

European politics increasingly became an arena for the Great Powers, where small Italian city-states, even wealthy ones like Venice, lost in influence. The Venetian fleet's major victory over the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571 was more of a triumph for the king of Spain, who had been allocated the role of the protector of Christendom. Nonetheless, the Venetians succeeded in holding on to their independence. Their political system spared the city from falling completely

under the influence of the Great Powers. This had happened to Florence which, by marrying members of its ruling family to the leading dynasties of Europe, was gradually absorbed into it.

The strict separation of Church and State in Venice meant that not even the Pope could hold great sway over the Republic. In 1607 Pope Paul V tried to give the Catholic Church greater power in Venice by laying the city under the interdict, i.e. banning all church rites. The Venetians, however, promptly banned the publication of the papal decree, and the Pope had to give in.

Luigi Querena: The Arrival in Venice of Napoleon's Troops, Museo del Risorgimento, Venice.



Palazzo Corner-Spinelli

This palazzo is one of the most interesting structures of the Early Venetian Renaissance (1490–1510). The architect Mauro Codussi combined the clear forms of the Renaissance with the liveliness of the Gothic facade. Antique motifs were transformed into more gentle structures. The first floor, which consisted of store-rooms, with its flat rustication and small windows, has the effect of a pedestal on which the richly decorated upper floors stand. The double (biforate) windows are topped by a single common arch. Codussi fitted the resulting spandrels with looped apertures reminiscent of the Gothic style, but which in Gothic architecture were used to frame additional details like foil ornaments, whereas here they are used independently. The colored stone decorations are throwbacks to marble inlays of the 13th century. The beautiful and highly prominent fleur-de-lis balconies below the side windows on the *piano nobile* are one of Codussi's more unusual ideas, and give additional vibrancy to the facade. This was the only time he used them.



Palazzo Contarini delle Figure

This Renaissance palazzo, built in the first half of the 16th century, was possibly begun by Giorgio Spavento, and was completed by Antonio Abbondio (known as Scarpagnino). It acquired the name “delle Figure” from the two (albeit not easily discernible and artistically unremarkable) caryatids that support the balcony over the main entrance. But some form of description was needed to distinguish this Contarini palazzo from the 21 others that this world-renowned family possessed.

San Giacomo di Rialto

This small domed basilica in a cruciform shape is one of the oldest places of worship in the city: the foundation stone was laid by 429. Its facade still displays the characteristic porch which, in the past, many Venetian churches possessed. Today it is the only remaining of its kind. In former times, the money changers and bankers would have sat beneath this portico and all around the small square, waiting for their international clientele. Banking transactions were carried out in the open air, monitored by the authorities. The Venetian bankers were famous for their successful credit businesses. It was here that the idea of bills of exchange emerged: clients would go from one banker to another with slips of paper upon which various sums of money were recorded. The impressive clock has been telling merchants the time since 1410.





Scuola Grande di San Marco, late 15th century

The Scuole: more than just fine buildings and insurance

An observant visitor to Venice will notice numerous sumptuous buildings which are neither churches nor the seats of wealthy families. These are the assembly halls of the *scuole*, brotherhoods of laymen which played an important role in the public life of the city-state. Such religious organizations of laymen existed in other Italian cities, although nowhere was their influence and importance as great as in Venice.

Although descended from the flagellant movement of the Middle Ages, displays of atonement like public whipping played a very minor role, if any, in the lives of the *scuole*. They were religious associations which met for prayer sessions, collecting money for good causes, and above all for holding masses for their members that were sick, dying, or dead. In a time when people lived in existential

San Sebastiano

The church of St. Sebastian was renovated in the 16th century by the Hieronymites, who had established their monastery on this site in the 15th century. An unusual event, which research has not yet uncovered, must have led the brothers to renovate the building only a few years after the previous work was completed. The original church was first completed in 1468. The plan for the new building was almost certainly by Antonio Abondio (known as Lo Scarpagnino), one of the architects who, in the first half of the 16th century, built mostly simple standard architecture rather than buildings remarkable for their astonishing architectural quality.

Interior

The first impression of the interior of the church is that it is very simply built. The only surprise is the gallery: it is not only, as is common in other Venetian churches, over the entrance, but spans the entire nave. As a result, there is room for six smaller chapels on the sides. The sacristy, which is accessed via a door under the organ, was decorated with paintings from 1551 onwards by artists from Verona. That no Venetians were commissioned was probably because the prior of the monastery, Bernardo Torlioni, was himself from

Verona. In 1555, he summoned another young artist from his home town to paint the areas on the relatively low, richly gilded ceilings. The name of the artist was Paolo Veronese. In the following ten years, he was called on again and again to work on the decoration of the church.



Venice, the way it was

The image we have of the city on the lagoon has been strongly influenced by 18th century landscape paintings of Venice by the artists known as *vedutisti* (painters of views). To this day in Venice,

tourists continue to seek out their colors and light. Besides Francesco Guardi, the most important Venetian *vedutista* was undoubtedly Antonio Canal, known as Il Canaletto.

Canaletto: Rio dei Mendicanti, 1723, Collezione M. Crespo, Milan

The Rio dei Mendicanti leads northwards by San Zanipolo. The partial, brightly lit church facade on the left is San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti. Within it were the monastery and the Scuola Grande di San Marco – not much different today from then.





San Pietro Martire

Today's parish church on the island was founded in 1348 as the church for a Dominican monastery. After a terrible fire, the monastery's church was almost completely rebuilt, which took until 1511. The exterior, with its bricks and the few, sparse details accented in white, shows the typical features of a Venetian mendicant order church. Under Napoleon's rule, in 1808, both the church and the monastery were closed down and their art treasures were stolen.

Interior and Choir

The interior of the church is surprising, particularly because of its bright space. Large windows allow daylight to stream in, illuminating the three wide naves. When the church was reopened in 1813, works of art were brought to San Pietro Martire from other churches which had also been closed down. Despite this, the church still seems rather empty: it is very clear that a large proportion of its once rich decoration is missing. Particularly conspicuous are the many white crystal chandeliers. These

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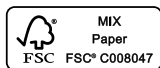
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Frontispiece
View of the Rialto Bridge

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Note:
Information regarding the location of works in museums and churches as well as
concerning opening times are subject to change.



© h.f.ullmann publishing GmbH

Original Title: *Kunst & Architektur. Venedig*
ISBN 978-3-8331-5422-5

Project Management: Ute Edda Hammer
Assistant: Jeannette Fentroß
Editing: Barbro Garenfeld
Layout: Anne-Claire Martin, Philine Rath
Graphics: Rolli Arts, Essen
Cartography: Astrid Fischer-Leitl, Munich
Picture Research: Monika Bergmann

© for the English edition: h.f.ullmann publishing GmbH

Translation from German: Mark Cole and Eithne McCarthy in association with Goodfellow & Egan
Editing: Kay Hyman in association with Goodfellow & Egan
Typesetting: Goodfellow & Egan
Project management: Jackie Dobbyne for Goodfellow & Egan
Project coordination: Kristin Zeier
Cover design: rincón² medien GmbH, Cologne
Overall responsibility for production:
h.f.ullmann publishing GmbH, Potsdam, Germany

Printed in China, 2013

ISBN 978-3-8480-0323-5

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
X IX VIII VII VI V IV III II I

www.ullmann-publishing.com
newsletter@ullmann-publishing.com



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