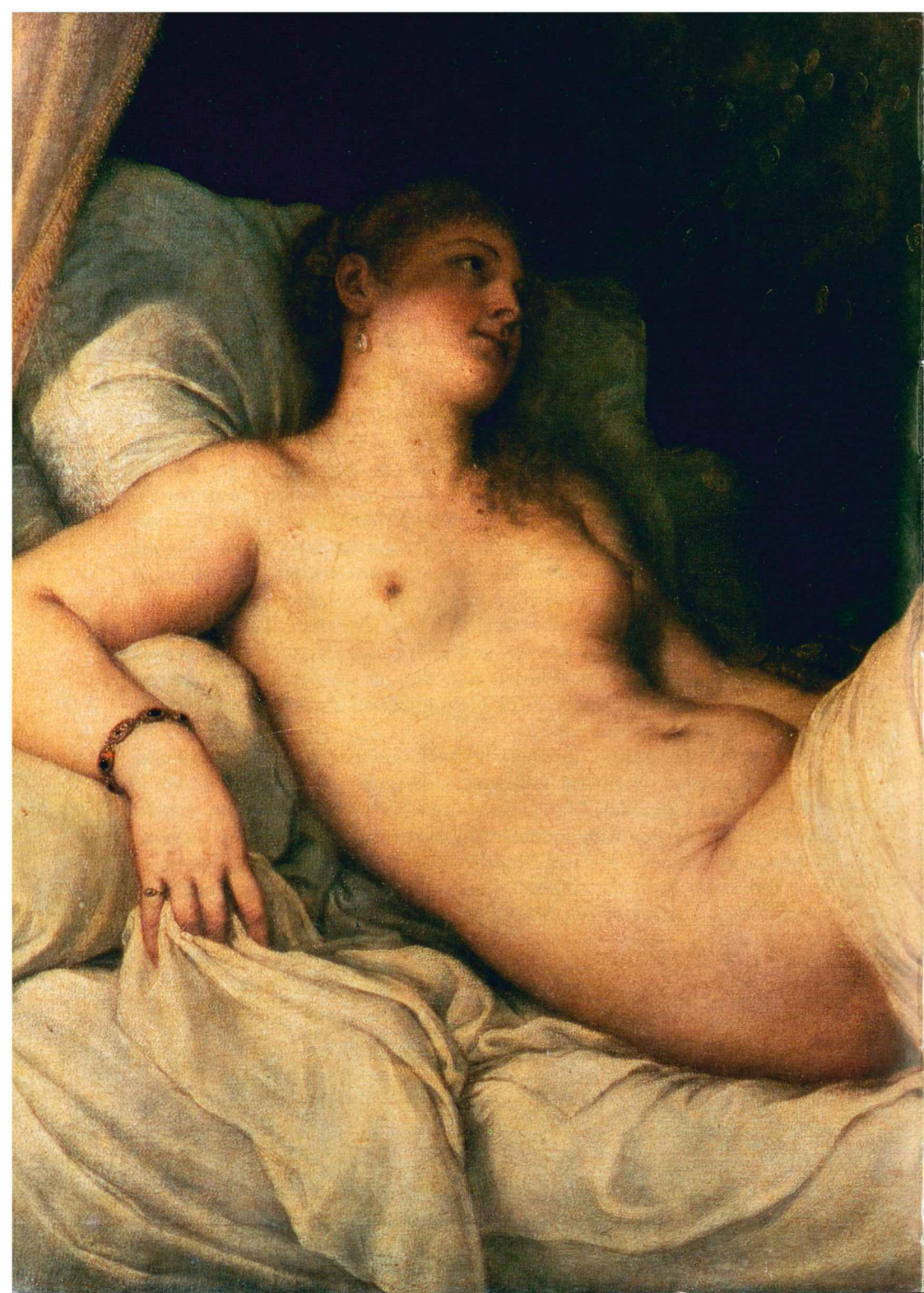




Painting in Renaissance Venice

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Introduction

In the winter of 1545–6 the great Venetian painter Titian paid his first and only visit to Rome. Part of his reason for making the long journey from Venice was to deliver his picture of *Danaë* (Pls 1, 4) to his patron Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, grandson of the reigning pope, Paul III.¹ By this date Titian was middle-aged and had long been celebrated as the presiding genius of Venetian painting. As if to justify this reputation to his Roman public, the artist displayed in his picture many of the characteristics that had already come to be associated – and have been associated ever since – with Venetian painting in general.²

Probably the most immediately striking of these characteristics is the radiant warmth and intensity of the colour. Although in this particular work Titian employs a relatively limited range of hues, the overall effect is still one of great chromatic richness and splendour. Complementing this is the treatment of light which, by playing over the surfaces of the forms, and even by seeming to glow from within them, enhances the illusion of sensuous physical presence; while at the same time, the equally vibrant areas of shadow evoke a hidden, poetic dimension beyond the world of the senses. The air is thick, edges are blurred, and forms – like that of the golden cloud, which spills down coins onto the lap of the reclining girl – seem constantly on the point of change. All these effects are achieved thanks to the artist's unprecedented ability to exploit the full range of resources – expressive and aesthetic, as well as technical – accessible to the medium of oil painting.

The unmistakably Venetian qualities of the *Danaë* are more, not less, evident for the fact that Titian has taken account of the Roman destination of his picture by paying homage to classical antiquity in the figure of Cupid, and to Michelangelo – the much-venerated leader of the central Italian artistic tradition – in the figure of Danaë herself. The reclining pose,

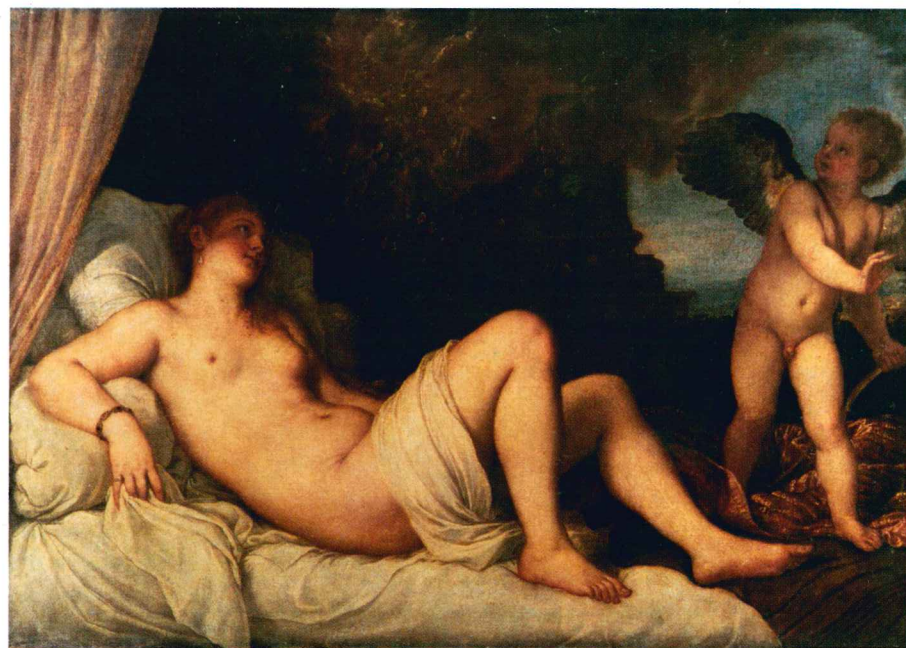
1 Titian. Detail of Pl. 4.

2(right) After Michelangelo. *Leda*. Canvas, 105 × 141 cm. London, National Gallery.



3(below) Vasari. *Patience* (1542). Panel, 77 × 184 cm. Rome, private collection.

with one knee drawn upwards, is clearly related to that of Michelangelo's now-lost painting of *Leda* (Pl. 2), and more generically, to his *Night* in the Medici chapel in Florence.³ Michelangelo had been living in Rome since 1534, and Titian must have known that he would meet him there. Indeed, the biographer of both artists, Giorgio Vasari, was later to provide a detailed description of his visit to see the *Danaë* in the company of Michelangelo, and of the great sculptor's reaction to Titian's picture. According to Vasari, Michelangelo had much praise for its colouring (*colorito*), naturalness and power to entrance. But he deplored its defective *disegno* – that is to say, its draughtsmanship, and the quality of its design.⁴



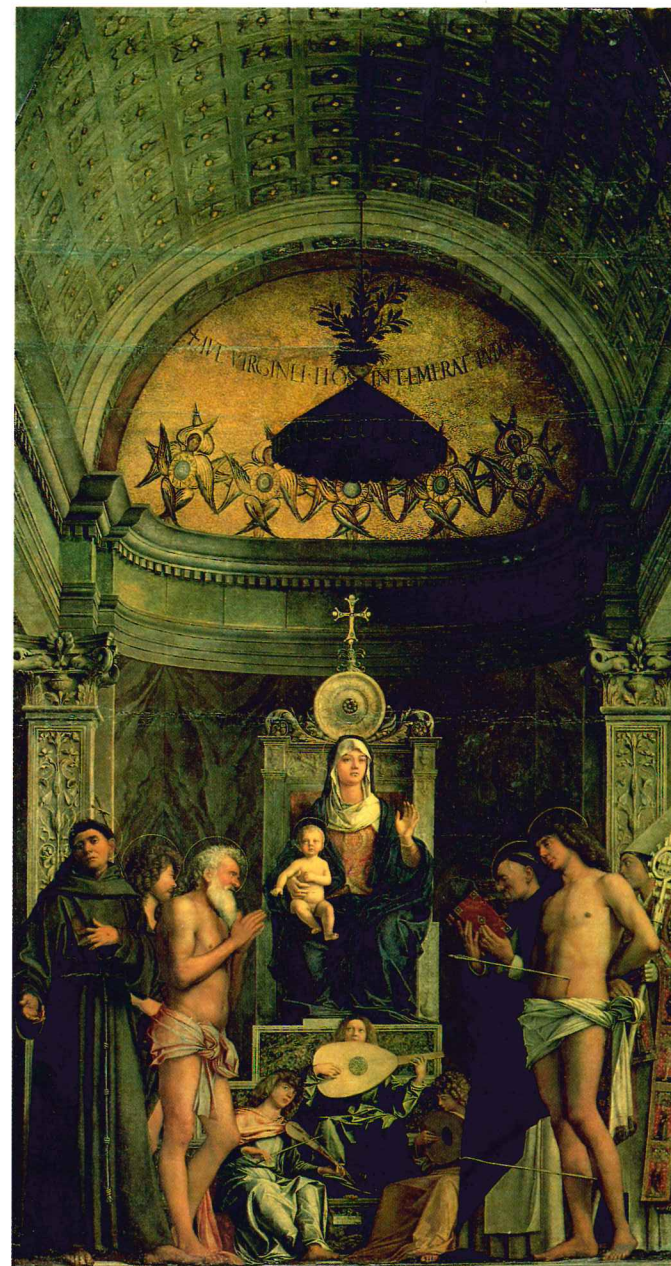
4 Titian. *Danaë* (1545–6). Canvas, 120 × 172 cm. Naples, Museo di Capodimonte.

There is some truth in this criticism, even if one does not share the aesthetic preconception on which it is based. The girl's left leg, for example, is not correctly drawn according to academic standards; and the picture lacks the taut, Michelangelesque design and sculptural surfaces of much of central Italian painting of the period, including that of Vasari himself. In his allegorical representation of *Patience* (Pl. 3), painted four years earlier for the ceiling of a Venetian private palace,⁵ Vasari had typically composed his main figure as if it were a piece of relief sculpture; and, as in Michelangelo's *Leda*, the limbs are artificially arranged parallel to the picture plane, and flesh and draperies alike are treated as if carved in marble. Clearly, instead of accommodating himself to local tradition, Vasari sought to provide his Venetian hosts with an almost programmatic demonstration of what he regarded as the superior artistic style of Rome and Florence. Conversely, Titian in the *Danaë* – and also in the triple portrait he painted in Rome of *Pope Paul III and his Grandsons* (Pl. 148) – set out to dazzle his non-Venetian audience with his own, characteristically Venetian, style, based on colour, light and sensuous realism.

Titian was not the first to introduce these qualities into Venetian painting. There obviously exist great differences of style and mood between the *Danaë*, a pagan mythology, and a major religious work such as the S. Giobbe altarpiece (Pl. 5), painted more than sixty years earlier by Giovanni Bellini, Titian's predecessor as leader of the Venetian school. But in contrast to the work of later fifteenth-century Florentine painters such as Botticelli, with their relatively cool colour range and emphasis on sharp, clear outlines, Bellini's picture already shows the warm, atmospheric radiance of Titian's *Danaë*. Similarly, too, while revealing the material substance and surface properties of the forms, the pictorial light also serves to evoke a transcendental world of the spirit. In this case, it is as if the fictive chapel in which the saints stand is filled with the presence of God.

As is suggested by the inclusion in the S. Giobbe altarpiece of the golden semi-dome, with its Byzantine-style mosaics, Bellini was in turn deeply conscious of local artistic tradition, which by the Renaissance period was already several centuries old. It is important to emphasise the longevity and continuity of this tradition at the outset of this book, since the relatively short period covered by it was one of constant artistic innovation and change. In 1440, when Bellini was still a child, the prevailing pictorial style in Venice was still that of the late Gothic; in 1590, sixteen years after Titian's death, European painting stood on the threshold of the baroque. It will be one of the main tasks of the book to trace how painting in Venice developed during the intervening century and a half, often in response to a wide range of influences from outside. Indeed, part of the greatness of Venetian Renaissance painting lies precisely in its dynamism, in its capacity for constant self-renewal. But another part lies in its inner strength, in its capacity to absorb outside influences and to assimilate them into its own distinctive tradition; and an underlying theme of the book will accordingly be this continuing awareness among Venetian painters of their own artistic heritage.

When visiting Rome, Titian had more than his own professional reputation at stake. As quasi-official painter to the Venetian government, he was in a sense also acting as an ambassador, charged with the responsibility of upholding the dignity of the Most Serene Republic in a foreign capital. Although Titian's status made him in many ways exceptional among Venetian painters, all of them would have shared a sense of patriotic mission that went beyond purely artistic considerations. Like all Venetians, the painters would have felt a keen pride in the uniqueness of their city, as symbolised visually by its wonderful physical situation in the middle of the sea, and as manifested in its unique and apparently unchanging political,



5 Giovanni Bellini. S. Giobbe altarpiece (c.1480). Panel, 471 × 258 cm. Venice, Accademia.

religious and social institutions. To the extent that these physical and cultural conditions provided the background against which Venetian painters lived and worked, it is worth briefly looking at them in more detail here, before we turn in subsequent chapters to look at the way in which painting in Venice developed during the Renaissance.

Geography

Then as now the city of Venice, built in the sea, with canals for streets, was a wonder of the world (Pl. 6). A reaction typical of many foreign visitors is that expressed in 1494 by the French ambassador, Philippe de Commynes:

I marvelled greatly to see the placement of this city and to see so many church towers and monasteries, and such large buildings, and all in the water; and the people have no other form of locomotion except by these barges, of which I believe thirty thousand might be found.

6 F. Hogenberg. *Perspective View of the City of Venice and its Lagoon* (from G. Braun, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, published in Cologne, 1572).

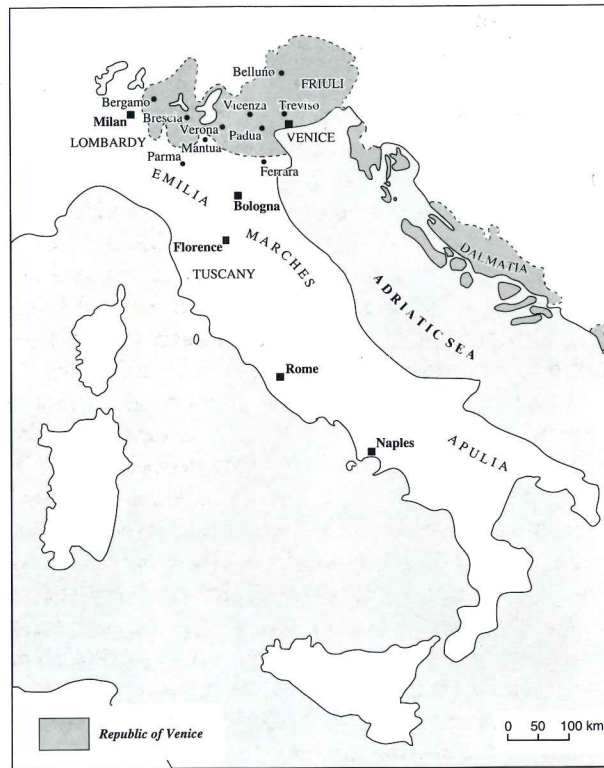


7 Carpaccio. *Miracle at Rialto* (1494). Canvas, 365 × 389 cm. Venice, Accademia.

Commynes goes on to describe the richly painted and marble-clad palaces that lined the Grand Canal, which he calls 'the most beautiful street in the world'; and he ends by declaring Venice to be 'the most sumptuous city which I have ever seen'.⁶ A striking visual complement to this verbal evocation of the wealth and bustle of Renaissance Venice, as well as of its extraordinary physical situation, is provided by Carpaccio's *Miracle at Rialto* (Pl. 7), which happens to have been painted in the very year of Commynes's visit.

The unlikely site of Venice, essentially consisting of an archipelago of small islands and mud flats, lying a mile or two off the Italian mainland,

8 Map of Italy, showing the extent of Venetian territorial possessions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.



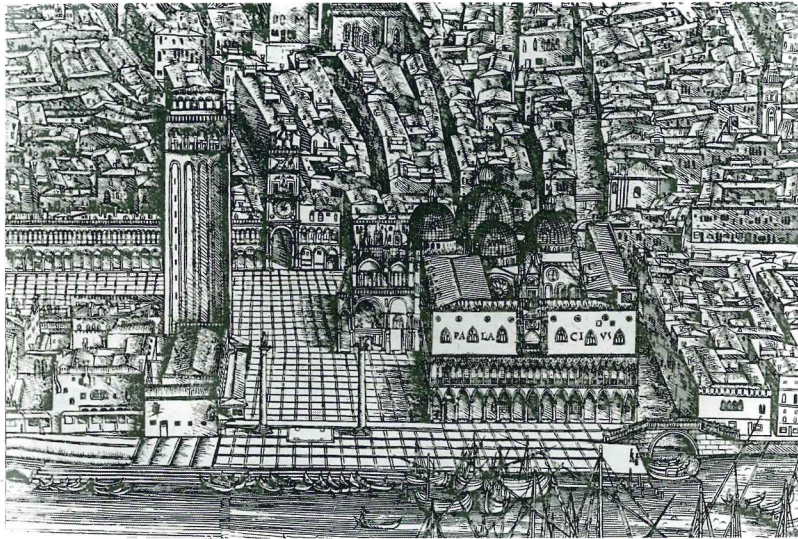
was originally chosen as a place of refuge by a colony of fishermen during the barbarian invasions that accompanied the collapse of the Roman empire. But during the course of the centuries, Venetian ships travelled increasingly far afield; and in its position in the north-western corner of the Adriatic Sea, Venice was ideally placed to become a centre of trade between east and west, north and south (Pl. 8). The conspicuous wealth admired by Commynes in 1494 was based on almost a millennium of commercial activity, which sent Venetian galleys variously to Alexandria and Beirut in the eastern Mediterranean, to Constantinople and into the Black Sea, round the southern tip of Italy to Sicily and north Africa, and westwards through the straits of Gibraltar to north-western Europe. To protect their commercial interests, the Venetians gradually built up a farflung empire, originally consisting of key ports and islands en route for the Levant, but by the early fifteenth century also covering extensive

territories on the Italian mainland, including all of the present-day Veneto, and also the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo in Lombardy. With commercial and territorial expansion went diplomacy, and the Venetians were pioneers in establishing permanent business offices in foreign ports, and later in sending resident ambassadors to the major European courts.

Commynes was much impressed by the large number of foreigners that he saw in Venice; and by comparison with the other great cities of Renaissance Italy – Rome, Florence, Naples, Milan, all situated on the western side of the peninsula – Venice must have appeared not only cosmopolitan, but positively exotic. In particular, centuries of commercial and cultural interchange with the eastern Christian empire had lent earlier medieval art and architecture in Venice a strongly Byzantine character, as is evident above all in the city's most important religious building, the church of San Marco. Built on a Greek-cross plan in imitation of the church of the Apostles in Constantinople, with its five principal cubic spaces all crowned with domes, San Marco was intended from the beginning to be decorated with the utmost material splendour (Pls 9, 10). Thus while the lower parts of the interior walls are sheathed in variegated marbles, the upper parts and vaults are completely covered with mosaics, which glow and shimmer like jewels when caught by the light, before disappearing again into dark, vibrating shadow. The effect of rich luminosity created by the glass tesserae is obviously quite different from that of fresco painting, with its matt surfaces, normal elsewhere in Italy; and as an ensemble, the mosaics of San Marco were clearly intended to convey to the spectator something of the mystery, as well as of the majesty, of heaven.

The continuing importance of San Marco, and of the Byzantine tradition generally, for Venetian painting of the Renaissance period has already been noted in the motif of the golden semi-dome in Bellini's *S. Giobbe* altarpiece (Pl. 5), where it is combined with a display of sumptuous marble veneer. There are numerous other examples, particularly in this earlier Renaissance phase, of the delight that Venetian painters took in the illusionistic rendition of marbles and mosaics (cf. Pls 15, 63, 65, 72). But on a deeper level, too, the Byzantine background to Venetian painting may be detected in the autonomous expressive power of warm colour and vibrant light already seen both in the *S. Giobbe* altarpiece and in Titian's *Danaë*.

But Byzantine art was only one ingredient in the melting-pot of Venetian culture. Especially after the conquest of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453, Venetians came into contact with the world of Islam; and the experience is reflected in the frequent subsequent appearance of oriental



9(above) Jacopo de' Barbari. *Perspective View of Venice* (1500). Detail showing the Piazza San Marco.



10 Venice, San Marco. View of interior.



11 Gentile and Giovanni Bellini. *St Mark preaching in Alexandria* (1504–c.1510). Canvas, 347 × 770 cm. Milan, Brera.

→ *Trade of 877 → turbans & silky clothes*
 (or pseudo-oriental) costumes, buildings and other motifs in Venetian painting (cf. Pls 107, 163, 174).⁷ A particularly comprehensive example is provided by the huge canvas begun by Gentile Bellini in 1504, and later completed by his brother Giovanni, representing *St Mark preaching in Alexandria* (Pl. 11), in which the large building in the background, while irresistibly recalling the church of San Marco, has assumed an appropriately exotic disguise. Other important non-Italian cultural influences on Venetian Renaissance painting include those from Flanders and from southern Germany. Thanks to the close trading and diplomatic links that existed between Venice and the southern Netherlandish cities of Bruges, Ghent and Brussels, Venice in the second half of the fifteenth century became a major port of entry in Italy for Flemish pictures. In 1451, for example, a panel by the leading Bruges painter Petrus Christus was shipped from Flanders to the Venetian church of S. Maria della Carità; and a few decades later the patrician Bernardo Bembo, on completing his term as ambassador to the court of Burgundy, brought back a devotional diptych by Hans Memling (Pl. 13).⁸ Similarly, Venice had closer commercial ties than any other Italian city with Germany; and the large warehouse built by the German merchant community on the Grand Canal at Rialto, known to the Venetians as the Fondaco de' Tedeschi, is visible just beyond the bridge in Carpaccio's painting (Pl. 7). The constant stream of mercantile traffic between Venice and southern Germany made the city the natural first port of call for any traveller from north of the Alps,

trade



13 Memling. *St Veronica* (?1471). Panel, 32 × 24 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection.

including for artists of the importance of Albrecht Dürer, who visited Venice twice in his career, in 1494–5 and in 1505–6 (below pp. 114–15). It was equally natural that German woodcuts and engravings (cf. Pl. 83), for which there existed a lively market in Renaissance Italy, should have arrived first and in greatest numbers in Venice, and should have made a particularly strong impact on local artistic practice.⁹

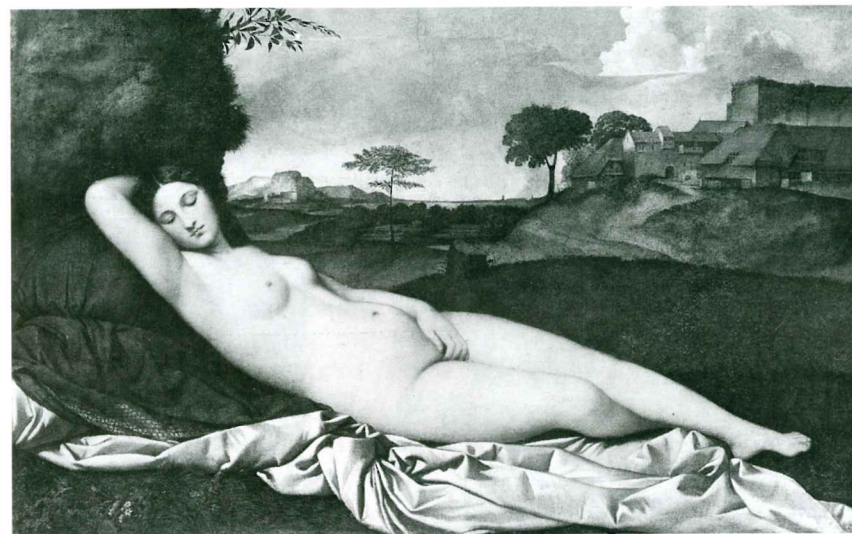
Conversely, the same well-established network of communications that brought foreign works of art to the city also created a large export market for works of art produced in Venice. By the mid-fifteenth century a leading Venetian workshop such as that of Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini was shipping altarpieces, and probably smaller devotional panels as well, to towns and villages situated down both sides of the Adriatic Sea, as far south as Apulia and even Calabria.¹⁰ Antonio's polyptych of 1464, for example (Pl. 44), was painted for the city of Pesaro in the Marches, while Bartolomeo's *Virgin and Child with Saints* of 1465 (Pl. 45) was painted for a church in Bari. Similarly, the westward extension of the Venetian *terraferma* empire meant that customers in the relatively distant provinces of Brescia and Bergamo naturally looked to Venice when commissioning

works of art. It is probably true to say, in fact, that Venetian painting was dispersed over a wider geographical area than that of any other Italian centre of the Renaissance period.

Another aspect of Venice's character as a commercial emporium of particular relevance for the history of painting is represented by the trade in artists' materials.¹¹ Several of the highest-quality minerals used for pigments, most notably lapis lazuli, used to make the rich purply-blue colour called ultramarine, but also orpiment and realgar, used to make yellows and oranges, came to Europe from the Near of Middle East by way of Venice, where they were first processed and made ready for use. Other materials came from less exotic sources: from the eastern Adriatic, from southern Germany, and from the Venetian mainland territories. But whatever the origin, Venetian painters enjoyed privileged access to the whole range of pigments available to artists in the late medieval and Renaissance periods; and, as shown by works such as Bellini's *Feast of the Gods* (Pl. 104), or Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* (Pl. 110), or Veronese's *Feast in the House of Levi* (Pl. 180), with their extraordinarily varied and intense colours, the painters exploited their privilege to the full.

On the potentially negative side, the geography of Venice meant that she lacked one of the elements often regarded as a central inspiration behind the civilisation of the Italian Renaissance: the physical remnants of classical antiquity. While all the other major Italian cities could take pride in a history that went back to Roman times, the foundation of Venice was officially placed in the year AD 421. This lack of an antique past did not, as we shall see, preclude an intense antiquarian interest among educated Venetians, which was in turn reflected in paintings such as Titian's *Danaë*, or earlier, in Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus* (Pl. 14). But it is significant that in Venice attitudes towards classical antiquity characteristically assumed a romantic, poetic tinge, as opposed to the more rational and historical approach found elsewhere in Italy.

Already by the Renaissance the city of Venice, which comprised one of the largest urban populations in Europe, covered all its available dry land; and although many more areas were given over to gardens and orchards than than now, the character of the city was essentially artificial, with few large, open green spaces. It may seem somewhat paradoxical, therefore, that one of the outstanding contributions of Venice to European art should have been in the area of landscape painting. But, as has often been suggested, it may well have been the very artificiality of the Venetian townscape that instilled in painters and their patrons feelings of nostalgia for the fields, woods and hills of the *terraferma*. Certainly the spirit in



14 Giorgione. *Sleeping Venus* (c.1510). Canvas, 109 × 175 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie.

which Venetian painters approached the natural world was characteristically less one of scientific detachment, as it so often was in Florence, than one of emotional engagement, with a highly evocative landscape, as in Giorgione's *Venus*, serving as a lyrical commentary on the human events in the foreground.

Much has also been said in the past about the ways in which the character of Venetian painting might have been affected by the situation of the city in the middle of the water. On a straightforward, practical level, this is evident in the lack of a strong local tradition of fresco painting. This is not to say that frescoes did not exist in Venice: many of the palace façades admired by Philippe de Commines and represented by Carpaccio, including that of the Fondaco de' Tedeschi, were decorated with frescoes; and since it was certainly not possible to decorate the interior of every Venetian church with mosaics, as in San Marco, fresco was very likely often used as a cheaper substitute. Yet experience had shown that the moist and salty air of the Venetian lagoon condemned frescoes to fade and disappear relatively quickly; and by the end of the fifteenth century the much more durable technique of oil on canvas had come to be preferred for the large-scale decoration of Venetian interiors.

The answer to the question of how far, and in what way, the particular quality of light in Venice affected pictorial practice is much more elusive. Contrary to what is sometimes claimed, colours in Venice only rarely match the intensity associated with Venetian painting, and more often the humid, almost palpable atmosphere reduces them almost to monochrome. On the other hand, the same atmosphere tends to soften the edges of forms, obscuring the clarity of their structure, and making them seem to merge with their surroundings in a luminous haze. Furthermore, the shimmering reflections ubiquitously cast by the water onto Venetian buildings may well have stimulated the painters to concern themselves as much with the transient effects of colour, light and air on surfaces as with immutable underlying shapes. To this extent, the characteristically Venetian pictorial qualities of the *Danaë* and the S. Giobbe altarpiece may be related as much to their authors' experience of natural phenomena in the Venetian townscape as to the purely artistic tradition represented by the mosaics of San Marco.

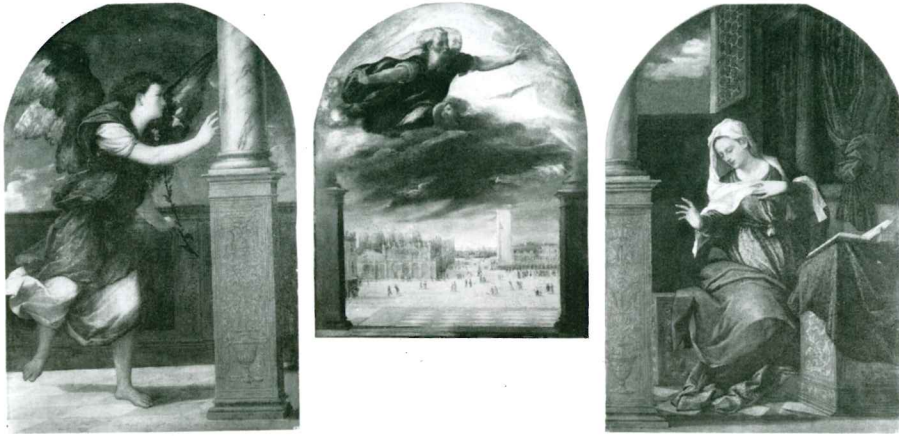
Politics

By the Renaissance it had become commonplace for writers on Venice to see a direct analogy between the unique, seemingly miraculous character of her physical situation and her unique and highly complex political system. Like several of the other Italian city-states that had risen to international prominence during the later Middle Ages, including Florence, Venice was a republic. But unlike Florence and the other cities, Venice did not succumb to autocratic rule during the Renaissance; and, in fact, she was to retain her republican constitution in a remarkably unchanged form right down until the end of the eighteenth century.¹²

The Venetian head of state was the doge. Although this term is literally equivalent to the word 'duke', and by the sixteenth century it had become customary to address the incumbent by the even grander title of 'Most Serene Prince', the doge of Venice was not like dukes and princes elsewhere. His office was elective, not hereditary; and although like that of the pope, he held it for life, his powers of independent action were strictly circumscribed by his electors. Giovanni Bellini's portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan (Pl. 15), probably painted soon after the sitter's coronation in 1501, is eloquently expressive of his role essentially as a figurehead. Encased within the majestic trappings of his office, and represented with a dignity and authority befitting the head of one of the wealthiest and most



15 Giovanni Bellini. *Doge Leonardo Loredan* (c.1501). Panel, 62 × 45 cm. London, National Gallery.



16 Bonifazio de' Pitati. *Annunciation with God the Father* (?1544). Three canvases, cut from a single original: 196 × 135 cm (sides); 166 × 132 cm (centre). Venice, Accademia.

powerful states in the Christian world, Doge Loredan is appropriately reticent in his expression of individual thought and emotion.

The limitation of the doge's personal powers did not mean that the Republic of Venice in any way resembled a democracy. About 95 per cent of the population remained disenfranchised, and the electorate was restricted to the approximately 2,000 male adult members of 150 Venetian families legally defined as patrician, or noble. These 2,000 patricians formed what was called the *Maggior Consiglio*, or Greater Council; and, besides electing the doge, this body elected the members of the various smaller councils, committees and magistracies that conducted the real business of government.

The Venetian constitution had evolved over a period of several centuries, and by the fifteenth century its workings had become highly complicated. But they were largely successful in their prime purpose, which was to prevent the concentration of political power in the hands of a particular individual or family, and thereby also to prevent the factional strife that was so recurrent a feature of politics in the other states of Italy. It was in a spirit of self-congratulation for the harmonious workings of its constitution that Venice styled herself the *Serenissima Repubblica* – the Most Serene Republic.

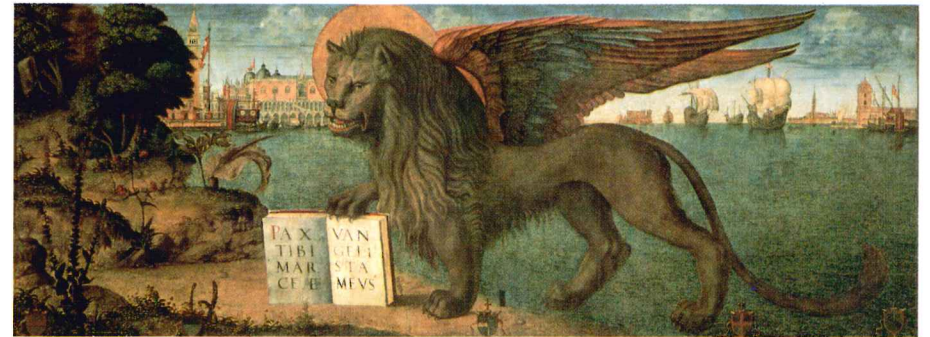
Already by the middle of the fourteenth century the Venetians' convic-

tion that their own system was superior to that of any other state had been developed by historians and propagandists into a more complex political doctrine, which came to be known as the Myth of Venice.¹³ Playing down the evolutionary aspect, the Myth claimed that the Venetian constitution was so just and perfect that it had to be regarded as a gift from God. Furthermore, God had caused Venice to be founded in the year (421) so that a new Christian order would rise out of the ruins of the Roman empire – just as the New Testament had emerged from the Old. It was no accident that the day of the foundation was set at 25 March, the feast of the Annunciation, marking the beginning of the era of Grace. A clear illustration of this nexus of ideas is provided by the tripartite composition by Titian's follower Bonifazio de' Pitati for the offices of a government magistracy (Pl. 16). On the left and right is the Annunciation group, enacting the very moment of the Incarnation of Christ; at the centre is the figure of God the Father hovering in the Piazza, and with his arms bringing two miracles into being at once.

Although the Annunciate Virgin makes a frequent appearance in Venetian political iconography, she was not, perhaps, sufficiently distinctive to meet every function demanded of a patron saint. After all, many other Italian cities, most notably Siena, but also Florence, similarly claimed her as their own. Even more ubiquitous in Venice was the image of the evangelist St Mark, whose relics had been physically present in the city since 829.¹⁴ In that year the Venetians, feeling the need to acquire the body of a saint comparable in sanctity and authority to the apostle St Peter, undertook a pious theft, and had the evangelist brought from Muslim Alexandria, where he had been martyred, to Venice, where he was

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17 Carpaccio. *Lion of St Mark* (1516). Canvas, 130 × 368 cm. Venice, Doge's Palace.

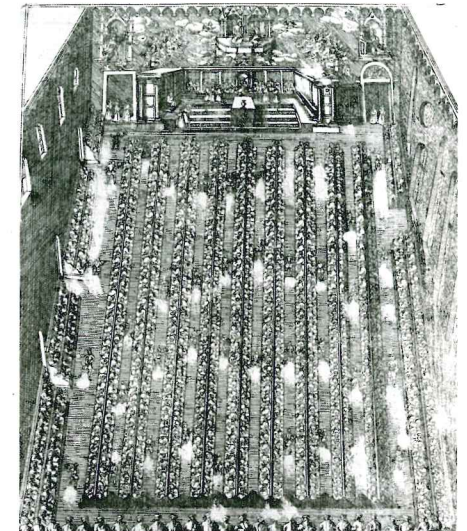


18 Venice, Piazzetta San Marco, with the Doge's Palace and San Marco.



19 Venice, Doge's Palace. View of Sala del Maggior Consiglio, as redecorated after 1577 with Tintoretto's *Paradise* (c.1588–92).

20 Anon. View of Sala del Maggior Consiglio before 1577.



buried under the high altar of the new church dedicated in his honour. As portrayed by Venetian painters, St Mark regularly appears as he does in the scene of his preaching in Alexandria by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini (Pls 11, 12) with a short black beard and a balding head, and dressed in a red robe with a blue cloak (cf. Pls 74, 188). Equally commonly, however, he appears in the guise of his evangelist symbol of the Winged Lion, as in the painting by Carpaccio from another government magistracy (Pl. 17). The inscription on the book *PAX MARCE TIBI EVANGELISTA MEUS* – 'Peace unto you, Mark my Evangelist' – refers to divine approval of the removal of his body to its final resting-place in Venice. Behind the lion to the right is a view of the Venetian lagoon, and to the left, of the Piazza, with San Marco and the Doge's Palace (cf. Pl. 9).

Carpaccio shows the Doge's Palace as it was rebuilt in the Gothic style of the mid-fourteenth century, and as it survives today (Pl. 18). With its diaper pattern of pink and white marbles in the upper part, and a graceful and open double loggia below, the building is strikingly unlike the heavily fortified communal palaces normal elsewhere in late medieval Italy, and implicitly proclaims the harmonious, peaceful and serene character of the Venetian state. The position of the palace next to San Marco in the city's principal urban space symbolised the indissoluble connection between sacred and secular authority. In other Italian cities, by contrast, a distinc-

tion was made between the civic centre, with the seat of government, and the religious centre, with the cathedral. San Marco was not, in fact, Venice's cathedral, but simply the ducal chapel; and the chief ecclesiastical authority of the city, the patriarch, had his seat at S. Pietro di Castello, on the eastern fringes of the city. But San Marco represented the spiritual centre of the city and of the Republic, and it was the doge, not the patriarch, who was the chief custodian of the evangelist's relics.

As well as providing a residence for the doge, the Doge's Palace contained all the many council chambers of the Venetian government. The largest of these – and one of the largest rooms in late medieval and Renaissance Europe – was the Sala del Maggior Consiglio, where the Greater Council met to elect the officers of state. The present decoration of the Sala dates from the very end of the Renaissance, and was commissioned to replace a previous decoration destroyed by a disastrous fire that gutted the room in 1577 (Pl. 19).¹⁵ Previously, as shown by an engraving made eleven years earlier (Pl. 20), the end wall was covered in a huge fresco representing the *Coronation of the Virgin* by the later fourteenth-century Paduan painter Guariento. The subject was clearly chosen to do honour to the Virgin as patron saint of Venice; and, as in its post-fire replacement by Tintoretto, the vision of the serried ranks of the court of heaven provides a celestial counterpart to the deliberations of the

Greater Council. The Annunciation group over the doors at the sides similarly has a political dimension in its allusion to the foundation of Venice.

The walls of the Sala – unfortunately rendered only schematically in the engraving – were previously decorated with a narrative cycle on canvas, representing the so-called *Story of Alexander III*. This story, which portrays another strand in the complex political propaganda that made up the Myth of Venice, was concerned with events that supposedly took place in the twelfth century, and told of how the reigning doge came to the aid of Pope Alexander III in his conflict with the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa. As a token of his gratitude, Alexander gave his rescuer a series of gifts symbolising the equality of status between pope, emperor and doge in perpetuity. An original cycle on this subject, painted in fresco, had been begun soon after the completion of Guariento's *Coronation* in the 1360s, and was still in progress in the earlier years of the fifteenth century, when Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, and probably also Michelino da Besozzo, another leading representative of the International Gothic style, were called to Venice to contribute one or more scenes. By the mid-century this first cycle was already in a bad state of decay, and in 1474 Gentile Bellini was commissioned to begin the task of gradually replacing the frescoes with canvases. Subsequently, virtually all the great representatives of Venetian Renaissance painting, including Giovanni Bellini, Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese, made contributions to the second cycle, which had only just been completed at the time of the fire of 1577. Despite our very incomplete knowledge of the cycle's appearance, it is clear that it represented by far the most important Venetian decorative ensemble of the entire Renaissance.

Responsibility for overseeing the decoration of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio and of the other main council chambers of the palace lay not with the doge, but with a committee of patricians appointed for the purpose by the government. In keeping with his carefully defined constitutional position, the doge of Venice could only occasionally match the activities of other Italian heads of state in initiating major artistic commissions. As pointed out, however, by Francesco Sansovino in the later sixteenth century:

It is the custom in this city that the doge during his term of office orders three things. His portrait is taken from life, where it is placed in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio beneath the ceiling in some lunettes; a picture in the Collegio or in the Senate, or whatever other place where it seems

best, in which is represented the Madonna and the Doge kneeling with other figures; lastly, a shield with the Doge's coat-of-arms which in his lifetime is hung on his ceremonial barge and on his death is placed in San Marco to his eternal memory.¹⁶

The series of ducal portraits, painted first in fresco, and after 1474 replaced with canvases, were, of course, destroyed in 1577, together with the narrative scenes below them. But it is clear from their post-fire replacements (cf. Pl. 75) that they showed each doge in a simple, bust-length format, either in profile or in three-quarter view.¹⁷ The type is probably accurately recorded in a number of surviving late fifteenth-century examples, including Giovanni Bellini's *Doge Leonardo Loredan* (Pl. 15), which were presumably ordered by each sitter, or by a member of his family, as an autonomous, often higher-quality variant.

Fire was also responsible for the wholesale destruction of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century examples of the other major type of ducal commission, that representing the doge kneeling in full length before the Virgin. In 1574, three years before the fire in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio, another disastrous conflagration swept through the most important council chambers at the north end of the east wing, including the Collegio and the Senate, destroying all the existing decorations. By chance, however, at least two examples had already been removed from the building, including a major work by Giovanni Bellini of 1488, known as the *Votive Picture of Doge Agostino Barbarigo* (Pl. 74).¹⁸ This may be taken as illustrating many of the characteristics of the type: as in a church altarpiece such as Bellini's slightly earlier picture for S. Giobbe (Pl. 5), the enthroned Virgin and Child are shown in the company of saints and angels; but in keeping with its destination for the walls of a council chamber, the format is broad rather than high, and the holy figures bestow their attention on the kneeling figure of Doge Barbarigo. Elected in 1486, he is shown dressed in his coronation robes, with his ducal cap studded with jewels, as he is presented to the Virgin and Child by St Mark. While the image may be interpreted in part as an expression of personal devotion by Doge Barbarigo to the Virgin and to his name-saint Augustine on the right, it also serves the more public function of invoking divine protection for the city during his reign, and of expressing the transcendent nature of the political order of the Venetian Republic.

* * *



21 Venice, Frari.
View of interior.

Religion

Underlying the grandiose politico-religious claims by the Venetians that their city was specially favoured by God, and that the doge was invested with a divine and temporal authority equivalent to that of the pope, were, of course, much more mundane considerations. The papacy was a major Italian power, some of whose extensive territories bordered on the Veneto; and it was natural that the respective political interests of Rome and Venice should frequently clash. Similarly, while the Venetians did much to exploit the propaganda value of their ongoing conflict with the Turks in the eastern Mediterranean, and to present themselves as principal defenders of the Christian faith against the advance of Islam, their true interest in the struggle was commercial rather than religious. At the same time, the claims of official propaganda seemed amply borne out by the active religious life of ordinary Venetians.¹⁹ In 1493 there existed no fewer than 137 churches in the city and its surrounding islands, and visitors were unanimous in reporting that these were attended regularly and with devotional enthusiasm. Comynnes's comment that 'God helps the Venetians for the reverence which they bring to the service of the church',²⁰ while echoing the government line, was clearly also based on his own direct observation. Furthermore, since many of the churches, and not just San Marco, held important relics, the round of the saints' shrines of Venice formed a major initial chapter for the many western European pilgrims who regularly passed through the city en route for the Holy Land.

Venice truly appeared what she claimed to be: not just a New Rome, but also a New Byzantium, even a New Jerusalem.

After San Marco, the most important churches of Venice tended to be not so much the seventy parish churches, all of which were rather small, as those of the religious orders. As was implied by a previously quoted comment by Comynnes (above, p. 6), Venice and her islands were full of monasteries, nunneries and friaries; and the two largest churches in the city belonged to the two leading mendicant orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Respectively entitled S. Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (known as the Frari for short) and SS. Giovanni e Paolo, these two churches, both of which were built in the Gothic style of the fourteenth and earlier fifteenth centuries, remained major foci of pictorial decoration throughout the later fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Pls 21, 108). In keeping with the Venetian climate, neither of them was ever apparently intended to receive the extensive fresco cycles characteristic of the churches of the mendicant orders elsewhere in Italy; and from the beginning, painting was concentrated on the numerous altars contained in the two churches. Although the huge buildings of the Frari and SS. Giovanni e Paolo were exceptional in being able to accommodate as many as about twenty altars apiece, even the smallest parish church would have contained some three to five, all of which would have required decorating.

The painting of altarpieces represents, in fact, the central type of commission undertaken by Venetian painters throughout the Renaissance, and several of the greatest masterpieces by Bellini, Titian and their colleagues were painted to be displayed above a church altar.²¹ It is important to remember, however, that as in the preceding Gothic period, painted altarpieces were more than just pictures, but formed part, together with their frames and sometimes also figurative sculpture, of complex ensembles. Today, the majority of Venetian Renaissance altarpieces have lost their original frames and are housed in museums; but an idea of their originally intended appearance may be gained from a painting by Carpaccio of c.1515 representing the *Vision of Prior Ottobon in S. Antonio di Castello* (Pl. 22). In this presumably topographically accurate view of the interior of the now-demolished Gothic church, two Gothic polyptychs, of a type still current around 1440 (cf. Pl. 35), are to be seen in the first two bays; while the third bay is occupied by an altarpiece of a fully Renaissance type, with a unified picture field, and a frame of a classicising architectonic design (cf. Pls 58, 71). The point that the individual panels of Gothic polyptychs would be fragments without their elaborately carved and gilded wooden frames scarcely needs underlining. But the stone tabernacle that charac-



22 Carpaccio. *Vision of Prior Ottobon in S. Antonio di Castello* (c.1515). Canvas, 121 × 174 cm. Venice, Accademia.

teristically enclosed every Venetian altarpiece painted after about 1480 played no less important a part in the total aesthetic effect, not only by further articulating and clarifying the painted composition, but now also by creating the illusion of a window, beyond which the painted scene seemed to be taking place.

As elsewhere in late medieval and Renaissance Europe, responsibility for funding the maintenance and decoration of the many altars in Venetian churches tended to lie not so much with the clergy as with the pious laity. Although the local clergy usually retained control of the high altar, as was the case at the Frari, it was customary for patronage rights to the side altars and chapels to be ceded to wealthy families and devotional confraternities, who financed their upkeep in the hope of heavenly reward. The subject-matter of altarpieces, in the period before the Reformation at least, correspondingly tends to express the particular devotional interests of their lay donors rather than the more general teachings of the church on Christian doctrine or ethics. Thus by far the most popular subject of Venetian Renaissance altarpieces, as of Gothic polyptychs before them, was that of a group of saints, usually in the type of arrangement known as

a *sacra conversazione* with the Virgin and Child in their midst, as in Bellini's *S. Giobbe* altarpiece (Pl. 5); or else airborne above them, as in Veronese's high altarpiece of c.1565 for *S. Sebastiano* (Pl. 177). Whatever other meanings such images were intended to convey, the primary purpose of a saintly grouping of this kind was to express the idea of intercession: to express the hope, in other words, that the saints represented would intercede with God on behalf of their devotees in front of the altar, for their material benefit in this life, and for the salvation of their souls after death.

Society

Lay society in Venice was officially divided into three very unequal parts.²² The top five per cent, as we have seen, consisted of the patriciate, a hereditary élite from whose ranks were drawn not only the doge, but all the members of the various councils and magistracies that constituted the government. Also reserved for patricians were key state appointments such as ambassadors, admirals in the navy, and high-ranking ecclesiastics, including the patriarch. Unlike aristocrats elsewhere, Venetian patricians in the fifteenth century still derived their wealth from maritime trade rather than from landed property; and although this situation was to change somewhat during the course of the sixteenth century, they remained proud of their association with the world of business and practical affairs. Some patrician families naturally became much wealthier than others, and with their greater wealth came a greater influence on the conduct of government. Yet no one family such as the Medici in Florence, or even one group of families, was ever permitted to become dominant.

Between the patriciate and the ninety per cent of the population that comprised the *popolani*, or ordinary people, came an intermediate class of Venetians called the *cittadini*, or citizens. To some extent these may be compared with middle classes elsewhere, since they included professional people such as doctors and lawyers; and socially the citizen class was much more dynamic than the strictly closed ranks of the patriciate, and allowed a considerable amount of upward mobility. But in many other respects, the Venetian *cittadinanza* should be regarded more as a secondary aristocracy than as a bourgeoisie. Like the patricians, the majority of citizens were merchants, while many others held high ranks in the navy and the clergy; and many acquired a wealth at least as great as those of the wealthiest patrician families. A large number of families had also held citizen status for several generations. In any other state, the

continuing disenfranchisement of so important a class might well have posed a serious threat to the social order; but in Venice various means were found for compensating the citizens for their exclusion from the political process, and for assuring their loyalty to the existing constitution. In the first place, several of the highest posts in the civil service, including that of Grand Chancellor of the Republic, were reserved for citizens. Similarly – and more relevantly for the patronage of art – citizens retained an exclusive right to the highest offices of the *Scuole Grandi*.

The word *scuola* in this context signifies not a school, but a devotional confraternity for laypersons, of a kind widespread in late medieval Europe generally.²³ In Venice, these confraternities fell into two main categories: the so-called Scuole Piccole, of which there existed some two hundred; and the Scuole Grandi, which in the Renaissance period numbered only six, each comprising between five and six hundred members. The names of the first four of the Scuole Grandi, founded at the time of the flagellant movement of the thirteenth century, were the Scuola di S. Maria della Carità, the Scuola di S. Giovanni Evangelista, the Scuola di S. Marco, and the Scuola della Misericordia; to these were added a fifth in 1489, the Scuola di S. Rocco, and a sixth in 1552, the Scuola di S. Teodoro.

By the fifteenth century, the Scuole Grandi had lost the penitential zeal associated with their origins, and had become respectable and often wealthy social institutions, active in the administration of charity, and of the many legacies bequeathed by pious testators. Although primarily religious in purpose, with an explicit mission to assist their members in the salvation of their souls, the *scuole* were not subject to the authority of the church, as were confraternities elsewhere, but rather to that of the Venetian state. The internal government of each *scuola* was in turn administered by a small group of annually elected officers, with a *Guardian Grande* at their head; and in this way, as pointed out in 1581 by the Venetian author Francesco Sansovino, the administration of a *scuola* 'to some extent mirrored that of the civic government itself, since the citizens had, as it were, their own republics, in which to gain rank and honour according to their merits'.²⁴ Certainly the considerable social prestige and economic power available to office-holders seems to have successfully diverted the attention of the citizen class away from political ambitions that might have threatened the position of the patriciate.

The strongly civic and patriotic character of the Scuole Grandi meant that their meeting-houses resembled not so much churches as microcosmic versions of the Doge's Palace. According to a standard pattern that had emerged by the fifteenth century, the meeting houses consisted of three



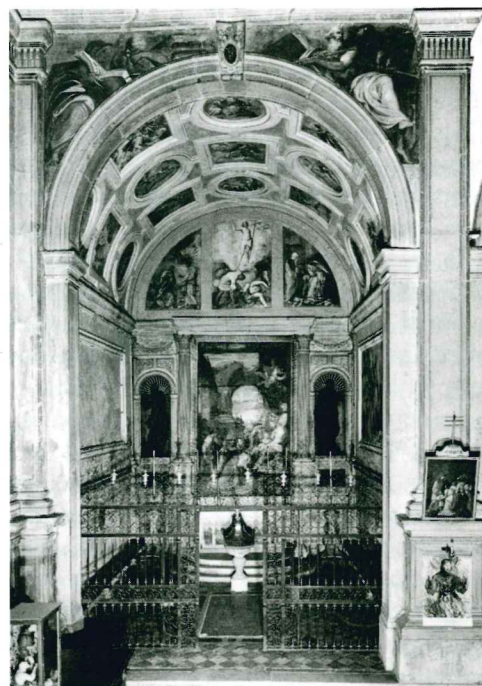
23 Venice, Scuola Grande di S. Marco, with façade of SS. Giovanni e Paolo.

main rooms: a large hall on the ground floor; a chapter hall directly above it on the upper floor; and an adjoining *albergo*, or boardroom, for the use of the officers. The distinction between the three rooms is clearly expressed, for example, by the magnificently ornate façade of the Scuola di S. Marco, as it was rebuilt in the years immediately after 1485 (Pl. 23). Thus the ground-floor hall lies on the longitudinal axis of the main entrance, and the chapter hall, with the two large windows with segmental pediments lies above it on the same axis; while the smaller *albergo*, its windows differentiated by the use of triangular pediments, lies at right angles to the two halls. During the course of the century it also became standard practice for the two rooms on the upper floor to be decorated with painted narrative cycles. In the case of the Scuola di S. Marco these celebrated the life and miracles of its patron St Mark, and included the huge canvas by Gentile and Giovanni Bellini (Pl. 11). As we shall see (pp. 81 ff), the narrative paintings of the *scuole* naturally took as their model the *Story of Alexander III* cycle in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio.

The many Scuole Piccole likewise offered members of the citizen class – and even to some extent the most prosperous of the *popolani* – welcome opportunities for acquiring enhanced social dignity through involvement in the corporate commission of a major work of art. The Scuole Piccole, which were very variable in size and economic means, consisted of three main types: confraternities that were purely devotional in character; confraternities representing the many foreign communities in the city, such as



24(above) Venice, Scuola di S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni. View of interior, with canvases by Carpaccio.



25 Venice, S. Francesco della Vigna, Grimani chapel. Frescoes by Battista Franco (c.1557–61) and altarpiece by Federigo Zuccari (1564).

the Germans, the Florentines, or the Dalmatians (*Schiavoni*); and confraternities associated with the guilds, representing trades or crafts. In the sixteenth century a fourth type became increasingly prevalent, the Scuole del Sacramento, dedicated to the proper upkeep of the Holy Sacrament in parish churches (p. 223). A few of the better-off Scuole Piccole possessed their own meeting-houses; and in such cases, they sometimes imitated the Scuole Grandi by commissioning a narrative cycle. A rare example to survive *in situ* is that of the Scuola di S. Giorgio degli Schiavoni, with its sequence of canvases by Carpaccio (Pl. 24). But more often the smaller confraternities met in churches, and concentrated their art patronage on the decoration of their altar. Indeed, some of the finest Venetian altarpieces of the Renaissance, including probably Giovanni Bellini's *S. Giobbe* altarpiece (Pl. 5), were commissioned by Scuole Piccole.

For a wealthy individual or family, whether of citizen or patrician status, the opportunity to maintain and decorate a church altar with an altarpiece would have been attractive not purely for religious reasons (above, pp. 25–6), but also for reasons of social prestige. This is particularly obvious in a case such as the Grimani chapel in S. Francesco della Vigna (Pl. 25), where Federigo Zuccari's *Adoration of the Magi* of 1564 in its grandiose frame was made the centrepiece of a larger architectural and sculptural programme celebrating the magnificence of one of Venice's most prominent noble families. But even the smallest and most modest altarpieces would, by virtue of their public placing, have constituted statements of pride in the patron's social status, and hence also of solidarity with the social order of the Venetian state.

In the more private context of palace decoration, the generally better-educated patrician class may have been more active than the citizens in commissioning and collecting important works of art. But too little is known of the original owners, for instance, of the many Madonnas and half-length devotional images by Giovanni Bellini, for us to be sure that a high proportion—even a majority—was not commissioned by prosperous and socially ambitious members of the citizen class. Similarly in the next generation, although several of the early owners of pictures by Giorgione, such as Gabriele Vendramin and Girolamo Marcello, were indeed patricians (pp. 117, 127), others, including Giovanni Ram and Andrea Odoni (pp. 168, 178), were citizens. Later in the sixteenth century, major commissions for the interiors of citizen palaces include Titian's *Ecce Homo* of 1543 (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum) for the Flemish merchant Giovanni d'Anna, and Veronese's series of canvases of 1571 (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie) for the Cuccina family.

Sources

Unlike in Florence, there existed no strong literary tradition in Venice for writing the lives of famous compatriots. As is illustrated by the office of doge, individual glory was made strictly subordinate to that of the state, and the preferred historiographical genre remained that of the chronicle, with its emphasis on collective history. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore, the earliest biographies of Venetian painters – or at least, the earliest discussions of their work – were provided, as was already mentioned in the case of Titian (pp. 2–3), by the Tuscan Giorgio Vasari.²⁵ But Vasari naturally knew much less about the painters of Venice than he did about those of Florence and Rome, and was not particularly interested in improving his knowledge. The four Venetian biographies included in the first edition of the *Lives* (1550) – ‘Jacopo, Giovanni and Gentile Bellini’, ‘Vettor Scarpaccia’ (i.e. Carpaccio, together with a number of other fifteenth-century painters), ‘Giorgione’ and ‘Palma’ – were drawn entirely from Vasari’s recollections of his visit to Venice in 1541–2, made before his book was conceived. He returned in 1566 to gather material for the second edition (1568),²⁶ but this time the visit was undertaken in a great hurry. To the existing lives, all of which were expanded and recast to conform with the new overall design of the book, were now added ‘Titian’ and ‘Battista Franco’. The award of a biography to the latter, a relatively minor painter who had spent some time in Rome in the orbit of Michelangelo, is symptomatic of Vasari’s bias in favour of central Italy. Tintoretto and Veronese, by contrast, the two leaders of Venetian painting in the 1560s, are mentioned only in the context of other biographies (of Franco, and of the architect Sanmicheli respectively). The information that Vasari provides on Venetian painters, including Titian, is accordingly sketchy, frequently inaccurate, and subject to distortion by the underlying theme of the *Lives*, which is to promote the universal validity of the central Italian concept of *disegno* (above, p. 2).

In the absence, however, of any Venetian counterpart to the *Lives* before the middle of the seventeenth century, Vasari remains a fundamental source for Venetian Renaissance painting, and only two local sixteenth-century sources match him in usefulness. In the 1520s and 30s the patrician connoisseur and collector Marcantonio Michiel compiled a series of notebooks recording works of art in private collections in Venice and the cities of the Venetian mainland.²⁷ Besides comprising a major document in the early history of collecting, these *Notizie* are especially valuable for their descriptions of a number of works by Giorgione, not otherwise

recorded in contemporary documents or early sources. Then in 1556 the polygraph Francesco Sansovino, son of the great architect and sculptor Jacopo Sansovino, published a brief dialogue on the art and institutions of Venice, which he followed up in 1581 with the first comprehensive guidebook to the city.²⁸ The latter, which was republished in revised and expanded editions in 1604 and 1663, provides an extremely useful record of paintings in Venetian churches, palaces and Scuole, the majority of which can be identified with existing works. But although Sansovino often mentions their dates on the basis of inscriptions, the topographical format of his book excluded all but the most perfunctory information about their authors; and he betrays a very defective knowledge of the course of Venetian painting before the early sixteenth century.

The earliest attempt to provide a comprehensive biographical account of the painters of Venice came with Carlo Ridolfi’s *Maraviglie dell’Arte* of 1648.²⁹ This considerably fleshes out the information provided by Vasari, and it is also written more objectively. But Ridolfi also lacked Vasari’s critical insight, and living a full century later, he is scarcely more reliable in his attributions. Since he evidently did not know Michiel’s *Notizie*, which remained unpublished until the early nineteenth century, Ridolfi’s biography of Giorgione is exceptionally unreliable. That of Tintoretto, on the other hand, which provided the starting-point for the book, is based largely on information obtained from the painter’s family, and is of major art-historical importance.³⁰

Much more critically perceptive, and a much more passionate advocate of the special qualities of Venetian painting, was Ridolfi’s contemporary Marco Boschini, whose books *La Carta del Navegar Pittoresco* and *Le Minere della Pittura* were published in 1660 and 1664 respectively.³¹ Neither is a history: while the first, a rhapsodical dialogue written in Venetian dialect, is a work rather of connoisseurship and criticism, the second is a topographical guide to the pictures to be seen in Venetian public buildings, updating and enriching the account of Sansovino. In the revised edition of the *Minere* (1674) Boschini added as a preface a brief historical survey of Venetian painting (*Breve Istruzione*); but again, this consists chiefly of a sequence of characterisations of the styles of the principal masters, based on direct observation of a selection of their works, and it provides little reliable new information of a factual kind.

Modern art historiography, beginning in the later nineteenth century, has been able to make good many of the deficiencies of the early sources, both by the rediscovery of original documents relating to works of art, and through a more systematic connoisseurship. Egregious errors that had



26 Attributed to Giorgione. *Concert Champêtre*. Canvas, 110 × 138 cm. Paris, Louvre.

survived the centuries, such as the assumption that Alvisio Vivarini was the eldest of his family of painters instead of the youngest, were finally dispelled. But in other cases, most notably that of Giorgione, disappointingly little new factual information has emerged, and art historians remain dramatically divided about what works he actually painted and when. Emblematic of the uncertainty that still surrounds so much of Venetian Renaissance painting is the *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre (Pl. 26). While there is general agreement that this picture is one of the great masterpieces of European art, some critics attribute it to the late Giorgione and others to the early Titian, while others again give it to the two painters in successive phases or, on the contrary, to neither of them.

It might be argued that modern research has also failed to dislodge the historiographic model imposed on Venetian painting by the unsympathetic Vasari.³² The customary subdivision of the Renaissance period into Early,

High and Late (comprising Mannerism), although not exactly corresponding to the way in which Vasari himself subdivided the revival of Italian art, nevertheless derives from him, and it is valid above all as a way of charting the various stages of evolution of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century art in central Italy. When applied to Venetian painting, the tripartite scheme does not fit so tidily. The boundaries between the early and High Renaissance are blurred first of all by the fact that the leading Venetian painter of the fifteenth century, Giovanni Bellini, not only outlived the notional creator of the local High Renaissance, Giorgione, but also apparently continued to be regarded as leader until his death in 1516. It is similarly much more difficult in Venice than in Florence and Rome to say when the High Renaissance may be deemed to have merged into the late Renaissance, especially since unlike Raphael, Titian did not die young, and once more there existed a continuity of leadership in Venice across the period divide.

Yet history has to be shaped in the writing of it, and the search for breaks in the evolution of Venetian painting has not revealed any obviously more meaningful than the conventionally accepted ones. The present book is accordingly divided into three main chapters, corresponding to the three standard phases of Italian Renaissance art. The first chapter begins with the moment of transition from late Gothic to early Renaissance in or around 1440. The second begins with the artistic revolution created by Giorgione, conveniently but still accurately datable to the turn of the sixteenth century. And the third begins in c.1540 with a moment of particularly strong interest among Venetian painters in the contemporary, specifically Mannerist, developments in central Italy. This moment did not, as we shall see in Chapter 3, usher in a period that can unambiguously be labelled 'Mannerist'; but it does represent a shift of emphasis that may legitimately be regarded as marking the beginning of a new and distinctive historical phase. Finally, the deaths of Veronese in 1588 and of Tintoretto in 1594 clearly mark the end of what has always, and rightly, been regarded as the golden age of painting in Venice.