



# CHAPTER 14



## MOST SPLENDID AND SERENE: VENICE AND THE RENAISSANCE

**F**or a thousand years people came to Venice to do business. The city was a vibrant commercial center—indeed, a birthplace of modern capitalism. Awash in riches and the seat of extraordinary power, Venice was a place

of action—where decisions were made, deals were struck, and fortunes were won or lost.

Today people come to Venice for the art. It is an irony that the rich trappings of Venice's wealth—the lavish art and architecture of the city—is all that is left of its grandeur, and all that anyone really cares to see. The customhouse is shut tight, the Arsenale no longer echoes with the sound of saws and hammers, the markets at Rialto no longer buzz with the exchange of commodities, and no government at all resides in the gilded halls of the Ducal Palace. Venice is an abandoned mansion, an exquisite corpse. The life that brought it into being has long since left, yet its outward beauty endures. And, truly, it is beautiful.

Much of the Venice that we know today is the product of a flurry of artistic output during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries—at a time when the republic had already begun its slow decline. This is not to say that Venice was not beautiful before the fifteenth century, but it had

a very different sort of beauty. As we have seen, Venice lived in the West, but its gaze was ever on the East. As a child of the Byzantine Empire, Venice naturally adopted the artistic style of its sophisticated parent. This can still be seen, staring out from the mosaic-covered walls of scattered churches in Ravenna that escaped the plundering of conquerors and the zeal of iconoclasts. Venetians most admired this style of art during their first millennium, and they used it to adorn their holy places.

Artists in the Middle Ages were craftsmen—much like goldsmiths, cobblers, or blacksmiths—trained to create a product. And just as blacksmiths did not sign horseshoes, the identity of medieval artists and architects has almost always remained unknown. Yet the beauty of their creations still testifies to their skill. Although the church of San Marco was modeled on the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople, the identity of the person who oversaw its con-

struction remains a mystery. Greek artists were surely employed to produce the mosaics adorning the interior of San Marco, most of which were executed in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Like that of all Byzantine churches, San Marco's beauty is internal. The open area beneath the grand cupolas was designed to draw the worshipper's attention skyward, toward the heavens. Biblical scenes, the lives of saints, and important events in Venetian history cover the upper walls and ceilings. Lit by hundreds of candles, the interior powerfully evokes the presence of the sacred.

The exterior of San Marco was another matter. Following Byzantine practice, the church's outside wall consisted of exposed brick with very little ornamentation. Over the centuries, as San Marco and its Piazza became more important to the people of Venice, that changed. The greatest improvements occurred after 1204, when ships laden with treasures from conquered Constantinople arrived in Venice. Rich marbles and reliefs



were mounted on the exterior of San Marco in almost haphazard fashion. Similarly, items such as the dark tetrarchs (mounted on a corner), the "Acre" columns (placed before a now-closed entrance on the Piazzetta), and the bronze horses (set on the front balcony) were used to decorate the church at the center of Venetian civic life.

Beyond San Marco one must look hard to find evidence of Venetian art before the fifteenth century. The best example is Torcello's church of Santa Maria Assunta, which has along its back wall a breathtaking mosaic of the Last Judgment produced in the twelfth century. At one time all the churches in Venice were decorated in this way. But then came the Italian Renaissance, and zeal for this new artistic style quickly swept away the medieval mosaics and frescoes. Few churches were spared. However, in a quiet part of Venice there is still a place where one can get a feel for the medieval parish church: San Giovanni Decollato (St. John the Baptist Beheaded) in Santa Croce,

tucked away between San Giacomo dall'Orio and the Fondaco dei Turchi. At least a thousand years old, the little church is a precious gem, covered in a traditional ship's keel roof and adorned with Byzantine columns. Overshadowed by the larger San Giacomo dall'Orio, it did not see much use during the Renaissance or baroque periods, and so it was largely left alone. At some point in the early nineteenth century the church was abandoned entirely. Its inside walls were plastered and it was used for storage. In 1994, however, San Giovanni Decollato was reopened after extensive restorations, revealing a window to a Venice that had long since passed away. Chipping away the plaster exposed beautiful medieval frescoes depicting St. Helena, the Annunciation, the four Evangelists, and St. Michael defeating Satan as a dragon. It is a place of quiet reverence—something almost extinct in the modern city.

Venice's earliest palazzi were likewise built along Byzantine lines, although with uniquely

Venetian modifications. One of the oldest is Ca' Farsetti, which stands very near the Rialto Bridge. Built by Ranieri Dandolo before 1209, the palazzo exhibits the classic rounded arches opening to doors, windows, or balconies all across its facade. The Ca' Farsetti has many of the features that would become standard for Venetian palazzi. The ground level, which opened directly onto the Grand Canal, was designed for commerce. There a merchant vessel could be loaded or unloaded and goods stored. The family also kept smaller boats on the ground floor, along with oars, sails, and occasionally a bedroom for a servant or slave. At the back of the ground floor a door opened to a private courtyard with a well and stairs to the upper levels, where the family lived. Upstairs could be found a wide hallway flanked by a ballroom, dining room, and sitting room for entertaining. Family quarters frequently spread across several floors as different nuclear families claimed separate sections of a palazzo owned by a common ancestor.

Venice's palazzi are most striking for their open doors and windows, designed to facilitate communication, commerce, and the circulation of air. Elsewhere in Italy, aristocrats built fortified compounds with iron bars on the doors and windows, thick walls, and mighty towers to defend the family during the factional warfare that so often raged across their cities. Such precautions were unnecessary in Venice. Nothing speaks more eloquently of the genius of the Venetian republican system than the rows of rich and utterly defenseless palazzi that still crowd the sides of the Grand Canal, and every other canal in Venice. The owners of these ornate palaces were powerful men with all of the enemies that power brings. Yet they never conceived of the idea that those enemies, who were fellow Venetians after all, would wage war against them in their homes. Venetian politics was rough and often treacherous, but it rarely turned to violence. Allegiance to the republic, rather than to any one man or dynasty, served

Venice very well.

By the fourteenth century Venetian architects began joining together two foreign influences often encountered by their well-traveled merchants. The Gothic style of pointed archways had swept through France and, by extension, the crusader states in Syria. So, too, Islamic architecture seen in Alexandria made its way into Venetian designs. The result is what is often called Venetian Gothic. It is characterized by pointed arches accentuated with various designs along an open facade. The Ducal Palace is the prime example of this style, yet it can be seen in numerous other private palaces, such as the Ca' d'Oro, with its colored stones and ornate tracteries of golden colors.

The Italian Renaissance was born in Florence in the fourteenth century and quickly traveled to Venice by way of Padua. It was characterized by a rebirth (thus the term *renaissance*) of classical models of architecture, sculpture, and literature. Renaissance artists, like Renaissance humanists,

searched the ancient past for a way forward. They rejected the flat medieval styles, perfecting instead new techniques that sought to breathe life into their art. Unlike medieval craftsmen, these new artists cultivated a celebrity status, not only signing their works, but overseeing busy studios of apprentices. In Florence the Renaissance was pioneered by artists such as Filippo Brunelleschi, Donatello, Masaccio, and Leon Battista Alberti.

Venice's adoption of these Renaissance styles was itself a remarkable break with the past, for the Venetians had always favored the sophisticated East when it came to artistic expression. But times were changing. The flame of Byzantium was flickering and even Venice turned its attention to the Western terra firma. Among the earliest Renaissance artists in Venice was Jacopo Bellini. The son of a Venetian tinsmith, Bellini worked under Gentile da Fabriano, who produced various now-lost works for the Great Council in 1408. Bellini accompanied his master to Florence,

where he remained for some years learning the new artistic techniques pioneered there. Later, Bellini traveled to Bruges, where he was introduced to the use of oil paints on canvas—a medium that would forever change Venice.

The seat of high culture in fifteenth-century Venice was not at the governmental center, but in its outskirts at Padua. There, since 1222, a university had flourished that drew the best minds in Europe and provided an excellent education for Venice's elite. After returning to Venice, Bellini set up shop in Padua with his two sons, Gentile and Giovanni. They were likely influenced by the arrival in 1443 of Donatello, who lived in Padua for about a decade. His masterwork during those years was the equestrian statue of the condottiere Erasmo da Narni, otherwise known as Gattamelata (Honey Cat). This magnificent life-size bronze was the first such statue produced since the days of ancient Rome. It remains there still, just outside the main entrance of the Basilica of St.

## Anthony.

Jacopo Bellini and his sons later moved to Venice, where they found their expertise in the new Renaissance style in high demand. Under their influence, the Venetians abandoned the fresco and adopted canvas and oil paintings. This was a matter of pure practicality. Although frescoes were generally easier to produce, they did not fare well in the humid, salty air of the Venetian lagoon. To avoid the peeling and fading that plagued Venetian frescoes, patrons began ordering the new oil paintings on canvas. Often these were giant canvases specifically constructed to cover entire walls. In the Great Council Chamber on the second floor of the Ducal Palace, fourteenth-century frescoes that depicted the Peace of Venice, the Fourth Crusade, and the Coronation of the Virgin had badly faded during the last hundred years. Gentile and Giovanni Bellini produced large canvases of the same subjects, although updated in style, which were then hung over the original frescoes.

Both Bellini brothers remained in demand in Venice and beyond. Gentile commanded extraordinary sums for his exquisite portraits. Indeed, in the 1470s he became the portrait artist of the doges. The honor of having one's image executed by Gentile Bellini was so great that the Senate employed it as a diplomatic tool. Gentile was, for example, sent to Germany, where he painted a portrait of Emperor Frederick III. He was not only well paid, but even given a knighthood by the grateful monarch. Similarly, in 1479 the Venetians sweetened the deal for peace with the Turks by agreeing to send Gentile to Constantinople to paint a portrait of the sultan. Mehmed the Conqueror, who hoped to soon rule Italy, was intrigued by the artistic innovations of the Italian Renaissance and eager to be immortalized by its techniques. Gentile's portrait of Mehmed, which today can be seen in London's National Gallery, remains a fascinating study of this enigmatic man.

Wealthy patrons for Venetian Renaissance

painters could also be found in the city's various *scuole*. Despite their name, these were pious fraternal organizations with a devotion to a particular saint or relic. Although nobles and non-nobles could join, by the fifteenth century the men of Venice's *scuole* were usually well off and politically connected. At a *scuola*'s meetings and banquets members had an opportunity to network and generally enjoy one another's company in a grand hall. The *scuole* also undertook numerous charitable works, provided some death benefits for their members, and routinely staged elaborate processions in the city. In other words, with the exception of the religious element, the *scuole* were not unlike fraternal organizations today.

The various *scuole* in Venice engaged in some competition with one another, which manifested itself in the size and lavishness of their processions and halls. They were eager to adorn their walls with the latest and most beautiful art extolling, of course, their own organizations, and

here they turned to the Bellinis. Gentile was commissioned to produce several canvases depicting scenes in the history of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista's greatest relic, a fragment of the True Cross. Around 1496 he painted *The Procession of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco*, and then a few years later *The Recovery of the Relic of the True Cross at the Bridge of San Lorenzo*. Both of these works (now in the Accademia Gallery in Venice) were commissioned to tell the story of miracles: the first about a cure and the second about a discovery. Yet the miracles in these two paintings are lost amid a busy panorama of the people and places of Venice. *The Procession* is really a depiction of the Piazza San Marco, filled with the members of the scuola and a host of other Venetians of all ranks. *The Recovery* is much the same, set on the canal of San Lorenzo. The object of both paintings is Venice itself and the people who lived there. This narrative style—filling the canvas with people, events, and structures tangential to

the subject of the work—would remain an enduring feature of Venetian Renaissance paintings. It was a marked change from Roman or Florentine methods, which populated their paintings with stylized classical architecture or ideal forms.

Giovanni Bellini had as successful a career as his brother, although he tended to focus more on religious subjects for Venice's churches and monasteries. Among his most famous are the *Transfiguration* (now in Naples) and *St. Francis in the Desert* (now in the Frick Collection in New York). After Gentile's death in 1507, Giovanni became the unquestioned master of oil painting in Venice. His studio was filled with young artists, responding to the rising demand for art among Venice's institutions and elite, and fueled by the extraordinary wealth of the city.

Giovanni Bellini's most famous pupil was Tiziano Vecelli, better known as Titian. It is impossible in so short a space to do justice to the life and artistic output of this giant of Venetian painting.

During his long life, Titian produced hundreds of canvases and acquired a fame that spanned Europe. Titian, more than any other artist, cemented Venice's reputation as a leader in art. Like his predecessors, he composed works for the government, churches, and scuole. His magnificent *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* was produced for the Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Carità. It remains there still, in the Accademia Gallery, which is the heir of the old scuola building. Titian's most famous work, though, is surely his *Assumption of the Virgin*, completed in 1518. For more than two years he labored over this massive canvas, to be hung over the high altar of the Franciscan church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, where it remains today. Titian's rich use of light and color in this masterpiece draws the observer ever upward, from the terrestrial to the angelic hosts bearing the Virgin Mary and finally to God in heaven.

As Titian's fame spread, the courts of Europe

called him to paint the portraits of leaders such as Pope Paul III and Empress Eleanor of Portugal. He was summoned to Augsburg, where he painted a series of portraits of the ruler of the largest empire in history, the Holy Roman emperor Charles V. His famous equestrian portrait of Charles V was the first of its kind, establishing a new genre of royal portrait style. Titian remained active until his death at around ninety, when he was one of thousands of victims of a plague that ravaged Venice in August 1576. So great was his fame that the government made an exception to its law about the disposal of the bodies of plague victims, which were usually dumped onto an island or into the sea. Instead, Titian was buried with full honors, as he had wished, in the glorious church of the Frari, made more glorious by his own works.

Although not as famous as Titian, his contemporary Vittore Carpaccio flourished by providing paintings for the usual clientele of patricians, scuole, and the government. Much of his work for

the Ducal Palace was lost in fires, but his famous *Lion of St. Mark*, executed in 1518 for the Treasury Office, not only survives but has become a symbol of the city to this day. Like his teacher, Gentile Bellini, Carpaccio filled his backgrounds with the sights and people of Venice. His winged lion strikes a familiar pose, one paw on the open Gospel, yet in the background can be seen the Bacino San Marco with ships, faraway campaniles, and the Ducal Palace itself. Carpaccio's biggest customers were the scuole. He painted a number of works on the life of St. Ursula for the scuola dedicated to her. Like the works of Bellini, Carpaccio's *Healing of the Madman* has precious little miraculous in it, but much that is mundane. Set in the Rialto area, the scene is filled with people, gondolas, and the old wooden Rialto Bridge. In the distance can be seen many houses and the forests of chimneys that defined Venice's cityscape then, as now.

Artistic culture in Venice benefited greatly from current events in Rome, although that was not immediately evident at the time. The lavish patronage of the pope had made Rome the center of the Renaissance. That changed in 1527 when Charles V invaded Italy and his unruly and largely Protestant soldiers sacked Rome. Talent quickly fled the Eternal City, much of it landing in Venice, where the demand for art coincided nicely with the money to pay for it. One transplant was the brilliant architect Jacopo Tatti, known as Sansovino. Doge Andrea Gritti commissioned him to repair, update, and beautify the main civic center of Venice around San Marco. The Piazza and Piazzetta were no more dirty, noisy, or disorderly than before, but Doge Gritti hoped to transform them into something akin to the beautifully decorated open spaces found in Rome. At

great expense the government began buying out the owners of stalls in the area, some of whom had done business there for centuries. In their place, Sansovino built the Biblioteca Marciana, directly across the Piazzetta from the Ducal Palace. It was later expanded to include the state mint, or Zecca. Almost immediately after its construction, the vault over the main hall of the library collapsed and, in good Venetian fashion, Sansovino was arrested and charged with gross negligence. He was forced to rebuild the structure with a flat roof at his own expense.

The mishap did not damage Sansovino's career. Indeed, he was appointed *Proto* of the Procurators of San Marco, the highest architectural position in the city, and in this capacity he redesigned several parts of the Ducal Palace. His best-known additions, though, are the stairways. He replaced the old ceremonial stairway in the palace's courtyard with the new Scala dei Giganti, a sweeping marble staircase flanked on both sides by massive statues

of Mercury and Neptune, representing trade and the sea. Sansovino also designed the famous Scala d'Oro (Golden Staircase) in the palace's east wing, leading to the chambers of the Senate and the Ten. His work extended to churches, updating their form to the latest styles. He designed, for example, San Francesco della Vigna, San Martino, San Giuliano, and San Geminiano. For twenty years Sansovino worked on the palace of the Corner family, known today simply as Ca' Grande. Like all of his designs, and those of his contemporaries, the styles of classical Rome, evoking the humanism of an ancient age, were used to replace the medieval Gothic wherever possible.

Among Venice's architects, however, none can rival the reputation and legacy of Andrea Palladio. The son of a miller in Padua, the young Andrea was apprenticed to a stonecutter, who apparently treated him badly. In 1524 he fled Padua, taking up residence in Vicenza. There he gained the attention of Gian Giorgio Trissino, a humanist who rec-

ognized the young man's talent for architecture. Since Andrea had no surname, Trissino called him Palladio, meaning "wise one." With Trissino's patronage, Palladio was able to travel to Rome to study and measure ruins, seeking to re-create the glory of the ancients. His reading there included Vitruvius's *De architectura*, a first-century treatise on Roman methods and the only architectural work to survive from antiquity. After Trissino's death in 1540, Palladio went to Venice, where he met the wealthy and powerful patrician Daniele Barbaro. Like many Venetian nobles in those days, Barbaro was a well-educated man of letters. He had served as ambassador to the court of Elizabeth I in England and as representative to the Council of Trent, which had set the reform agenda for the Catholic Church after the disruption of the Protestant Reformation. Barbaro was later made a cardinal and even elected patriarch of Aquileia. He encouraged Palladio's genius, bringing him to Rome in 1554. Two years later Barbaro and Pal-

ladio published a new edition of Vitruvius.

Palladio's architectural style, based firmly on classical models, found its most energetic employment in the magnificent mainland villas of wealthy Venetian nobles. He designed dozens of them, including Daniele Barbaro's own Villa Barbaro. The Palladian style, as it came to be known, would become the new face of Western architecture for centuries. It was, in short, a revival of antiquity. Within its solid, clean lines and towering columns, it celebrated a Roman and Greek past reborn in a new age of virtue and self-confidence. Palladio spelled out its elements and methods in his seminal work, *The Four Books on Architecture*, published in 1570. During the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Palladian architecture became the embodiment of reason in building, dispelling the superstition of the medieval "Gothic" (that is, barbarian). It spread across Europe and into the colonies, even arriving in British North America. There the well-educated country gentlemen

embraced Palladio as the architect of a new age. Thomas Jefferson read Palladio and used his methods when designing his own estate at Monticello. Likewise, the design of public structures in Washington, D.C., was largely based on Palladio's work. American government buildings so often resemble ancient temples precisely because of the architectural styles forged by Palladio.

It is no exaggeration to say that Andrea Palladio changed the face of Venice. As the classical style became the rage, he was in high demand to design new buildings or redesign old ones. In some cases he simply placed a new classical facade over a medieval structure, as at San Pietro di Castello, where the white steps, columns, and capitals replaced the bare bricks of the medieval building. In other cases he designed entirely new buildings, such as the Redentore church on Giudecca or the church of Santa Lucia (where the train station now stands). His most visible masterpiece, however, was the new church of San Giorgio Maggiore,

facing the Bacino San Marco—an unmistakable part of the Venetian cityscape. With the completion of this church the Bacino had become majestically framed much as it is today. The last element of the group, the church of Santa Maria della Salute, was added during the next century. Like the Redentore, the Salute was built in thanks for the departure of a terrible plague. Although it owed much to Palladio, the Salute, which was completed in 1687, is very much a product of the baroque period, with its elaborate decorations favored in Venice.

In 1577 a disastrous fire broke out in the Doge's Palace and quickly destroyed most of the section toward the sea, including the Great Council Chamber. The Venetian government asked architects to submit ideas for the palace's repair, reconstruction, or rebuilding. Given the tastes of the time, it is not surprising that most architects considered the fire to be a providential opportunity to

tearing the whole thing down and starting fresh with a new, classical structure. In another city, one ruled by a monarch with a penchant for the arts, Palladio would surely have had his way. But Venice was a republic, and the people of Venice—steeped in a conservative commercial culture that valued stability—would hear nothing of such alterations to their house. The Ducal Palace was a cherished part of their history. It belonged to them and they would not give it up.

While the architects and officials argued, the Great Council held its meetings at the Arsenale, in a warehouse used to store the fleet's oars. The members were naturally eager to see things moved along. At last the decision was made to repair the Ducal Palace, restoring the lost portions just as they had been. It was also decided to remove the prison from the palace, building a new structure across the canal for that purpose. To avoid the problem of having to cross the canal with guards and criminals, the famous Bridge of

Sighs was extended between the two buildings. Although decorated ornately on its exterior, the Bridge of Sighs was meant to be a maximum-security construction.

The restoration of the Great Council Chamber posed a problem when it came to decoration, for the paintings and frescoes depicting the Peace of Venice, the Fourth Crusade, and the Coronation of the Virgin had been lost in the fire. So long had these scenes decorated the council room that it seemed unthinkable not to replace them. The large canvases that today adorn the walls of that vast room are the results of a major government project to restore what was lost to the flames. Certainly the most spectacular is *Paradise* by Jacopo Robusti, otherwise known as Tintoretto. The largest oil painting on canvas in the world, *Paradise* dominates the head of the room. Tintoretto, who was in his seventies, prayed that he would be awarded the commission, saying that he hoped to experience paradise by painting it. He painted

the massive seventy-four- by-thirty-foot canvas largely in sections at the Scuola della Misericordia, which was not far from his house. The pieces were then transported to the Ducal Palace, where they were stitched together and the final work was done. Because the aged Tintoretto found it difficult to climb ladders, his son, Domenico, completed many of the final details. While Tintoretto kept the Virgin Mary as the focal point of his work, he greatly expanded its depiction of heaven and its inhabitants. Indeed, the work consists of a great sea of faces, most painted from live subjects, who people the heavenly realm. It was a constant reminder to the assembled council members of the reward for good and honorable service to God and to Venice.

As his name suggests, Tintoretto was the son of a dyer. When he was young and had demonstrated a talent for art, his father placed him as a pupil in the workshop of Titian. For some reason, Titian took a dislike to Tintoretto and within a

few weeks the pupil had departed to begin his own career. Without Titian's connections (and, indeed, with the active dislike of Titian's partisans), Tintoretto had to be particularly aggressive in seeking contracts. He was a whirlwind of energy, bidding for projects wherever he found them, and there were many projects to be had. Unlike Titian, Tintoretto hardly ever left Venice, being always busy with the next job. The Scuola Grande di San Rocco numbered among his best customers.

Tintoretto's muscular style typified the Mannerism that was popular during the High Renaissance, but his use of color and light was unique to him. The speed with which he produced his paintings won him plenty of contracts with the Venetian government, particularly after the fire of 1577 when there was a rush to restore the governmental complex. These included the famous *Bacchus with Ariadne Crowned by Venice* and *The Forge of Vulcan*. Tintoretto's political work shared a style with other Venetian artists, such as Paolo

Veronese—a style evident on the walls of the Ducal Palace, where there are many pictures that include multiple doges, but few portraits of a single doge. As citizens of a republic, Venetians were careful never to extol one man too much. This was a marked departure from artistic subjects elsewhere in Europe, which often depicted a king, pope, or other ruler in grand style. Instead, the focus of the paintings in the Ducal Palace was on the institutions and people of Venice. Occasionally, Venetians would adopt the ancient Roman practice of depicting their republic as an allegory. This can be seen marvelously in Palma il Giovane's *Allegory of the War of the League of Cambrai* (1582) or that masterpiece of nostalgia, *Neptune Offering to Venice the Riches of the Sea* (ca. 1745) by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. Tintoretto's own contribution to this genre, *Venice, Queen of the Sea*, can be still seen on the ceiling of the Senate chamber.

The sixteenth century also saw the creation of Venice's most famous bridge, and the only one

before the modern era to span the Grand Canal—the Rialto Bridge. Because of the frenetic activity at the Rialto markets, a bridge had been a necessity since at least the thirteenth century. Several wooden bridges had been built at Rialto over the centuries, each with a pulley system to allow sailing vessels bearing their cargoes to pass through. This was no longer a consideration in the sixteenth century, however, since the large galleons docked and unloaded their goods at warehouses near the Bacino San Marco. The Venetian government, therefore, announced a competition to design a new stone bridge—one that need only be high enough to allow local traffic and state galleys to pass under it. The greatest architects of the day, including Palladio and Michelangelo, submitted proposals. But the government declined to fund a work of art in the middle of a marketplace unless it had some commercial application. Instead it gave the contract to Antonio da Ponte, the lead architect overseeing the restoration of the

Ducal Palace after the 1577 fire. His design was not only graceful but useful. With its three separate pathways, it could move traffic quickly and efficiently. Its market stalls, which faced inward toward the central path, allowed the government to rent out new space in an area in which property values were astronomical. In short, the Rialto Bridge perfectly answered the Venetians' desire for both beauty and profit, while maintaining the honorable traditions of the past.

The extraordinary demand for artistic and architectural products among Renaissance Venetians was fueled by two things they had in abundance: education and money. The money came, as it always had, through international commerce and trade. Yet by the sixteenth century much of Venice's wealth was also generated by a boom in local industry. The wars on the mainland had played havoc with Italian craftsmen, who found it difficult to conduct business amid the cannon fire and raids of mercenary armies. Venice, a city that

no enemy had ever captured, seemed extremely attractive for those looking for a new place of business. After all, the extensive trade routes that terminated in Venice ensured that any craftsman could find the materials that he needed to produce finished goods. Populous Venice also had plenty of ready, sometimes educated workers.

The largest industry to take root in sixteenth-century Venice was woolen textiles, followed closely by silk production. By 1600, in a clear sign of the times, more people worked in the silk industry in Venice than built boats. Numerous other specialty industries also developed in the lagoon, including leatherwork and jewelry. Lace made on the island of Burano soon became coveted across Europe, just as it remains among tourists today. This century also saw the rapid development of the glass industry on Murano. Venetian glass gained a wide reputation for excellence and the artistic skill of Murano's glassblowers became legendary. Aside from producing glassware and

decorative items, the craftsmen also created precision hourglasses, crucial in an age of oceanic voyages.

Education levels in Venice had always been among the highest in Europe. Merchants, after all, must be able to read, write, and count. By the late fourteenth century a humanistic education, preferably at the University of Padua, was becoming a standard for Venetian patrician men. Humanism thrived on a diet of classical literature—a commodity that was extremely expensive before the fifteenth century. However, around 1450 Johannes Gutenberg created the first movable-type printing press in Europe. The printing press dramatically reduced the cost of books, which previously had to be copied by hand. Coupled with new techniques in paper production, the printing press ushered in a new age of education, communication, and thought that would ripple through the centuries. Few people in medieval Europe learned to read because there was nothing for

them to read. The printing press changed that.

Movable-type print was invented in China, yet there it had nothing like the effects that it would have on Europe. The reason is simple. In China, printing presses were controlled by the imperial government and used for the needs of a complex bureaucracy. In Europe, the printing press was controlled by no one. It was, instead, an entrepreneurial opportunity. Anyone with money and some idea of which books would sell could purchase a printing press and set up shop. For Europeans, therefore, printing became a craft, not unlike making barrels, caulking ships, or painting portraits. Because it had the potential for great profits, printing expanded rapidly.

It should not be too surprising, then, that printing soon arrived and flourished in Venice. The Venetian government was, by its nature, business friendly, and certainly Venice was safe. By the sixteenth century, printers also had to contend with local governments or church tribunals, both Cath-

olic and Protestant. While the Inquisition in Venice paid attention to what flowed from the city's presses, it tended to move slowly and often gave the publisher the benefit of the doubt. Paper and ink were readily available in Venice, along with the technical know-how to build and maintain machines. Most importantly, the high literacy rate among Venice's elite sustained a strong local market for books.

By 1500 nearly a quarter of all publications in Europe were produced in Venice. The most famous, and probably the largest, press in the city was that of Aldus Manutius. A humanist from Bassano, Manutius invested much of his fortune in the publication of Greek classics for the growing audience of humanists in Europe. He established his press in Venice not only because it had become a center for printing, but because it had a large library of Greek manuscripts from Constantinople, as well as a population of Greeks who could help with their publication. The Aldine Press soon

gained a reputation for producing the best scholarly works in Europe. In 1501 Manutius adopted the now-famous symbol of a dolphin around an anchor for his press. This image became so associated with excellence in publishing that it was quickly copied by presses everywhere—and, indeed, until recently was the logo of Doubleday. The organization and capacity of the Aldine Press were truly extraordinary. It employed dozens of printers, scholars, and proofreaders.

Among the latter was the young Desiderius Erasmus, who would go on to become one of the most famous humanists of his age. As he looked back on his first job, though, Erasmus had little good to say about it. He complained of the long hours, poor working conditions, stingy bosses, and bad food (“a morsel of shellfish caught in the sewer”). Whatever Erasmus’s complaints about the Aldine Press, it seems to have taken the young scholar in stride. The busy workshop was always in need of help. According to one of Erasmus’s

biographers, the Aldine Press had a sign above its door that read:

Whoever you are, Aldus earnestly begs you to state your business in the fewest possible words and be gone—unless like Hercules to weary Atlas, you would lend a helping hand. There will always be work enough for you, and all who come this way.

To increase sales, Manutius developed several innovations that fundamentally shaped Western book production. During the Middle Ages, books came in all sizes, but in general they tended to be large. Since most books were religious, it made sense to produce larger codices designed to stay put on an altar or at a table in a monastic library. Since the first printed books competed for sales with traditional manuscripts, it is not surprising that they, too, were large. The Gutenberg Bible, for example, is 12 x 17.5 inches. Most printed books

were produced in *quarto*, which meant that a large sheet of paper was printed with four pages on each side and then folded into four parts, cut, and bound into a book. Manutius wanted to bring the size, and thereby the cost, of the book down. He therefore produced the world's first *octavo* book—eight pages were printed on each sheet, which was then folded one more time before cutting and binding. This produced a book not much larger than a modern paperback. To fit more print on each page, the Aldine Press adopted a new compact, slanted script, later (and still) called italic. These smaller books were not only cheaper but also portable. The octavo was a huge success—so much so that it was immediately copied by other presses across Europe.

By the end of the sixteenth century Venice had firmly established itself as a center for arts and culture. The rude community of fishermen, sailors, and merchants had grown up. In later centuries Venetians would continue to innovate in

other cultural fields, particularly in music. However, on the canvas, the great period of innovation was winding down. Giants like Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese proved difficult acts to follow. By the eighteenth century the epicenter of European culture had clearly shifted to Paris. Still, Venice remained important. Tiepolo, who perfected the ceiling painting, was in great demand outside Venice.

As European wealth grew in the eighteenth century to unprecedented levels, art collectors began to cast their gaze on Venice. The Venetian practice of using canvases rather than frescoes seemed good fortune to art lovers with deep pockets, who began buying up Renaissance masterpieces from Venetian families and churches that were down on their luck. The problem became so acute that the Council of Ten ordered a detailed inventory of all canvas paintings in Venice and strictly regulated their purchase by foreigners, a desperate attempt to hold on to a legacy that was slipping out

of their fingers.

The greatest of all of Venice's artistic masterpieces, however, was Venice itself. The city of the lagoon, adorned by some of the greatest artists of all time, had become a showplace like none other. Wealthy visitors in the eighteenth century, many of whom were English tourists, paid large sums for newly executed paintings of the city. To meet the demand, an industry of Venice-scape painters arose—one that still flourishes today. The most famous of these was Giovanni Antonio Canal, known as Canaletto. An accomplished landscape artist, Canaletto turned his considerable talents to producing highly realistic scenes of Venice. English tourists snapped up his works, bringing them home to remember their trip. When war on the Continent in the 1740s disrupted English travel to Venice, Canaletto moved to England to be closer to his clientele. Although his early scenes were painted from life, his later ones obviously were not. Indeed, Canaletto produced many capriccios

—fantastic scenes of an imagined Venice with monumental statues, classical temples, and non-existent bridges. His other works, though, still preserve the image of the city in the eighteenth century—an image that is surprisingly similar to the Venice of today.

The beauty of Venice's landscape is unusual, for it is an entirely artificial one. Imposing buildings seem to float on a water canvas that both frames and reflects their splendor. It is an image frozen in time—a Renaissance city that remains unchanged, unmoved. Its magnificence is an enduring monument to a wealthy, powerful, and culturally vibrant republic at the peak of its history. And yet, unlike the monument of stone and water, that greatness would not last.

At the age of one thousand, Venice was entering old age.