



# HS 488ven: *The History of Venice*

Huntington University, Spring 2007, Loew 153, 1:00 pm

Dr Michelson

"Streets flooded. Please advise."

Humorist Robert Benchley, Telegram from Venice to his editor

## I. Introduction

Venice has been enveloped in myth for a long time. For much of its unparalleled thousand year history, Venice saw itself as the successor to the ancient Roman Republic. The Venetian constitution was supposedly designed as a deliberate continuation of the Roman tradition by freedom-loving refugees fleeing the barbarian invasions to the safety of the lagoon. Historian James Grubb writes: "the prevailing vision of Venice has been remarkably consistent and persuasive and has been transmitted substantially unaltered in guidebooks and histories since its full articulation in the sixteenth century: a city founded in liberty and never thereafter subjected to foreign domination; a maritime, commercial economy; a unified and civic-minded patriciate, guardian of the common good; a society intensely pious yet ecclesiastically independent; a loyal and contented populace; a constitution constraining disruptive forces in a thousand-year harmony and constancy of purpose; a republic of wisdom and benevolence, provider of fair justice and a high degree of toleration."<sup>1</sup>

Venice, "La Serenissima"—the Most Serene Republic—was a world power by the Middle Ages and perhaps the richest state in Europe. Its empire had a population of 3,500,000 (larger than the British Empire), ruling "one quarter and a half of one quarter of the Roman Empire." Its naval Arsenale was the largest industrial operation in Europe, with over 16,000 workers and able to build an entire warship in a single day. At the same time, it was the powerhouse of European and world art and architecture.

---

<sup>1</sup>James Grubb, "When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 58 (1986), pp. 43-44. See also Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); and David Robey and John Easton Law, "The Venetian Myth and the 'De Republica Veneta' of Pier Paolo Vergerio," *Rinascimento*, Vol. 15 (1975), pp. 3-59.

When Venice suddenly collapsed in the face of Napoleon's armies in 1797, it was a shock to all of Europe. This was poignantly summarized in Wordsworth's poem "On the Extinction of the Venetian Republic" (1802, 1807):

"Once did She hold the gorgeous east in fee;  
And was the safeguard of the west: the worth

Of Venice did not fall below her birth,  
Venice, the eldest Child of Liberty.  
She was a maiden City, bright and free;  
No guile seduced, no force could violate;  
And, when she took unto herself a Mate,  
She must espose the everlasting Sea.  
And what if she had seen those glories fade,  
Those titles vanish, and that strength decay;  
Yet shall some tribute of regret be paid  
When her long life hath reached its final day;  
Men are we, and must grieve when even the Shade  
Of that which once was great, is passed away."



The same sentiment was expressed in Lord Byron's *Childe Harold* (1817) (Canto IV, St. 1):

"I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs,  
A palace and a prison on each hand;  
I saw from out the wave of her structure's rise  
As from the stroke of the enchanter's wand:  
A thousand years their cloudy wings expand  
Around me, and a dying glory smiles  
O'er the far times when many a subject land  
Looked to the winged Lion's marble pines,  
Where Venice sate in state,  
throned on her hundred isles."

Part of the mythos of Venice, of course, was its unique location. "Venice was born in the water, Venice was born of the water. Today as yesterday, it triumphs over the water. At least this is the destiny that Venetian history assigned to the city."<sup>2</sup> This was because as a "cluster of islands scattered across the waters of a vast lagoon at the head of the Adriatic Sea and improbably melded into a civic entity, Venice invariably inspired hyperbole. In the early years of the sixteenth century, a Venetian patrician affirmed that 'for a certain novelty of placement and opportune position, it was by itself the only form in all the universe so miraculously disposed.' Some years later, a visitor exclaimed: 'I

---

<sup>2</sup>Elisabeth Crouzet-Pavan, *Venice Triumphant: The Horizons of a Myth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. ix.

have seen the impossible in the impossible."<sup>3</sup> This was echoed by the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "White swan of cities, slumbering in thy nest, So wonderfully built among the reeds, Of the lagoon, that fences thee and feeds, As sayeth thy old historian and thy guest!" This romantic Venice is composed, in fact, of some 117 small islands, 150 canals, with nearly 400 bridges.



Not only its location, history, and institutions were evocative of myth, so was its art and architecture. This was immortalized in print by one of the most influential and controversial art books of modern times, John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* (three volumes; 1851-1853). Ruskin wrote: "The Ducal palace of Venice contains the three elements in exactly equal proportions—the Roman, Lombard, and Arab. It is the central building of the world. The reader will now begin to understand something of the importance of the study of the edifices of a city which concludes, within the circuit of some seven or eight miles, the field of contest between the three pre-eminent architectures of the world:—each architecture expressing a condition of religion..."<sup>4</sup> This is, of course, an extreme claim, but a case can be made for the influence of Venetian architecture and art that goes far beyond the city on the lagoon.

Venetian art and architecture are, thus, a product of Venice's unique place historically, geographically, and culturally. Part of the Italian West, but looking East to Constantinople. Part of the Byzantine sphere, but too far West to be dominated from the East. Its trade ties with the South brought it into contact with Muslim culture as well. As Ruskin noted, these influences can be seen in the San Marco Basilica, neither West nor East nor South and yet part of each. It also meant that Venice harbors a wild variety of art from Byzantine to Baroque.

The course will consider the works of several major Venetian visual artists, including the ever-popular "anonymous", Paolo Veneziano (1300-1362); Gentile (1429-1507) and Giovanni Bellini (1430-1516); Vittore Carpaccio (1460-1525); Giorgione (1476-1510); Titian (1487-1576); Tintoretto (1518-1594); Paolo Veronese (1528-1588); Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770); Canaletto (1697-1768); and Francesco Guardi (1712-1793). We will also consider the unique work of Jacopo de' Barbari (nd). In architecture, we will look specifically at the work of Mauro Coducci (1440-1504);

---

<sup>3</sup>Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (Upper Saddle River NY: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 15.

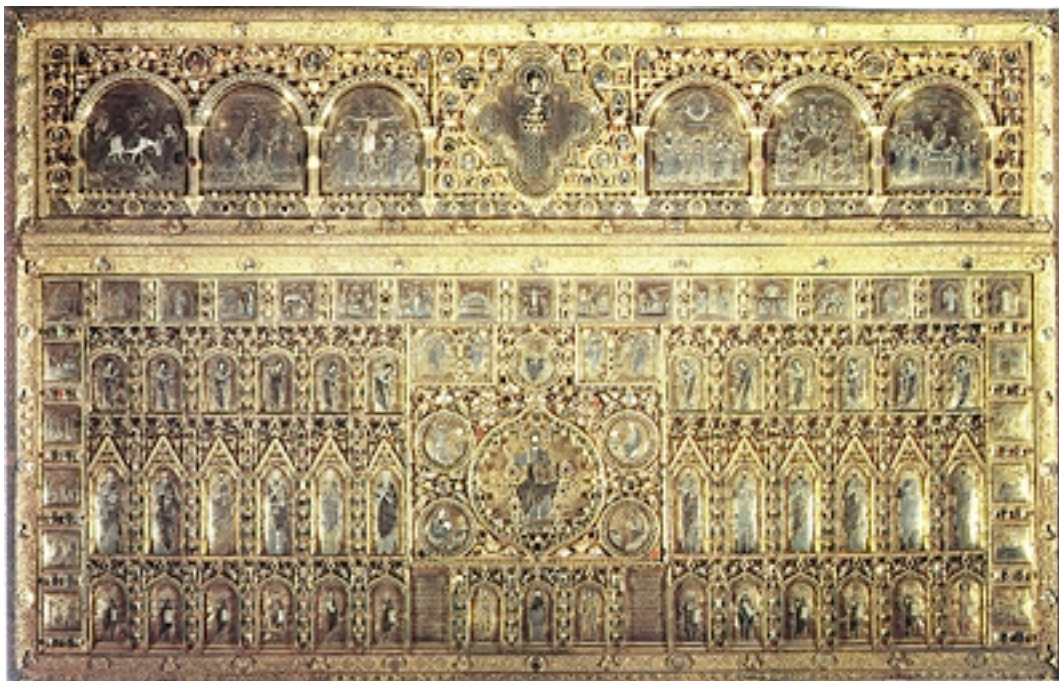
<sup>4</sup>John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, edited and abridged by J. G. Links (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 19-20.

Michele Sanmicheli (1487-1559); (Jacopo Sansovino (1468-1570); Andrea Palladio (1508-1580); and Baldassare Longhena (1598-1682).

Musicians associated with Venice include Giovanni Gabrieli (ca. 1555–1612), Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741, and Baldassare Galuppi (1706-1785), and Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), who though not Venetian had several works premiered at Venice's opera house, La Fenice. Also connected in various ways with Venice were Richard Wagner (1813-1883) and Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971).

Venetian theatre was the birthplace of the Commedia dell'Arte. We will look at the work of Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) and Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806).

From the rich literary heritage of Venice, we will be touching on the work of Pietro Aretino (1492-1556), Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554), Veronica Franco (1546-1591), Paolo Sarpi (1552-1623), Leon Modena (1571-1648) and Sara Copio Sullam (1592-1641).



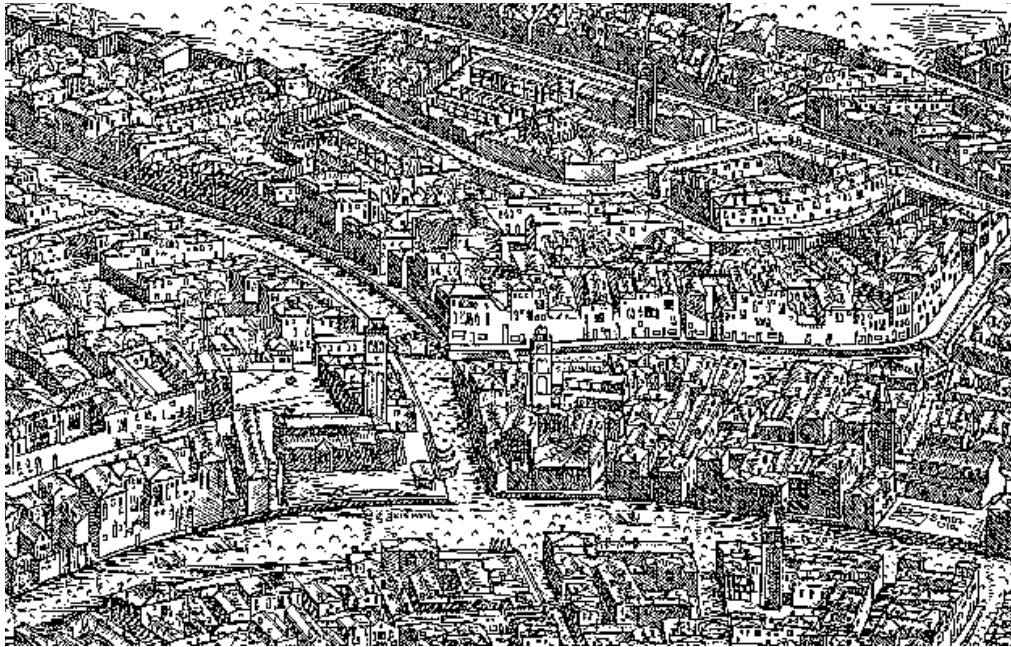
Henry James famously wrote over a century ago about Venice: "There is nothing left to discover or to describe, and originality is completely impossible."<sup>5</sup> This didn't prevent James and hundreds of others from saying it anyway and continuing to say it today. Amusingly enough, this complaint had been voiced as early as the late 15th century by Pietro Casola, who wrote that Venice was a place "about which so much has been said and written...that it appears to me there is nothing left to say."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Henry James, *Italian Hours* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 290.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Robert C. Davis and Garry R. Marvin, *Venice: The Tourist Maze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 15.

Following its end as a republic in 1797, Venice morphed into a living museum and by the 20th century had become, in part, a kind of theme park. For many, "there is no *real* Venice here....visitors often fail to see or intuit such mundanity....Venice is not a real city, with a real city's inhabitants and constraints, but a backdrop and a stage for one's gaze, emotions, and passions."<sup>7</sup>

Detail of Cannaregio and the Jewish Ghetto (upper right) from Jacopo de'Barbari's 1500 Map



Our study of Venice will try to come to grips, to a greater or lesser degree, with all of these mythical and "real" Venices. We will study and analyze the history of Venice from its founding to the present, with a heavy interdisciplinary emphasis, including cultural history (architecture, art, literature, music, theatre), geography, and economics.

Our work will be organized both chronologically and topically. We will begin with a look at the unique geographical situation of Venice. Then we will follow the thread of Venetian history in four sections: the rise of Venice (to 1205), Venice Triumphant (1205-1530), the decline of Venice (1530-1797), and Venice from Museum to Theme Park (1797 to the present).

At the same time, we will examine various themes: the "myth(s) of Venice", Venice and Byzantium, Crusading Venice, Religious Venice: Christian and Jewish, Architectural Venice, Artistic Venice, Literary Venice, Printing in Venice, Musical Venice, Theatrical Venice, Shakespearian Venice, Women in Venice, Body Parts Venice, among others. It should be fun.

---

<sup>7</sup>Davis and Marvin, *Tourist Maze* 2004, pp. 1-2.

## II. Required Readings

John Julius Norwich  
*A History of Venice*  
New York: Vintage Books, 1989, 736 pp.

Martin Garrett  
*Venice: A Cultural and Literary Companion*  
New York: Interlink Publishing Group, 2001, 243 pp.

Jan Morris  
*The World of Venice*, revised edition  
New York: Harvest Books/HBJ, 1995, 320 pp.

Pamela Fortini Brown  
*Art and Life in Renaissance Venice*, second edition  
Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice Hall, 2005, 176 pp.

Deborah Howard  
*The Architectural History of Venice*, Revised and enlarged edition  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004, 368 pp.



## III. Evaluation

1. Quizzes, Work sheets, Discussion, Written Work, etc.: 20% of the final grade.
2. Since this is a senior level class, there will be a major course term paper on a topic to be decided by mutual consent with the instructor. More exciting details later. The Term Paper will be 20% of the final grade.
3. Three Exams: 20% of the grade each.
4. Scale:
  - A=90-100
  - B+=87-89; B=80-86
  - C=70-79
  - D+=65-69; D-=60-64
  - F=59 or lessPluses and Minuses may be awarded for borderline cases.

## IV. Attendance

1. Absences will result in the loss of points for that particular day.
2. Papers and assignments handed in late will be penalized 10%.

## V. Conferences

Students should feel free to make appointments for consultation as needed. You may check my schedule at [www.huntington.edu/history/pmichelson/calendar.htm](http://www.huntington.edu/history/pmichelson/calendar.htm). EMail provides another handy way of keeping in touch: [pmichelson@huntington.edu](mailto:pmichelson@huntington.edu). My office is Loew Center 272; my office phone is 359-4242; my home phone is 356-5518; and my Home Page can be found at [www.huntington.edu/history/pmichelson](http://www.huntington.edu/history/pmichelson).

Aerial View of Piazza San Marco from Google Earth

