

ONE

INTRODUCTION

Printing the New World in Early Modern Venice

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
— T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

The winding course of the *Merceria* – the historic, commercial thoroughfare that runs through the heart of Venice between the Rialto and San Marco – eventually leads to the curious façade of the church of San Giuliano, easy to miss in the bustling city center. Set back in the *campo* of the church and slightly removed from this central artery is a memorial to the doctor and philologist Tommaso Rangone (c. 1493–1577) (Figure 1). A triumphal arch surrounds a lunette above the church’s doorway, framing a bronze statue of Rangone, seated in a reconstruction of his study, all perched atop a fictive sarcophagus. Rangone commissioned the prominent Venetian architect Jacopo Sansovino, at the peak of his fame and influence, to undertake this memorial. The lunette functions as a tomb monument, in which Sansovino creatively transported the location of Rangone’s grave from the inside of the church to its more visible and monumental outside wall, transforming San Giuliano into a kind of self-glorifying, personal mausoleum.¹

Originally from Ravenna, Rangone settled in Venice in 1528, eventually becoming a lecturer at the University of Padua, an astrologer and astronomer, a doctor to the Venetian fleet, and an advisor to the republic on issues of



1. Jacopo Sansovino, statue of Tommaso Rangone. San Giuliano, Venice, 1553–1557. With permission from Alinari Archives, Florence.

sanitation. His social origins increasingly at odds with his newfound wealth, he spent much of his life aspiring for status in the city and harboring hopes of being admitted into the Venetian nobility. Rangone was an avid collector, and his library included a variety of globes, charts, and world maps of the Americas, as well as precious stones from the New World.² Like many *nouveaux riches* and Venetian *cittadini*, he purchased his reputation, in part by developing an impressive career as a patron of architecture. He became well known for his obsession with having his image prominently displayed in the institutions he supported. His ambitions as procurator of the church of San Giuliano led him to approach Sansovino, who completed the commissioned façade in 1559.

Executed in collaboration with his student Alessandro Vittoria, who cast Rangone's bronze statue, the façade was contrived by Sansovino to represent a calculated celebration of Rangone's career. Latin, Greek, and Hebrew inscriptions, as well as a lectern, a celestial globe, and classicizing architectural elements in Istrian stone, all surround the seated Rangone and demonstrate his familiarity with the world of classical antiquity in ways early modern viewers would have expected. More surprisingly, however, Sansovino also included a terrestrial

globe turned to display the Atlantic World, including the eastern coast of the American continent, and Rangone's hand, extended just below it, grasps a three-dimensional branch of guaiacum: a medicinal plant from that same part of the world, believed to cure syphilis, also thought to have its origins in the Americas.³ A specialist in this disease, Rangone was the author of *De mali Galleci ortu et nomine* (1537). Sansovino's monument emphasized Rangone's learned image not only through traditional Renaissance motifs such as a lectern, books, and classical inscriptions but also with a map of the New World and a sculptural embodiment of its products. Notably, the architect memorialized the public virtues of a private citizen in Venice in part by exalting his medical expertise as informed by his knowledge of the New World. That is to say, by the middle of the sixteenth century, an image of culture and learning in the eyes of Venetian patrons, artists, and audiences was represented not only through the language of classicism but also through a rhetoric of global worldliness and a portrayal of the Americas, just a stone's throw away from the Piazza San Marco itself and the ceremonial heart of the city.⁴

Even the most casual student of Venice and its history knows that Venice is a city of the East. Founded at intentional remove from the crossroads of Roman trade and civilization, the city's architecture – its ogee arches, mihrab windows, and mosaics – mimics forms from Cairo and Damascus, emphasizing visual motifs from the Byzantine, Islamic, and especially Mamluk worlds in the Eastern Mediterranean. Venice is, uncontestedly, an Eastern city, in its foundation myths, historic relationships of trade, and aesthetics.⁵ What is less known, however, is that during the course of the sixteenth century, Venice also became a city of the Americas: not so much in its visual, material, or even commercial forms, but in its print culture and, more significantly, in the mental universe of its learned citizens and their ways of thinking about the wider world.

Very few Venetians actually traveled to the New World in the early modern period, yet a variety of Venetian armchair travelers – writers, editors, map-makers, printmakers, and cosmographers – developed a series of reactions to the Americas that revealed Venetian visions of European exploration. These visions often resisted or denied the importance of Iberian expansion by downplaying Iberian achievements in comparison to the glory of the Venetian past or by inserting Venetians as fictive or virtual players into the drama of the Age of Encounters. Venetians at times also embraced the emergence of these new empires by seeing curious and surprising reflections of themselves in news and images from the Americas; for instance, they valorized Columbus and rooted his voyages in the travels of Marco Polo, saw Venice and Tenochtitlan as reflections of one another, and likened Italians to New World peoples. A variety of sixteenth-century Venetian texts, maps, and prints about the New World demonstrate how learned elites often viewed the Columbian voyages,

the conquests of Mexico and Peru, and encounters in the New World in general through the lens of Venetian history, especially the city's colonialism in the Mediterranean and exploration of the Far East. This book explores the ways in which Venetian culture grappled with the surge of new knowledge arriving from the Americas and employed a variety of rhetorical strategies to reconfigure Italian and European conceptions of geography and assert the centrality of Venice in the first global age.

Rather than through painted representations, the collection of American objects, or actual travel to the Americas, Venetians developed their ideas about the New World through the matrix of their presses, which were noted around Europe for their voluminous output. At the end of the sixteenth century, when the Roman Inquisition pressed the Friulian miller Menocchio to explain the origins of his heretical thoughts, he responded that his ideas had come from books printed in Venice.⁶ In *I marmi*, the Venetian writer and *poligrafo* Anton Francesco Doni claimed that even Florentines – coming from a city amply furnished with booksellers – arrived in Venice armed with lists of books that could be found only in the lagoon city.⁷ More than 150 printshops and bookstores crowded Venice's city center between San Marco and the Rialto, and in the preface to his Latin grammar *De latinae linguae reparation* (Venice, 1493), Marcantonio Sabellico, then a teacher of rhetoric at the school of San Marco in Venice, described pedestrians unable to tear themselves way from the stalls and piles of books displayed for sale in the *Merceria*.⁸ Erasmus himself remarked on the fame and pervasiveness of Venetian print culture, pointing out that books, maps, and prints “shipped from Venice to foreign countries immediately find a readier market merely because they bear that city's imprint.”⁹ Venetian prints and books, beginning with the printed texts of Aldus Manutius and continuing through the sixteenth century, traveled everywhere and were avidly sought out by European readers.¹⁰ Writers also knew that Venice was the print capital of Europe and endeavored to publish their texts there; as we shall see, Italian cosmographers and naturalists such as Bernardo Sylvanus, Lorenzo D'Anania, Pietro Andrea Mattioli, and Castore Durante all brought their New World texts to the lagoon city for publication, and every significant cartographer of note that built a career in the city had foreign origins.

The European Age of Encounters unfolded concurrently with the print revolution, and they directly influenced each other.¹¹ Columbus's landfall at San Salvador retains a pride of place in global history, more so than the Norse settlement in Newfoundland, in large part because Columbus wrote about his voyage, and printing presses rapidly disseminated his news. If early modernism was characterized by a great deal of mobility, print represented a “critically important strand in this constellation of change and movement.”¹² The relationship between print and discovery, however, was not always predictable. The absence of printing in the Ottoman world, for instance, handicapped

scholarly exchange about otherwise intrepid Ottoman exploration, and while Portugal was on the forefront of fifteenth-century navigation, logging more voyages than any other European state, most travel narratives produced by the Portuguese remained unpublished manuscripts or first appeared in print in Italy, or later, in the Low Countries, rather than in Portugal itself.¹³ The same can be said for Spain.¹⁴ Unlike the Ottomans or the Portuguese, the Venetians did not undertake global exploration to any notable degree in the sixteenth century, but Venice became one of the most important centers of print culture in early modern Europe. The Venetian press grew to publish between 15,000 and 17,500 editions in the sixteenth century alone. This represented half or more of all the books printed in Cinquecento Italy, and the expansion of the Venetian press neatly coincided with the accelerated pace of European exploration.¹⁵ Generally speaking, printshops in Florence distinguished themselves for their publication of classical texts and literature; in Rome, for sacred texts and theology; in Turin, for scientific texts; and in Venice, for Arabic texts, history, philosophy, and travel literature.¹⁶ If print “revolutionize[d] the transfer of knowledge in the early modern world,” Venetian presses, in this way, brought the New World to Europe.¹⁷

If Italy in general was “one of the greatest centers for the spread of information about the discoveries,” Venice developed a unique position with respect to the discoveries as *the* print capital of early modern Europe.¹⁸ Venetians famously lived by news as much as by trade, and the city represented “the leading center of information and communication in Europe,” rivaled only by the cities of Genoa, Antwerp, and Rome.¹⁹ Among the seemingly endless kinds of information and arrays of books to be found in the sixteenth-century city, texts about the New World abounded. As Theodore Cachey put it, “writing represented for these Italians a key instrument of spatial invention-intervention,” suggesting that while the Iberians conquered and colonized land and territory in a variety of new worlds, Venetian editors and translators produced and mediated an understanding of the conquests in print and, in turn, colonized the knowledge.²⁰ Italian and indeed European literature about the New World was largely shaped in Venice, as the city occupied a prominent position in the transmission of information about the Americas.²¹ News of the Columbian voyages arrived first in Barcelona, Rome, Paris, and Florence, and Venetian presses in fact published nothing about the New World in the fifteenth century, making Venetian printmen latecomers to New World publication.²² After 1505, however, Venice functioned as one of the main clearinghouses of New World information through its production and diffusion of texts about exploration and conquest in the Americas, including accounts of the Columbian voyages, the travels of Vespucci, the conquest of the Yucatan and central Mexico, and Pizarro’s conquest of Peru. For the encounter with the Americas to produce knowledge, it needed to be textually

represented, and the Venetians clearly capitalized on this process, avidly collecting information about the Americas and mediating the dissemination of this knowledge to the rest of Italy and Europe.

Europeans often learned of Spanish activities through Italian translations, and Italian literature and maps were regularly among the first to offer representations of New World events, places, and commodities. To list just a few such examples: the first known printed world map to depict North America and the Columbian voyages was the Contarini–Rosselli map (1506) (Chapter 4, Figure 16), designed in part by the Venetian cosmographer Giovanni Matteo Contarini and most likely printed in Venice. Benedetto Bordone’s *isolario* (1528), entitled *Il libro di Benedetto Bordone*, contained the first printed map specifically of what we today call North America (Chapter 4, Figure 17).²³ Venetian presses produced some of the earliest and most significant treatments of Columbus’s voyages.²⁴ The city’s publications first described and depicted both the tomato and the cacao plant.²⁵ Venetian maps were among the earliest to employ the toponyms of Canada and Brazil.²⁶ The second edition of Benedetto Bordone’s *isolario* (1534) offered the first printed account of Pizarro’s conquests in Peru, and the earliest discussion of Peruvian architecture and urban planning in Cuzco was also first published in Venice.²⁷ “Firstness” is by no means always an important indicator of historical significance; nevertheless, in this instance, this concentration of firsts pointed to the central role the city would play in the transmission of geographic knowledge to Europe. In addition, Venetian print culture contributed directly to the formation of the atlas – and the New World’s place in it – as well as to the creation of the Black Legend. The staggering quantity and variety of Venetian printed texts and images about the Americas prompt questions about how Venetians obtained their knowledge and what they had to say about lands they had never seen, questions that have hitherto been overlooked as a result of the traditional understanding that Venetians were little concerned with events in the Atlantic World.

While the idea of an *American Venice* may at first seem surprising, in many ways, it should not be. The Portuguese had begun to explore “unknown” worlds along the African coast in the mid-fifteenth century; however, aside from these Portuguese endeavors, Venetians had otherwise developed an informed, global mentality long before much of the rest of Europe, so much so that from their perspective, Habsburg expansion was in many ways a mere extension of what Venetians already knew. Venice had long-established and tangible links to the Far East, allowing for a worldly consciousness that went far beyond the Mediterranean.²⁸ As the Venetian traveler to the Near East Giosafat Barbaro (1413–1494) put it, “a large part of this [world] . . . would be unknown if Venetian merchants and sailors hadn’t discovered it.”²⁹ Knowledge of the New World – even as explorers began to question the degree to

which this “new world” was a part of Asia – was not new, but merely confirmed and extended what Venetians had already known for centuries: that Asia was on the far side of the known world, and that its riches exceeded expectations.

Compared to the Venetians, most other European powers had relatively little substantive knowledge of what lay beyond the Holy Land before the end of the fifteenth century. Europeans had compiled the Hereford world map, gone on crusades, hosted Mongol ambassadors at their courts, seasoned their dishes with pepper, cloves, and nutmeg, and read Marco Polo, Prester John, and Mandeville; they understood intellectually that a wider world existed and had some sense of what was out there. Western knowledge of the non-European world, however, often remained shadowy and confused, consisting largely of scraps of information and fanciful legends. Italians in general, especially the Venetians and the Genoese, could by contrast claim the praxis of more global engagement, especially with the faraway world of the East.³⁰ Venetian horizons extended from the North Sea to China, from Poland to North and West Africa, Persia, and India, all before 1492. The Venetians were by no means without parallel; there were Florentines in Timbuktu in the fourteenth century, and late medieval Jewish merchant families maintained wide connections between Spain, Kiev, and India. Nevertheless, among Europeans broadly cast, Venetians were precocious. They were among the few who had the most knowledge of the wider world before the Columbian voyages.

As the historian Alberto Tenenti put it, “In Asia, the Venetians found themselves confronted with such a rich array of customs and practices that the Iberians or other westerners did not discover anything substantially new in the Americas. [The ideas of] discovery and anthropological engagement were for them already well established before [Europeans] arrived on the shores of the New World.”³¹ According to Tenenti, there exists no example of Venetian travelers employing the expression “other world” even among the most distant lands or in reaction to the most unusual foreign practices, since Venetians had the sense that “all regions were a part of one world and their inhabitants a part of a unified humanity.”³² Tenenti surely exaggerated – indeed, any reader of Marco Polo knows that he occasionally raised an eyebrow at the things that he saw – yet Venetian print culture confirms the existence of a grain of truth in Tenenti’s ideas. Knowledge of the New World, as much as it was “news,” remained a mere extension of a pre-existing global mentality and an affirmation of Venetians’ age-old knowledge of the expansiveness of the world. And as we shall see, Marco Polo figured prominently in Venetian printed texts about the New World, which was, for many Venetians, just another part of Polo’s Asia. Polo served as Venetians’ most fundamental reference point for travel and exploration and framed Venetians’ understanding of the Americas. Many if not most authors of Venetian Americana

understood the New World through the matrix of Polo and his travels in Asia, and Venetians regularly linked Polo, in a variety of ways, to Columbus and the exploration of the New World.

Though a seemingly unassailable maritime and territorial empire in the late Middle Ages – the center of the European spice trade, with a virtual monopoly in the trade of pepper – Venice suffered substantial territorial losses in the first half of the sixteenth century. In the summer of 1509, the League of Cambrai spectacularly defeated Venetian forces at Agnadello, resulting in the loss of almost the entire Venetian mainland state in the battle that has come to symbolize the end of the age of Venetian triumphalism.³³ Among other maritime defeats, Venice lost the Peloponnesian island of Modone – one of the strategic “eyes” of the republic – to Ottoman forces in 1500, followed by its colony on Corfu in 1537. Much of this territory was recovered, but Venetian superiority in Mediterranean and European trade was slowly eclipsed by the emerging supremacy of Spanish, Ottoman, and Northern European traders. Among these, the Habsburgs especially humbled and hemmed in Italy; they colonized roughly a third of Italian territory in the sixteenth century, adding to Venetian concerns in the face of Spanish advancement. Venetians also demonstrated considerable worry about the newly plotted Portuguese maritime route to India and its potential to encroach upon the city’s spice trade. Managing to shift from international markets to a series of more regional and local ones during the course of the sixteenth century, the Venetian economy was not as seriously damaged by these changes as historians once thought.³⁴ Nevertheless, the city’s commercial fortunes were in decline in exactly the same time period that Iberian empires were on the rise. Confronted with these changes, Venetian writers, printmen, editors, cosmographers, and cartographers wielded their editorial and artistic tools to make sense of the new global order, mobilizing a variety of rhetorical strategies to shore up images of Venetian superiority at a time when the city’s political and economic prestige were on the wane.

A consideration of the relationship between Venice and the Americas necessarily entails noting that the terminology surrounding the history of early modern European exploration has long been fraught with anachronism and Eurocentrism. It is largely framed by the colonial experience and its binary identities of colonizer–colonized and colony–metropole, in turn often missing more nuanced and hybrid forms of interactions.³⁵ It is difficult to situate observers like Venetians amid this language, since they existed on neither side of these relationships, and in many ways challenge such binary thought. Replacing the “Age of Discovery” or the “Age of Exploration” with the more neutral and evenly weighted “Age of Encounters” helps to overcome the limitations of some of these binaries by recognizing these complex global interactions as encounters among different parts of the world rather than the “discovery” of one part by another. Yet the notion of discovery remains

problematic in other ways as well. Contemporary Ottoman activity in the Indian Ocean, for instance, tends to be less known than the time-honored narratives of the European landing in the Americas, but in terms of the territory added to the Ottoman sovereigns' sway, the achievements of Columbus and Cortés were dwarfed by those of their Turkish contemporaries. Far from a pale imitation of the European voyages of exploration, Ottoman expansion into the Indian Ocean was much greater than that of Europeans in the Atlantic. As the historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto put it, whereas Muslim merchants were extremely well connected, the European age of expansion was launched “from the insecure edges of a contracting civilization” on the part of small and sparsely populated states that were only scantily endowed in natural resources compared to the wealthy Ottoman Empire at the height of its power.³⁶ Furthermore, as Eviatar Zerubavel has persuasively argued, America was by no means “discovered” in 1492; it took Europeans hundreds of years to fully grasp its geography.³⁷ The notion of discovery – historians are quick to remind us – is entirely relative.³⁸

In addition, it remains impossible to fully neutralize basic terms such as “America,” “New World,” or even “Western Hemisphere,” all of which remain laden with Eurocentric and colonial meaning. Along similar lines, the Atlantic was just emerging in the sixteenth century as a geopolitical entity; the “Atlantic World” represents a way of describing this region that has evolved only since the 1960s, and it too is anachronistic and imperfect.³⁹ Though some scholars find this lexicon to be problematic, many if not most of these terms have become conventional, and I too will use them here. The concept of discovery, furthermore, is not entirely to be discarded, since where the reception of ideas and information about the Americas in Europe was concerned, Europeans “discovered” a lot during the Age of Encounters. The act of discovery – of both the self and the other – happened as much in Italy as it did in the New World. Venetians were among the most significant virtual and vicarious explorers of the Americas, and investigating the myriad ways in which they received and configured knowledge and representations of the New World helps to move discussions about the Age of Encounters beyond the acts of conquest and domination, as well as beyond the more obvious commercial, political, and economic components of conquest. While the actual activities and experiences of Iberian and other agents in the Americas were, of course, entirely structured by their colonial ambitions, Venetian engagement with the Americas was devoid of colonial implications. This book emphasizes, therefore, the complexity of the term “discovery” and uses it to discuss a land that always existed. Whenever “discovery” is employed here, it is to evoke the exploratory nature with which Venetians reacted to the New World. While some Italians traveled to the Americas in the early modern period, for the most part, Venetians – and the Europeans who read their

printed texts – did not “discover” the New World by going there but by reading about it at home. They made their own discovery of America, mostly secondhand, and in doing so, discovered much about themselves. That is, they learned much about their own anxieties, interests, and identities, which they then communicated to Europe at large through the mechanism of print.

Pursuing these claims, *The Venetian Discovery of America* contributes to our understanding of how Europeans wrestled with the conceptual challenges of discovery and conquest during the making of the early modern Atlantic World. This scholarship includes the venerable studies of John Huxtable Elliott, *The Old World and the New* (1970), Anthony Grafton’s *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* (1992), Anthony Pagden’s *European Encounters with the New World* (1993), and Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s seminal volume *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (1995). To date, no one has explored these concepts through the lens of Venice, despite the fact that Venice is commonly acknowledged as one of the most important centers for the production of texts and maps of the New World.⁴⁰ Along these lines, this study considers how knowledge is mediated, building on works such as Edmundo O’Gorman’s *The Invention of America*. Again, in this context, the Venetian case is a fascinating one deserving greater scrutiny. As the pivot of European preeminence shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, how older, Mediterranean powers like Venice sought to defend their centrality in changing circumstances will tell us much about the movement and politics of knowledge: one of the essential goals of this study.

Scholarship among colonial Latin Americanists and ethnohistorians has consistently worked to uncover the agency of participants in the New World encounters who did not leave written records. It has revealed both indigenous ontologies and the role of Africans in the early modern Atlantic, and has encouraged historians to de-emphasize the role of the nation in the Atlantic World in favor of more hybrid perspectives.⁴¹ While not the subject of my investigation here, these studies remind us of the myriad ways in which European knowledge of the New World was regularly mediated by and derived from forms of indigenous knowledge. In European historiography, the acts of conquest, the imperial gaze, the politics of colonialism, and relationships between Europeans and indigenous peoples, by contrast, have traditionally garnered the most attention, with a customary focus on Iberian, French, or English interactions in the Atlantic World. For instance, Barbara Fuchs has demonstrated how the Spanish conquest of the Americas acted as an extension of the *reconquista* of the Moors, and Ricardo Padrón has tied the invention of America in literature and cartography to the development of “Spanish *grandeza*.”⁴² Michael Householder’s *Inventing Americans in the Age of Discovery* focuses on the English colonization of North America through the study of English travel writing, revising David Quinn’s comprehensive