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978-0-521-18134-1 - The House of Gold: Building a Palace in Medieval Venice

Richard J. Goy

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In 1406 a young Venetian nobleman, Marin Contarini, married into another ancient patrician clan. His wife's family owned an old palace on the Grand Canal. Contarini demolished the old palace and, in 1421, he began to build the Cà d'Oro, his 'House of Gold'.

This book tells the history of the building of the palace over a period of nearly twenty years. After a general introduction to the city of Venice at the beginning of the *quattrocento*, Dr Goy discusses the background to the building of the palace, including Contarini's motives and the rôle of his father, a high-ranking government official. There then follows a discussion of the building industry in Venice in this flourishing period, and of the functions of the three chief building crafts – masons, carpenters and builders. In the latter half of the study, the whole building process is recreated in detail, from laying bricks to terrazzo and metalwork, with particular emphasis on the stonework of the magnificent façade. The relationships between Contarini and his craftsmen are analysed, as is the pivotal rôle of Contarini himself, the architect *manqué* whose monument this was to become. The author concludes by discussing the architectural importance of the palace and its historic legacy.

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Building a Palace in Medieval Venice

RICHARD J. GOY



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PREFACE

On 16 August 1406 a young Venetian nobleman named Marin Contarini was betrothed to a patrician lady, Soradamor Zeno. Both parties to this nuptial contract were members of ancient and highly respected aristocratic dynasties that collectively formed the backbone of the Venetian Republic. Such marriages – almost always arranged for mutual benefits, both financial and political – were many and frequent, and in some ways this particular contract was unremarkable.

However, the Contarini were no ‘typical’ noble clan (if such a clan existed), but were the most numerous and probably the wealthiest and most influential of all the great *casade* (clans) of the *Serenissima*. This fact alone made the marriage of a first-born son of a Contarini of more than passing interest. Marin had an important politician for his father; in addition, he was a man with an ambition to make his mark on the city, a capital that was already the wealthiest metropolis in Europe.

Marin Contarini’s marriage was thus destined to be fruitful, not in the sense of producing numerous heirs to the extensive clan, but in quite a different manner. The first stage in achieving his aim was Marin’s purchase of an old palace that his wife’s family owned, on the Grand Canal not far from the Rialto Bridge. Twenty years later, he had finally achieved his aim, and had built the finest, most richly decorated palace in this city of palaces. This book tells the story of the construction of that magnificent house, the Cà d’Oro, the House of Gold.

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On a more personal level, I must thank a number of close friends in Venice for their practical support: in particular, Giulio Vianello for finding me excellent accommodation in which to stay; Giovanni and Maria Borella for their ever-warm welcome; and Primo Zambon for his boundless generosity with practical sustenance.

Elsewhere, thanks are due to Professor Donald Queller for information on the 1379 *Estimo*, and to Frances, Lady Clarke, for details of the restoration of the Porta della Carta. A debt of thanks must also be recorded to Dr Susan Connell-Wallington, for kindly allowing me access to the results of her own considerable researches, and from which I have derived great benefit. Finally, thanks to two friends and professional colleagues in Venice: to Dott. Arch. Mario Piana for his extensive knowledge of the later history of the Cà d'Oro, and to Dott. Arch. Nubar Gianighian, who somehow found time to patiently read the whole draft of the study, and who made many constructive suggestions. Any errors that remain are, of course, entirely my own.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

I have restricted this glossary to a list of Venetian terms found in the Contarini papers. The essential work to consult for much greater detail is E. Concina *Pietre Parole Storia: Glossario della costruzione nelle fonti veneziane (secoli XV – XVIII)* (Venice 1988)

Venetian	Italian	English
acconciar, conzar (v.)	restaurare	to restore, repair
agudo	chiodo	nail
albedo	abete	fir (timber)
albergo	salone, salotto	large room or hall
altana	terrazza	roof-terrace
antenella	–	small section of timber, originally used in boat-building
archeto	archetto	small arch
arpese	grappa	iron tie or strap, esp. for fixing stonework
aterar (v.)	bonificare	to reclaim land from lagoon
balcon	finestra	window, together with its sill and surround
balconada	–	large, multi-light window
banda	lato, fianco	side, flank
barbacane	mensole	jetty; a large bracket supporting a beam
becadelo	modiglione	modillion, sometimes a string-course
bordonal	grossa trave	very large beam or architrave
butar (v.)	fondere	to found
butar zo (v.)	demolire	take down, demolish
cà	casa, palazzo	a large house or palace
cale	via, strada	street
calzina	calcina	lime
campaniel	campanile	bell-tower, turret, pinnacle
caneva	cantina	store-room

canon	tubo di scarico	waste-pipe
cantinella	listello di legno	small timber lath
canton	angolo	corner, external angle
cavanna	–	covered boat-shed or dock
chiave	trave	beam of fir or larch
colmo	tetto	roof
compir (v.)	finire	to complete
cuete	modanatura	cusps of tracery
dentada	cornice a dentelli	dentil-course
desfar (v.)	demolire	demolish, take down
erta	stipite	jamb, pilaster
esafora	esafora	six-light window
fazà, fassà	facciata, fascia	façade, fascia, front surface
fero	ferro	piece of ironwork
foiami	fogliami	foliage-carving
foio	foglio	leaf, as of gold etc.
fòntego, fòndaco	magazzino	large store or warehouse
foro	apertura	opening
fregar (v.)	levigare	to polish (fregador = polisher)
gorna	grondaia	rainwater gutter
investisonij	rivestimento	cladding
lido, lio	capitello	capital of a column
loza	loggia	loggia, balcony
marangono	falegname	carpenter
mastelo	mastello	barrel (capacity approx. 75 litres)
merladura, merli	merlatura	crenellation
modioni	modiglioni	modillions, corbel-brackets
murer	muratore	builder
napa	cappa di camino	chimney-pot
palificada	palizzata	timber pile-foundation
passo	passo	Venetian unit of length equal to five feet (1.738 metres)
pè, piè	piede	Venetian foot, unit of length equal to 0.348 metres
pergolo	poggiolo	balcony or sill
piana	piana	slab of a balcony, flat piece of material
piera (viva)	pietra	natural stone
piera cotta	mattone	brick (lit. 'baked stone')
pinze	–	roundels of stone or marble
pòrtego	salone	great hall of a palace
pozal	vera da pozzo	well-head
quadro, quarelo	mattone	brick, occ. paving-stone
retorto, retortolij	cornice a corda	rope-moulding
rio	canale	minor canal
sabiom	sabbia	sand

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GLOSSARY

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salizzata	strada selciata	paved street
smaltar (v.)	intonacare	to plaster
soaza	cornice	cornice
soldar (v.)	allacciare	to fix or fasten together
soler	piano	storey; thus: soler de soto = first piano nobile; soler de erto (alto) = second piano nobile
sopede	base	base of a column
straforo	traforo	tracery, fretwork
taiapiera	tagliapietra	stone-mason
tavola, tola	tavola, asse	plank of timber, floor-board
terazer	terrazziero	terrazzo-layer
tolpo	palo	timber pile or stake
trar (v.)	stendere	to spread out
trave	trave	beam
vero	vetro	glass
ziolo	barra	bar or rod of iron

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SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

All of the original archival material for this study is found in two large *buste* of documents in the Archivio di Stato in Venice. They are numbered B.269, 269 *bis* and B.270 in the archive of the Procurators of San Marco de Citra, the latter two being filed together. The first contains a miscellany of papers, among them wills and other legal documents, and *commessarie* relating to the estate of Marin's son Piero; I have made limited use of some of these in outlining the family context in which the palace was built. Together with them are several scraps of paper relating to the building of the Cà d'Oro; they are in no sequence although most have been numbered, probably by Cecchetti. Some are badly damaged and many are not dated – in fact, they are mostly *aides-mémoire* written by Marin Contarini, although one or two are informal contracts or short accounts, later transferred to his proper ledgers. Among them are important papers, including the contract with Zane Bon, and that with Zuan da Franza for the decoration of the façade.

But the key to the whole story lies in four small, unassuming paper ledgers or *libretti*. These were to form Marin's weekly accounts in which he entered records of expenditure in building the palace. The analysis of these *libretti* (all in B.269 *bis*) forms the basis of the present work. Of the four, though, the first (L.I) contains further loose papers but no written text. L.II seems to have been begun as an alphabetical notebook of expenditure under such headings as 'manoalij, marangonij, murerij', but was quickly discontinued. Ledger no.III is of much more value as it records payments covering the period 1421–30, and is complete up to page 15t. However, after 1426, Marin began his fourth and last *libretto*, and this became his definitive informal record. Most of our knowledge derives directly from its contents, and Contarini also transferred his notes from L.III to it. The 134 sides of notes contain a wealth of detailed information, although it is of little value today in its present form. Marin's notes are highly informal, usually completed weekly, but sometimes monthly, or at longer intervals as seemed appropriate. At other intervals (usually at the close of an account) he transferred information into his 'great ledger' (*libro grando*), which is unfortunately lost today. We are therefore left with these notes and the necessity to re-organize them.

The difficulties are these: Marin grouped his entries approximately into trades, so there are details on all the major crafts scattered at intervals, interspersed with other trades, and all of them covering quite different time-spans. Some entries are far more detailed than others and, indeed, they are often completely out of chronological order. Thus we find long, meticulous lists of daywork payments interspersed with lump sums paid for materials, and occasionally

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with summaries of contracts with the senior craft masters. None of the recorded sequences bears any direct relationship with the works on site.

There are two further difficulties, one minor and one of some importance. The minor one is Marin's calligraphy, which is typical of the period, but since his notes were solely for his own temporary records, he made no attempt to make them legible to anyone else, and many words are difficult to decipher.

The greater difficulty is that Contarini was often unspecific as to the precise nature of the work for which he carefully noted the cost. Thus, for example, we know nothing of what Zane Bon worked on for nearly two years at the beginning of the building programme, although we know every single day that he did work. Paradoxically, we often have more detail of routine daywork (particularly stone-carving) than we have of some vital construction work such as the installation of the roof.

For all these reasons, it is clear that a degree of ingenuity is necessary to attempt certain elements of this reconstruction of Contarini's palace, although in many other places, fortunately, the picture is extremely clear. Broadly, it was necessary to take apart each one of Marin's *libretto* entries, group them by trades, and then group them chronologically. It was then possible to compile a 'profile' of each individual who made some contribution to the building process, either on the site or as a supplier of materials. Thus a brief biography of each man evolved, and these could then be again grouped by trades. All of this information was then transferred onto a very large chart, to produce an overall picture of patterns of work and employment over the long period of construction. This was in the form of a bar-chart, that simple but effective technique still in use on sites all over the world, and one which immediately allows one to identify certain central operations that formed the 'critical path' to the building process. From these patterns emerged the twenty or so chapters that form the latter part of this book.

It is salutary to remind ourselves that, in many respects, building sites have changed little over the centuries. The laws of statics, as always, determine certain processes, from consolidating foundations to tiling roofs; many of these processes had to be followed in 1430 in much the same way as they have to be followed today. It is my intention, therefore, to try to bring to life once more the events that took place on the banks of the Grand Canal nearly six centuries ago, and to illustrate the ways in which Bon and Antonio di Martini dealt with problems very similar to many encountered on any building site today.

Note: for the sake of brevity, references to Contarini's four *libretti* have been shortened to L.I, L.II, L.III and L.IV throughout the book.

A note on money and coinage

There are many references to the Venetian monetary system in this book, and a brief explanatory note may assist the general reader. The system was complex, involving moneys of account as well as coinage, gold as well as silver. The elements that concern us comprise the smaller system of coin based on silver, and which was used for retail transactions in the city. The base coin was a small penny or *piccolo*, of impure silver; twelve *piccoli* formed a *soldo* (shilling) and twenty *soldi* formed one *lira* or *lira di piccoli* (the latter to distinguish it from a larger money of account, the *lira di grosso*). The system thus had the same structure as that used in Great Britain until recent times, and was expressed in the same way, thus: L.14.3.9.

These units were all based on silver. But there was one vital gold coin, first minted in 1284, and which became the international symbol of the strength of the Venetian economy: the gold ducat. The ducat weighed 3.55 grams and was highly refined to 0.997 parts pure gold. The

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purity and stability of the ducat gained an extraordinary reputation for reliability throughout Europe and, of course, in the capital itself.

Since the ducat was of gold and the *lira* of silver, their relative values fluctuated according to the strengths and weaknesses of the two metals. But since the ducat was more reliable than the *lira* in both weight and refinement, the *lira* gradually became worth less in relation to the ducat. For example in 1421 there were exactly five *lire* (100 *soldi*) to one ducat, but by 1425 the ratio had 'slipped' to L.5.4.0. (104 *soldi*); by 1431 a ducat was worth 106 *soldi*, and by 1436 the ratio was 110 *soldi* or L.5.10.0. In this book I have followed the original figures in the accounts, usually expressed in *lire*, *soldi* and *piccoli*. Larger lump sums and contracts were often expressed in ducats, in which case I have indicated the conversion rate which then obtained, to provide a constant reference. It would be wrong to assume that when Marin paid someone in ducats, a large bag of gold coins changed hands immediately; payment was often made by smaller coinage, or even by a credit or promissory note. Venice was a dangerous city.

The Venetian calendar

The Venetian year began on 1 March; all dates have been modernized.

Spellings

Spellings varied widely in this period. For consistency and to retain a degree of authenticity, I have retained the original spellings of proper names in their most frequently used form. Thus Zane Bon, rather than Zan or Zuan Bom, or any other permutation. The modern standardized spelling of Buono was never used at this time. Zuan or Zane is the Venetian form of Giovanni and Zorzi the Venetian form of Giorgio.