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INTRODUCTION

PETER HUMFREY

RENAISSANCE VENICE (FIGURE 1), LIKE FLORence and Rome, was one of the great cities not just of Italy but of the entire Christian world. Situated at the head of the Adriatic, close to the mouth of the river Po and with easy access to the Alpine passes to the north, the city-republic had for centuries exploited its geographical position to dominate the major trade routes between the Near East and western Europe. Extraordinarily wealthy through commerce and industry, Venice was also an international political power and the capital of two distinct empires: one on the Italian mainland, the other overseas. The maritime empire, originally acquired to safeguard the passage of merchant galleys, comprised a chain of Mediterranean islands and ports, stretching as far east as Cyprus. The *terraferma* empire extended to the borders of the Holy Roman Empire in the north, and to those of Milan in the west (Figure 2). Subject to Venice by the mid-fifteenth century were the prosperous north Italian cities of Treviso, Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia, and Bergamo, together with their surrounding territories. As significant artistic centers of the Renaissance in their own right, these subject cities have their place in Part III of the present volume.

The primary focus of the volume, however, naturally falls on the art and architecture of their powerful and wealthy metropolis.[1] Venice was already a major center of artistic production for several centuries before the Renaissance period, and it continued to be so for long afterward. It is not easy to disentangle fact from myth in defining the beginning of Venice's artistic greatness. But architectually ambitious buildings certainly existed on the Venetian island of Torcello from as early as the seventh century; and by the eleventh century, if not earlier, the long medieval campaign to cover the interior spaces of the state church of San Marco with Byzantine-inspired mosaics was already well under way. In the post-Renaissance period, the rich flowering of all three major arts in the eighteenth century has usually been interpreted as the swan song of Venetian art, which is supposed to have expired with the Republic itself in 1797. A strong case can also be made, however, for regarding Venice as a continuingly vital artistic center throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed, up to the present day.[2]

Yet within this time span of well over a millennium, it is the period covered by the present volume – from about 1450 to 1600 – that has always been recognized as Venice's golden age. Within this century and a half, many of the most important figures in Italian Renaissance art were active in Venice and on the Venetian mainland. These included not just Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Jacopo Sansovino, and Palladio, but a host of other, scarcely less creative painters, sculptors, and architects. In the exceptional richness and vitality of its artistic culture during the Renaissance period, Venice compares favorably with the other leading Italian centers, including Florence and Rome.

For those who still view the Renaissance from the Florentine perspective of Giorgio Vasari, Venice's achievement may at first sight seem somewhat surprising. Since the city had no classical past, it had no ancient buildings to serve as reminders of a lost glory

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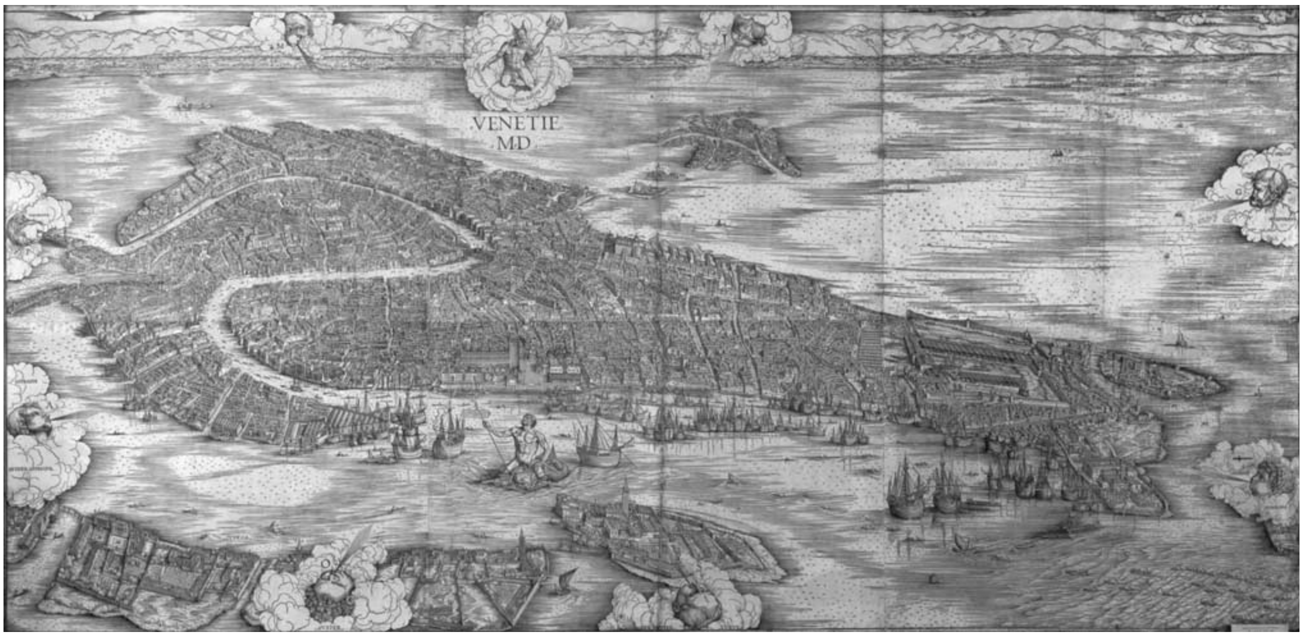
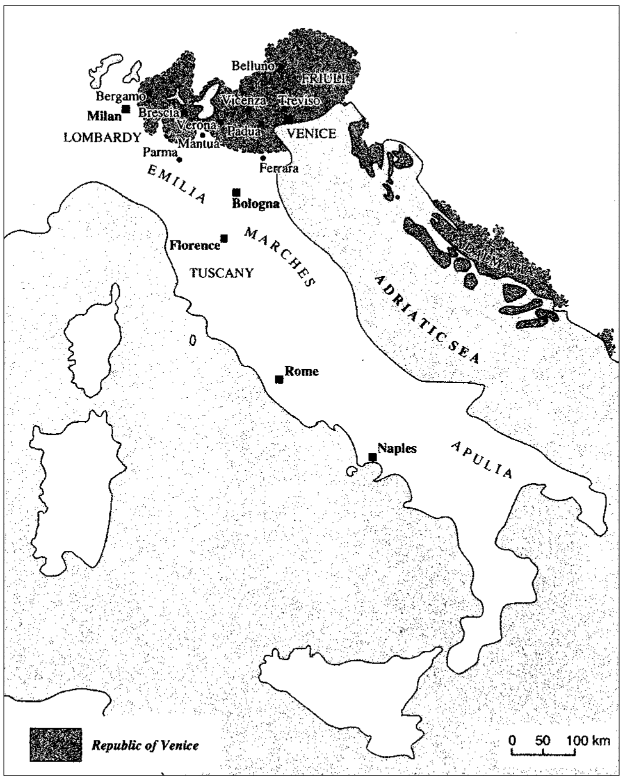


1. Jacopo de' Barbari, *Bird's-Eye View of Venice* (1500) (woodcut), Museo Correr, Venice. (Scala / Art Resource, NY)

to be revived. Nor were Venetians fired by the spirit of individualism that since Jacob Burckhardt has often been seen as another defining characteristic of Renaissance civilization. The Republic's oligarchic system of government tended to promote rather a spirit of collective enterprise and a suspicion of individual ambition or cult of personality. In art, as in politics, Venetians tended to be deeply conservative, with a strong sense of tradition and a dislike of sudden change. Throughout the Renaissance period, the two great medieval buildings at the religious and political heart of the city – the Byzantine basilica of San Marco (see Plate I), and the Gothic Doge's Palace (see Plate III) – continued to be regarded with deep veneration.

Yet the intense pride that Venetians took in their city and state – what they termed the Most Serene Republic (*Serenissima*) – also acted as a source of creative inspiration. This meant that while Venetians liked to claim that their political, social, and religious institutions were God-given and unchanging, they constantly sought new visual means for expressing the venerability and sanctity of their city. Moreover, central to the Venetian sense of history was a belief that made a virtue of Venice's lack of the physical remnants of classical antiquity. According to Venetian historians, God had caused the city to come into being on the Feast of the Annunciation in the year 421 – at the very time, in other words, of the collapse of the pagan Roman Empire – with the express purpose of creating a new, Christian empire to take its place. Throughout the Middle Ages, Venetians had accumulated fragments of ancient architecture and sculpture, incorporating them into their own buildings and displaying them as trophies, as a way of endowing the city with an antique prestige while also proclaiming the superiority of their own civilization.[3] Then, in the Renaissance period, imported classical forms continued to be adapted to Venice's own political ideology and artistic traditions. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than by the long campaign of restructuring the Piazza San Marco undertaken by the native Florentine Sansovino after 1530.[4] Sansovino's brief was to impose a new order on this medieval piazza, and to introduce new, heroically classical buildings that would reflect Venice's claims to be a New Rome. With his recent experience in High Renaissance Rome he succeeeded triumphantly in this; yet he was no less successful in integrating his designs and materials with their Venetian surroundings, and in particular with San Marco and the Doge's Palace. The message was that Venice was indeed a New Rome, but also a New



2. Map of Renaissance Italy, with Venetian mainland empire.

Constantinople and a New Jerusalem and, above all, a constantly renascent Venice.

As will be seen in the historical introduction in Chapter 1, the dates given for the present volume approximately correspond, at the beginning, to the Fall of Constantinople of 1453 and the Peace of Lodi of 1454, and, at the end, to the papal Interdict of 1605. By contrast, the opening and closing dates do not coincide with any similarly momentous artistic event or turning point. Although Giotto had painted his frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in nearby Padua as early as the first decade of the fourteenth century (see Figure 143), the dominant style in all three major arts in mid-fifteenth-century Venice remained a vigorous and exuberant late Gothic. Perhaps the earliest local response to the artistic revolution that had taken place in Florence in the 1420s is to be found by about 1440 in Jacopo Bellini's first Book of Drawings (Figure 3), which shows the artist experimenting with geometric perspective, classicizing architectural forms, and subjects inspired by ancient sarcophagus reliefs. But until the 1460s such experiments were restricted to works on a small scale and for intimate viewing, and in the large-scale, public context of actual buildings and statues, elements of the Gothic style survived for much longer. Only by about 1475, in the mature work of Giovanni Bellini, Antonio Rizzo, Pietro Lombardo, and Mauro Codussi, did Venetian art reach a new stylistic synthesis that can unambiguously be called Renaissance. Yet for reasons already outlined, the length of this phase of stylistic transition should not be interpreted in terms of any slowness by Venetian artists and their patrons to grasp the stylistic principles of the Florentine Renaissance and of classical antiquity. For fifteenth-century Venetians, the Florentine Renaissance represented not a new language to be systematically learned but the source of new ideas with which further to enrich their own long artistic tradition. They were accordingly no less interested in visual ideas from other directions, such as Flanders and Germany. Indeed, the close trade contacts that had long existed with northern Europe made Flemish and German art much more accessible than art from beyond the Apennines.

The closing date of the present volume is as fluid as the starting date, but it has been chosen for less positive reasons. Arguably the first manifestations of the dominant style of the seventeenth century, the baroque, did not appear in Venice until after 1620, with the arrival in the city of the painters Johann Liss from Germany and Bernardo Strozzi from Genoa, and the beginning of the career of the architect Baldassare Longhena. The leading figures of the first two decades of the century, such as Palma Giovane in painting, Girolamo Campagna in sculpture, and Vincenzo Scamozzi in architecture, were all pupils or close followers of the great protagonists of the Venetian cinquecento, and their work still really belongs in the Renaissance tradition. There can be little doubt, however, that by 1600 this tradition was locally in serious decline, and that its true heirs had already begun to emerge in artistic centers elsewhere: in Bologna, Rome, and Antwerp.

Of the various factors that have traditionally been seen as contributing to the distinctiveness of Venetian Renaissance art, one of the most important was certainly the extraordinary site of the city itself.[5] Constructed during the course of several centuries

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on an archipelago of mudflats centered on Rialto, surrounded by a constellation of other small islands and separated from the Italian mainland by a broad lagoon, Venice represents a triumph of human will – supposedly assisted by Divine Providence – over the forces of nature. The physical character of the site obviously had a direct effect on the practicalities of building, in ways that survived and transcended changing architectural fashions. But on a more subtle level, the omnipresence of water, which casts shimmering reflections on the surfaces of buildings (see Plate II), and the moisture-laden air, which blurs solid shapes and clear edges, naturally affected the ways in which Venetian architecture was conceived and perceived. Similarly, when Venetian painters of the fifteenth century began to study the outside world, they instinctively saw it as if through the same luminous haze that pervades the Venetian townscape. Already true of the late works of Giovanni Bellini from about 1480, this is even more true of the great Venetian painters of the sixteenth century, led by Giorgione and Titian. As has always been recognized, central to the art of Titian is the softness and mellowness of his pictorial handling, as well as his evocation of shifting patterns of light and shade, in a way that is both convincingly natural and highly poetic.

Another important defining characteristic of Venetian art is the exceptionally wide range of the cultural influences absorbed into it. With its wealth built on centuries of international trade, Renaissance Venice was a thoroughly cosmopolitan city, and it had formed highly efficient channels of commercial, diplomatic, and cultural communication with all the major cities of western Europe. In the medieval period, during the centuries of Venice's most active engagement with Levantine trade, Venetian art was deeply influenced by the cultures both of Byzantium and of Islam.[6] Integrated into Venetian tradition, including into the two great medieval buidlings in the Piazza, both cultures continued to inform the character of Renaissance art in Venice and to distinguish it from that of other Renaissance centers, including Venice's own subject cities. In particular, the characteristic Venetian taste, in architecture and sculpture as well as in painting, for warm color and material sensuousness seems to reflect the enduring effect of the marbles and mosaics of San Marco. In the Renaissance period, Venice's contacts with the principal centers of central Italy – with Florence in the fifteenth century and with Rome in the sixteenth – were naturally of particular art-historical significance. But scarcely less significant, as has been mentioned, were Venice's contacts with her trading partners in northern Europe: with the cities of Flanders and with those of southern Germany.[7] The importation into Venice of Flemish devotional panels in the later fifteenth century played a major role in defining the character of Venetian painting in the Early Renaissance period – and especially in inspiring the adoption of oil painting, the technique that was to become intrinsic to the great achievements of the Venetian cinquecento. Similarly, the impact of German art was both stylistic and technical, not only introducing Venetian painters of around 1500 to a new sense of expressive urgency but also demonstrating to them the enormous potential of the new media of printmaking. The genius of Venetian art was to absorb these and other outside influences – including the continuing influence of the material culture of the Islamic Near East – and to translate them into a local idiom.

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The effects on Venetian art both of the city's watery site and of the wide reach of its cultural contacts are persistent themes in Part II of the present volume. The main emphasis, however, falls on a third factor that decisively influenced the particular character of Venetian art: the needs and ideologies of the people who commissioned it and were its intended audience. To this end, the discussion of the art produced in metropolitan Venice is structured according to three principal categories of patron. Thus Dennis Romano's survey of the historical context in Part I is followed by chapters on the Venetian state (by Deborah Howard), on the Venetian clergy and devotional confraternities (by Louisa Matthew), and on individual Venetians and their families (by Tracy E. Cooper). This structure is designed to reflect the fact that the range of art patrons, both corporate and private, was much wider in Venice than in other Italian Renaissance states, most of which were dominated by a prince and his court.[8] The structure is also designed to reflect the particular, often uniquely Venetian character of the

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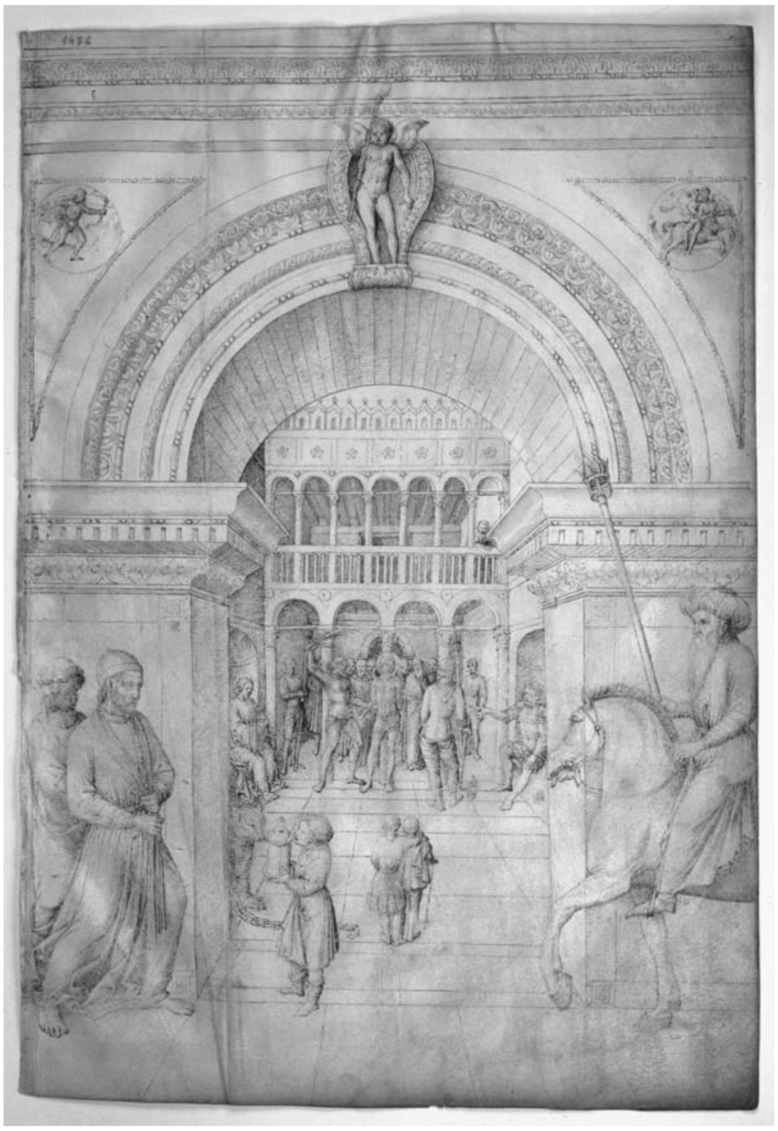

3. Jacopo Bellini, *Flagellation of Christ,* Book of Drawings (c. 1430–55), Louvre, Paris, f. 8. (Art Resource, NY)

Republic's political, social, and religious institutions, and the corresponding demands they made on the artists in their service. Individual patrons obviously enjoyed a greater freedom of personal preference; yet as loyal Venetians they, too, were usually bound, by duty or desire, to commission a type of art that reflected the collective values of their class and nation. The three main categories of patronage do not preclude considerations of chronology, since although Venice's public institutions were famously stable, they naturally did slowly evolve as a result of changing historical circumstances. However. in keeping with the volume's emphasis and its aim to define the character of Venetian Renaissance art in terms of its wider historical context, artistic change is interpreted less in terms of autonomous aesthetic concerns than of changing institutional demands.

The value of the visual arts for powerful and effective self-presentation was equally obvious to Venice's six principal subject cities. These six are covered in the three chapters of Part III in contrasting pairs: Padua and Treviso (by Sarah Blake McHam, who also addresses Bassano); Vicenza and Verona (by Gabriele Neher); and Brescia and Bergamo (by Andrea Bayer). In each case it was the task of public commissions, and often again of private ones, to create an appropriate balance between a declaration of loyalty to the Republic of Venice and an expression of pride in the subject city's own distinctive history and local traditions. Different physical and geographical conditions

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obviously also played an important part in determining the particular artistic character of the six subcenters. Thus while all were inevitably deeply influenced by the art of Venice itself, their mainland sites and their access to different building materials naturally resulted in a rather different kind of architecture, and, for example, a much more widespread use in painting of the medium of fresco. The size and wealth of the city of Venice inevitably acted as a magnet for artists and craftsmen from all over the Venetian mainland, and throughout the Renaissance period the art produced in the capital was immeasurably enriched by their presence. But meanwhile the provincial aristocracy of all six of the main cities, together with their social and religious institutions, also continued to provide an attractive source of local patronage, enabling many artists of talent to remain in their own native regions. In such cases – as with the painters Moretto in Brescia and Moroni in Bergamo, or with the architects Sanmicheli in Verona and Palladio in Vicenza – the creative tension between the artistic traditions of the center and of the periphery could be highly productive.[9]

The volume concludes with my short Epilogue on the demand for Venetian art by customers from outside the Republic of Venice. This is an area that naturally overlaps with areas covered by other volumes in this series. The four great bacchanalian mythologies, for example, painted by Bellini and Titian between 1514 and 1523 for the Duke of Ferrara, belong as much to the history of Ferrara as an artistic center as to that of Venice. Similarly, the portraits painted by Titian of Pope Paul III in Rome in 1545–6 belong as much to the history of papal as to Venetian portraiture. Yet it is also important in the context of the present volume to give some indication of the growing international admiration for Venetian art, and especially for Venetian painting, that took place in the Renaissance period. A demand for Venetian altarpieces in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries on the part of cities down the coasts of the Adriatic developed in the sixteenth century into the munificent patronage, especially of Titian, by the northern Italian courts, and later by the great potentates of Europe: the Emperor Charles V and King Philip II of Spain. Then, in the early seventeenth century, this internationalization of taste for the achievement of Venetian Renaissance art was to lead to such developments as the close study of the buildings of Palladio by Inigo Jones and the exportation of the Palladian style to Britain, as well as the avid acquisition of Venetian pictures by royal collectors such as Charles I of England and Philip IV of Spain. These developments, however, are beyond the scope of the present volume, as are their enormous implications for the wider history of European art in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

NOTES

1 Recent historical surveys of one or of all three of the major arts of Renaissance Venice include Huse and Wolters (1990), Humfrey (1995), Romanelli (1997), and Howard (2002). Lucco (1989–90) and (1996–9), as well as being very well illustrated and providing detailed artistic biographies, have the merit of covering the Venetian mainland as well as Venice (but not the provinces of Brescia and Bergamo in Venetian Lombardy). Thematically structured studies include Brown (1997) and Rosand (1997).

2 Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

3 Brown (1996).

4 Howard (1975), 8–37. See also her essay, Chapter 2 in the present volume.

5 Hills (1999).

6 Howard (2000).

7 Aikema and Brown (1999).

8 John Martin and Dennis Romano, "Reconsidering Venice," in Martin and Romano (2000), 1–35, esp. 23–5.

9 The same applies naturally to a number of other cities and towns of the far-flung Venetian empire, several of which were artistic centers in their own right, and so might reasonably have been included in the present volume. It might seem illogical, for example, that room has been found for Bassano but not Udine or any other town in the large area of the Friuli. Arguably even more regrettable is the omission of the chain of Venetian cities along the eastern coast of the Adriatic, including Koper (Capodistria), Zadar (Zara), Šibenik (Sebenico), Trogir (Traù), and Split (Spalato), several of which played a vital pioneering role in shaping Renaissance culture. Recent essential bibliographical contributions to this subject include Dempsey (1996) and Erlande-Brandenburg and Jurković (2004).

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PART I

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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I

CITY-STATE AND EMPIRE

Dennis Romano

In 1516, Vittore Carpaccio completed a painting depicting a winged lion, the emblem of the Venice's patron, Saint Mark, for one of the many governmental offices housed at the Palazzo dei Camerlenghi at Rialto (Figure 4). The lion holds in his right front paw a book in which is inscribed the greeting of the *praedestinatio,* the angelic prophecy designating Venice as Mark's final resting place and foretelling the city's predestination to greatness. The lion stands astride both land and water, his front paws in a verdant and flower-filled landscape, symbolic of Venice's *terraferma* Italian dominion, his rear paws planted in a tranquil sea, the *stato da mar,* the maritime world that was the source of Venetian greatness, as illustrated by the large merchant ships, their sails billowing in the wind, returning from overseas. On the left horizon, Carpaccio has carefully depicted the major monuments of Piazza San Marco, Venice's civic and religious center – the domes of the basilica of San Marco, the Doge's Palace, the Clock Tower, and the Campanile – even including before them the richly festooned Bucintoro, the doge's ceremonial barge. On the right horizon, one glimpses the Fortezza di San Nicolò guarding the sea entrance to the lagoon, as well as one of the island communities, and at the very edge one part of the great Benedictine monastic establishment San Giorgio Maggiore. Barely visible at the bottom of the painting are five shields, bearing the coats of arms of the noble officeholders who commissioned this work.[1]

Painted toward the end of the Wars of the League of Cambrai, the grand alliance of European powers that nearly brought Venice to ruin, this lion can be taken at least in part as Carpaccio's commentary on the times.[2] Although the painting is less overtly political than Palma Giovane's retrospective *Allegory of the League of Cambrai* (1590–5) (Figure 5) with its fierce rampant lion and sword-brandishing figure of Venice jointly attacking the coalition of Venice's enemies, it nevertheless makes a powerful statement about the perdurability of Venetian republican values and commercial greatness under Mark's evangelical protection. For the modern historian the painting serves other purposes. With its emphasis on the *stato da terra* and *da mar,* as well as government and trade, it provides a useful starting point for considering the political and economic factors that made Venice one of the most important powers in Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the same time, its origins as a commission by noble officeholders and allusions to Venetian civic mythology act as clues to some of the social and cultural conditions that made Venice a great art center of the Renaissance as well. Thus it serves to introduce the themes of this overview.[3]

* * *

In the 1450s, the beginning of the period we are considering, Venice faced serious challenges in both East and West, on both land and sea. In the East, Venice saw its commercial colonies and maritime trade, the lifeblood of the Republic, threatened by the increasingly powerful and expansionist Ottoman Turks. In the preceding half-century, the Turks had already

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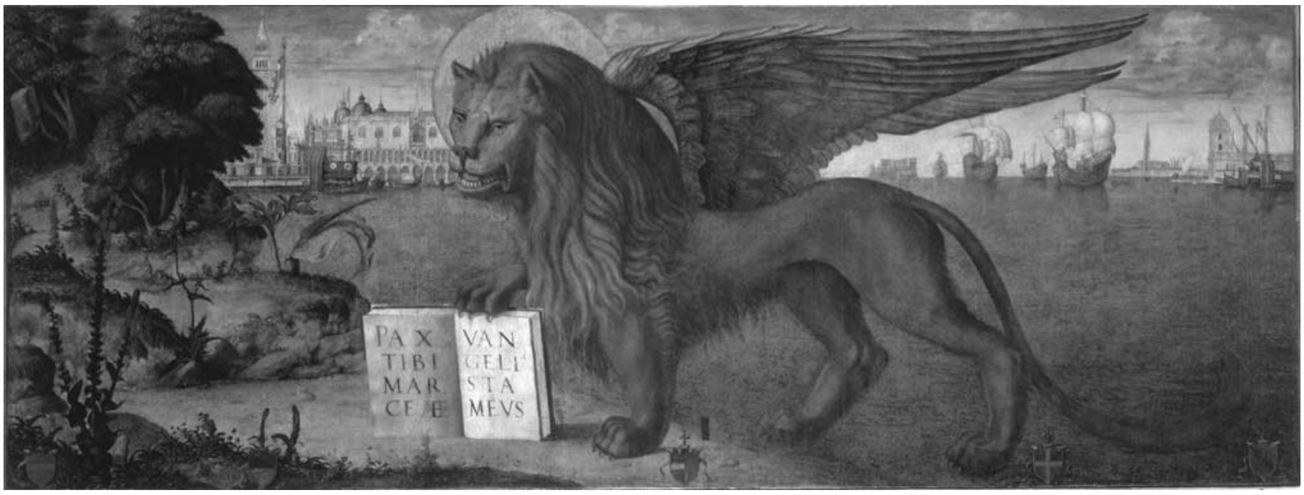

4. Carpaccio, *Lion of Saint Mark* (1516), Doge's Palace, Venice. (Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY)

threatened or captured important Venetian possessions such as Negroponte and Thessalonica and made inroads into the Balkans (thereby challenging Venice's access to and control of the lower Adriatic Sea). They had also reduced the once mighty Byzantine Empire to little more than the metropolis of Constantinople itself. Although the political and military significance of Byzantium was greatly diminished, the city remained an important commercial center for Italian merchants and of great psychological importance to the West, especially to the Venetians; for Venice had originated as a Byzantine outpost and then turned the tables on its overlord in 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, when Western troops under Doge Enrico Dandolo sacked and looted Constantinople and divided up its empire. Venice took as its share those parts that served its commercial interests. Now to see the city threatened by the Ottomans was not only a challenge to Venetian preeminence in trade but an affront to Christian sensibilities as well. It was, after all, from Moslem Alexandria that the Venetians had rescued the body of Saint Mark himself in the early ninth century in fulfillment, as they would later come to understand it, of the *praedestinatio.* In 1451 Sultan Mehmet II succeeded his father, Murad II, and set as his goal the conquest of Constantinople, which he accomplished in May 1453. The Venetians who had dawdled in coming to Byzantium's defense now wasted little time in seeking to secure a new commercial treaty with the sultan.[4]

Before the conquest, Venice had protested its ability to come to Constantinople's aid due to events in Italy, which themselves had reached a crisis point. For much of the preceding three decades, since 1426 to be exact, Venice and its sometime ally Florence had been waging war against the duchy of Milan and its allies including the kingdom of Naples. At stake was control of important trade routes, such as the Adige River leading to the merchandise-hungry Holy Roman Empire, and rich agricultural lands along the banks of the Po River and its tributaries, as well as the taxable wealth and human resources of a constellation of imposing cities: Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia, and Bergamo, to name only the most significant ones. This shift toward the *terraferma,* itself a major volte-face in Venetian foreign policy, occurred in stages. Much of this territory had been acquired under Doges Michele Steno (1400–13) and Tommaso Mocenigo (1414–23); but it was Doge Francesco Foscari (1423–57), who became the great advocate of Venetian expansion, claiming as he did that Venice was acting to defend the liberty of all Italy against Milanese aggression. Nevertheless, by 1450, both sides were financially exhausted, having poured millions of ducats into the hands of mercenary captains, like Francesco Sforza and Gattamelata, but showing little in the way of new territorial gains after years of war. When news of Constantinople's fall reached the West in late June 1453, it gave new impetus to papal efforts to bring about a pacification of the Italian peninsula.

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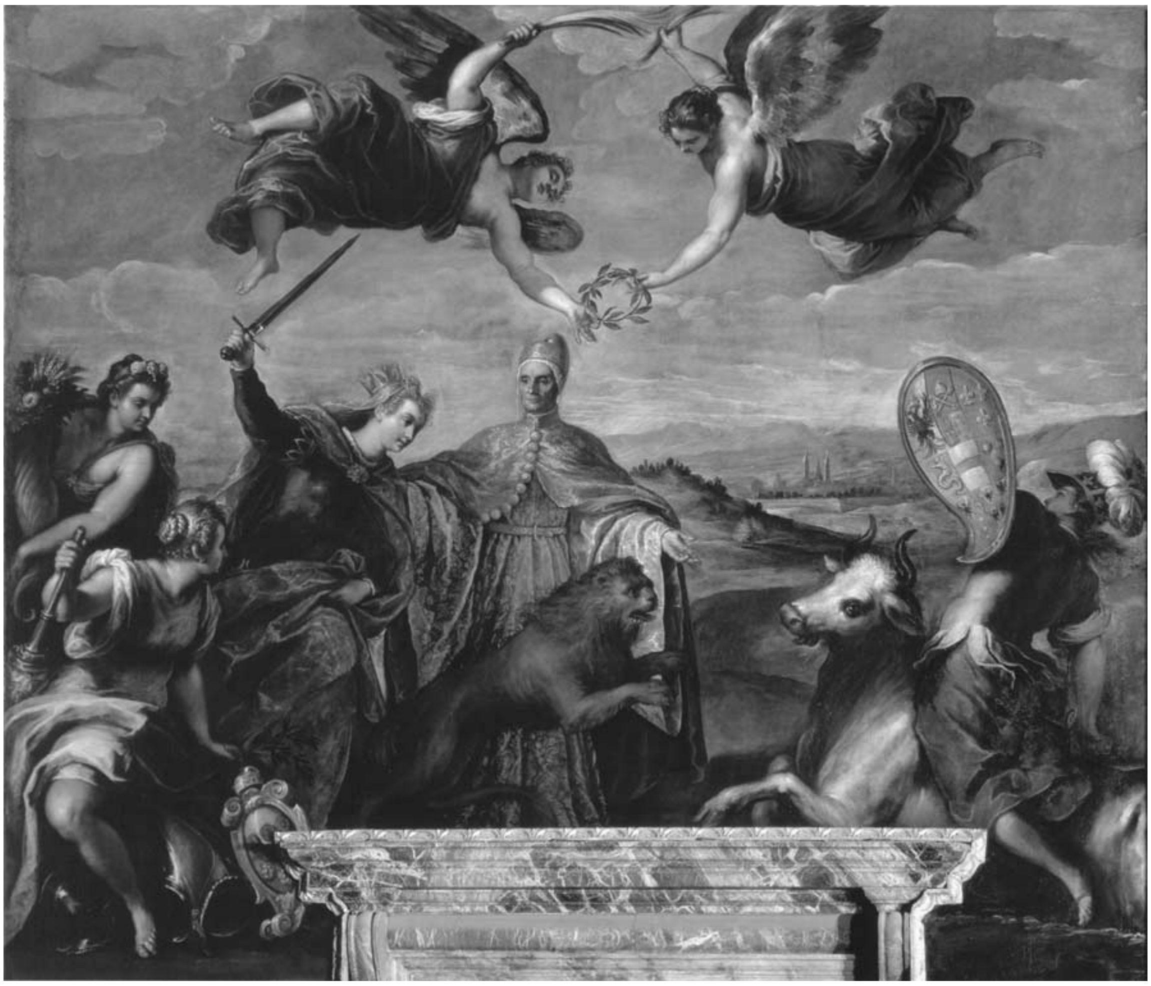

5. Palma Giovane, *Allegory of the League of Cambrai* (1590–5), Doge's Palace, Venice. (Cameraphoto Arte, Venice / Art Resource, NY)

In April 1454 Venice and Milan signed the Peace of Lodi, establishing the Adda River as the boundary between the Venetian and Milanese states and sanctioning the addition of Crema to Venetian territory. This was followed up by the negotiation of a league among the principal Italian powers and their allies – essentially a mutual nonaggression pact – which secured an uneasy peace until the Milanese-inspired invasion of the French king Charles VIII in 1494.[5]

Only a city of great wealth could defend and, when necessary, wage war on two fronts; yet Venice in the mid-fifteenth century was surely that – a city of extraordinary prosperity. Like the mother city Constantinople, which it imitated in so many ways,[6] Venice played an intermediary role, negotiating the exchange and interchange of men, ideas, and especially goods between Europe and Asia. It served, in William H. McNeil's words, as the "hinge of Europe."[7] The foundation of Venice's prosperity was trade. Venetian merchants served as crucial middlemen along the trade routes that extended between the Black and the Baltic Seas. Throughout the fifteenth century, the government sent its state-owned merchant galleys on voyages to Cyprus, Crete, Beirut, Alexandria, Tana, Trebizond, the Barbary Coast, Aigues-Mortes, Flanders, and London. These ships carried in their holds an extraordinary variety of goods, everything from bulk items such as cheese, wine, grain, cotton, and wool to precious luxury commodities including oriental spices, silken cloth, and human slaves. The huge profits that Venice made in trade (the 1455 shipwreck of two galleys returning