

Venice, not so glorious upon closer inspection

by Nora Hamerman

The Glory of Venice: Art in the Eighteenth Century

Edited by Jane Martineau and Andrew Robison
Yale University Press, New Haven and London,
1994

527 pages, illus., with bibliography; \$55
hardbound, \$39.95 softbound.

Temporal coincidence may be about the weakest form of causality, although it is frequently resorted to, by ambitious politicians and sloppy journalists. Thus, "it stopped raining," or, the Berlin Wall fell "during my administration," therefore "I take credit for this positive change"—if I am George Bush, for example. It was not much more convincing when Andrew Robison, the otherwise punctilious curator of the exhibition "The Glory of Venice"—seen late last year at the Royal Academy of Arts in London and on view Jan. 29-April 23 at the Washington, D.C. National Gallery of Art—told the press that the exhibition of Venetian paintings, prints, and drawings of the 18th century is related to the American founding fathers, who, like Venice, he alleged, exemplified the thinking of the Enlightenment. It's just not so.

But the exhibition is worth seeing, for two somewhat contrary reasons. One is that viewing such a broad range of the art of Venice at the time when the treacherous "republic" was at its nadir of overt political power but at its zenith of cultural hegemony (and hence of covert political power) is bound to offer valuable lessons regarding the manner and means of cultural warfare and subversion practiced by Venice's latter-day oligarchist pupils today centered in the City of London.

The second reason, which will be developed in the last part of this review, is that there were indeed real artists in Venice, particularly among those individuals who had a gift for penetrating into the bizarre mix of comedy and tragedy which surrounded Venice, and often among those who were the less famous in their own day.

Just to set the record straight: The "Serenissima Repubblica" of Venice in its waning days, before it fell to the invading Napoleonic army in 1797, was coincident in time, but opposite in intention, to the noble experiment of founding the American Republic. One crucial example can be cited:

The principles embodied in the preamble to the U.S. Constitution, to "form a more perfect Union" and "to promote the general welfare," were in polemical opposition to the imperial looting programs of the British East India Company masquerading as "free trade," whose ideologues such as Adam Smith were straight plagiarists of the Venetian 18th-century proto-"game theorist," Giammaria Ortes, who pioneered such anti-human ideas as the earth's "limited carrying capacity" and "overpopulation."

What was Venice?

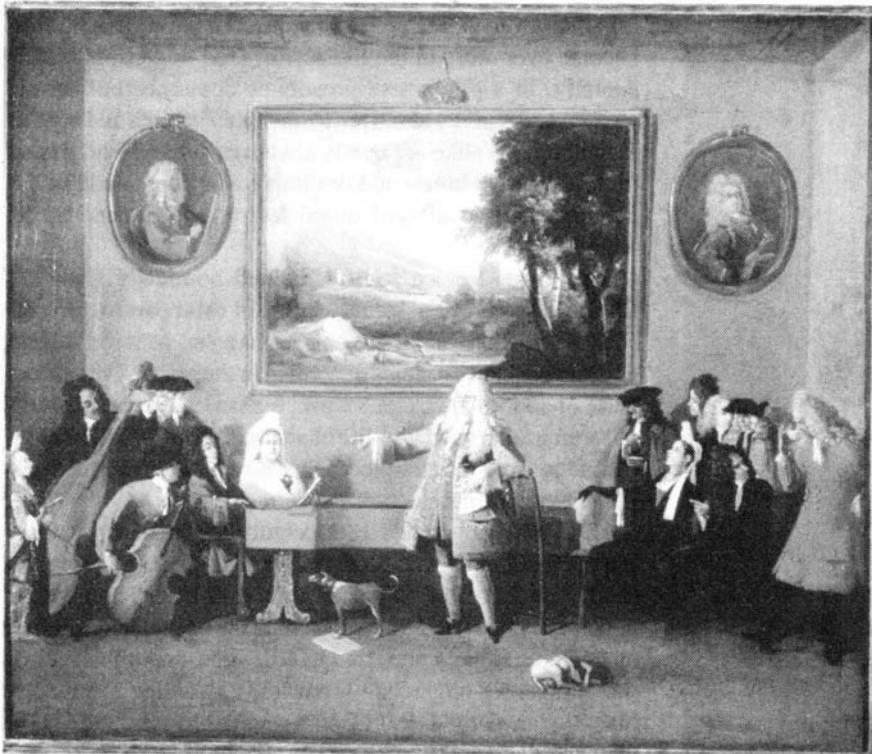
A number of articles in *EIR*, *New Federalist*, and *Fidelio* magazine over recent years have developed the image of Venice—which is often presented as a second center of the Renaissance after Florence—as a capital of the world oligarchy which took on all the characteristics of oriental despotism from the Babylonian and Byzantine empires and never really became part of western civilization.

From Webster Tarpley's Nov. 18, 1994 article in *EIR*, entitled "Venice's War against Western Civilization," we take the following succinct description of the Venetian oligarchist mentality: "Oligarchs identify wealth purely in money terms, and practice usury, monetarism, and looting at the expense of technological advancement and physical production. Oligarchs have always been associated with the arbitrary rejection of true scientific discovery and scientific method in favor of open anti-science or more subtle obscurantist pseudo-science. . . . The oligarchy has constantly stressed race and racial characteristics, often as a means for justifying slavery."

Tarpley explained: "A pillar of the oligarchical system is the family fortune, or *fondo*; as it is called in Italian. The continuity of the family fortune which earns money through usury and looting is often more important than the biological continuity across generations of the family that owns the fortune. In Venice, the largest *fondo* was the endowment of the Basilica of St. Mark, which was closely associated with the Venetian state treasury, and which absorbed the family fortunes of nobles who died without heirs."

By sometime in the early 16th century, the oligarchs who ruled Venice had determined they could not directly destroy the greatest fruits of the Golden Renaissance which had spread from Florence in the second half of the 15th century—modern science, and the modern nation-state—and therefore, they determined to *undermine* these from within.

As Tarpley put it in "Palmerston's London During the 1850s, a Tour of the Human, Multicultural Zoo" (*EIR*, April 15, 1994), from the early 16th century onward, "Venice was a cancer consciously planning its own metastasis. From their lagoon, the Venetians chose a swamp and an island facing the North Atlantic—Holland and the British Isles. Here the hegemonic *Giovani* party would relocate their family fortunes, their *fondi*, and their characteristic epistemology. France was also colonized, but the main bets were placed



"The Opera Rehearsal," painted in London by Marco Ricci, c. 1609. (Private collection, U.S.A.)

further north."

Tarpley further explained this in "How the Dead Souls of Venice Corrupted Science," (*EIR*, Sept. 23, 1994). There were three consecutive important groups of "Venetian dead souls" who attempted to suffocate scientific discovery by "using formalism and the fetishism of authoritative professional opinion." The first were active in the first part of the 1500s, the second group opposed Johannes Kepler in the early 1600s, and the third group, around Antonio Conti and Giammaria Ortes in the early 1700s, coincides with the paintings exhibited in the London-Washington show.

The apotheosis of the occultist magician Sir Isaac Newton as a "great scientist" which is almost universally accepted today—despite the fact that his only "achievement" was a distorted cribbing from Kepler—was arranged, as Tarpley shows, by Antonio Conti of Venice, who succeeded in shaping a network of French Anglophiles and posed himself as a "mediator" in the polemic over the calculus then raging between Newton and the great German economist, physicist, and philosopher Leibniz, when in fact he was a total partisan of Newton's reductionist views.

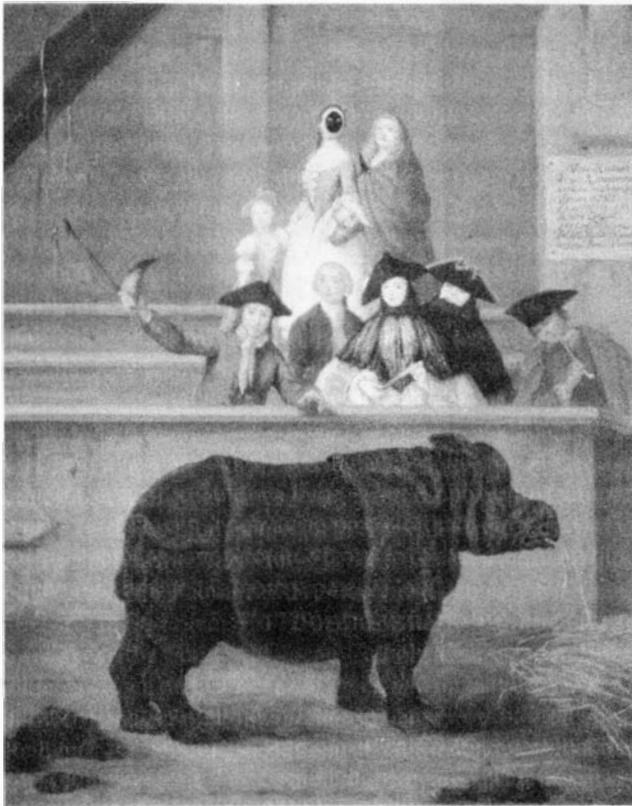
Then there was Algarotti, another Venetian in Conti's circles who wrote, in Italian, *Newtonian Philosophy for Ladies*. Algarotti was a close friend of the most celebrated French libertine, Voltaire, whose short novel *Candide*, was a "distillation of Venetian cultural pessimism expressed as a raving attack on Leibniz, through the vicious caricature Dr. Pangloss." Algarotti was also involved in forming the homosexual harem around British ally Frederick the Great of Prus-

sia, who made Algarotti his court chamberlain at the palace of Sanssouci in Potsdam.

Compare Venice with the real Renaissance

Keeping all of the above in mind as background, it was most instructive that there was an overlap of six weeks between another major show at the National Gallery, the one dedicated to Italian Renaissance Architecture, and the Venice show. The visitor who studied the magnificent models of St. Peter's, the Cathedral of Florence, and the Cathedral of Pavia, dating from the mid-1400s to the end of the 1500s, and then walked to the other wing of the West Building to see the Venice show, would have been struck by how much of the stylistic forms of the Renaissance were metamorphosed, yet still recognizable, two centuries later in the Venetian art.

The famous Venetian "view" paintings seem to capture many of the architectural forms which Brunelleschi, Bramante, Michelangelo, and others had rediscovered and recast from Greco-Roman antiquity, and to bathe them in the brilliant light for which Venetian art has long been famous. By comparison with French imitations of the same era (let alone the Impressionist School of a century later) these pictures have, undeniably, much to charm the eye and even to appeal to the intellect. But it is when one studies the treatment of the human figure, and human relations within "history paintings," which from the 1300s onward were always the pivot of Italian art, that a startling insight is gained into the Venetian version of the Renaissance. Saints, or ancient heroes, when



"The Rhinoceros," 1751, by Pietro Longhi. (Ca' Rezzonico, Venice)

they appeared in paintings of the original Renaissance, are shown undertaking significant deeds within appropriately beautiful settings. Typically for the cycles of Bible stories and saints' lives in the 15th-century Renaissance, it is only in the final painting of the mural cycle that we encounter the hero in ecstasy, contemplating his or her own death and transport to the purely spiritual realm. The mystical state which the saint attains is always affirmed as an important reality, but it is "earned" and truly continuous with his self-transformation and constant growth of character seen in his earthly actions.

In Venetian art, all these intermediate steps are ruled out or turned into mere incidentals in the spectacle of martyrdom or ecstasy, as the paintings by Piazzetta, one of the featured artists in the exhibit, especially show ("Virgin and Child Appearing to St. Philip Neri," 1725; "Guardian Angel with St. Anthony of Padua and St. Gaetano Thiene," 1727; and "Ecstasy of St. Francis," 1729). This is not merely because in the wake of the Council of Trent, Catholic Church authorities clamped down on the range of legend and fantasy artists were allowed to use in weaving narratives of the lives of the saints. Rather, it is a genuine subversion and ultimate reversal of the Christian-humanist message of the Renaissance, in which man, born in the image of God with the potential to create in

imitation of the Creator, strives through his own actions to become ever more in the likeness of God as well. Not accidentally, in a city where prostitutes outnumbered married women and nuns by about ten to one, holy women and mythological figures alike are nearly always portrayed with a good deal of exposed breast and/or dimpled derriere to add titillation to whatever alleged moral lesson is contained in the picture.

Although Venice itself remained nominally Catholic, Christianity played a distant second or third part to the Reasons of the State in the City of the Lagoon, as it did largely in the Protestant satrapies of Venice in the north, Amsterdam and London. In Piazzetta's work, his famous genre paintings of fortune tellers and low-life characters blend almost without distinction into the altarpieces, because both share a preoccupation with the momentary sensation.

The most celebrated 18th-century Venetian artist on an international scale was Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, renowned as a "great decorator." Tiepolo's pictures share the sensationalism of Piazzetta, but instead of semi-bestialized low-life characters, Tiepolo preferred to turn almost all of his figures into simpering oligarchs. A particularly telling example is his "St. James the Great Conquering the Moors" (1749), in which the conquered "Moor" is shown as a black African slave, a rather explicit acknowledgment of Venice's role in establishing the black African slave trade two centuries earlier. But for all his tremendous celebrity, then and now, it is only slightly exaggerated to observe that all of Tiepolo's vast output—like airline food—looks and tastes alike.

The exhibit offers a multitude of examples of how Venice "metastitized" into northern Europe, particularly into Great Britain, then building its world empire on the Venetian model of looting and exploitation: Among these, is a picture which is the combined effort of three famous Venetian artists, Canaletto, Piazzetta, and Cimaroli (1726), the "Allegorical Tomb of John, Lord Somers," or the hilariously titled "Allegorical Tomb of Admiral Sir Cloudisley Shovell" by Marco and Sebastiano Ricci (1725). Likewise, one of Piazzetta's most elegantly illustrated books is *Il Newtonianismo per le Dame, ovvero dialoghi sopra la luce e i colori*, the aforementioned *Newtonian Philosophy for Ladies*, published by one of the most famous Venetian publishers, Giambattista Pasquali. The catalog entry recounts, "The author simplified Newton's scientific theories of light and discussed the existence of mechanical laws governing the celestial bodies; the fact that it was first published anonymously and with the place of publication falsely given as Naples, whereas it was probably published in Venice or Padua, may have been a precautionary measure to avoid Venetian censorship in a city that still defended the belief in the divine nature of the celestial world." Publisher Pasquali, described as a shrewd businessman, was a close friend of Consul Smith, the English consul who fostered the close relations between Venetian art and British aristocratic collectors.



"Ruins of the Kreuzkirche," 1765, by Bernardo Bellotto. (Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen)

But irony also intrudes

This is not to say that everything in this show is merely sensationalist propaganda for the Venetian world-outlook. Two artists who conformed less and stood in the shadow of their more successful relatives, stand out for a more thoughtful contribution to the history of art and thought. One is the nephew of the famous view-painter Antonio Canaletto, Bernardo Bellotto, who also went by the name "Canaletto." It seems to be the view of the exhibit's curators that Bellotto surpassed his uncle in depth of feeling and originality, and this is a view with which this reviewer concurs. Bellotto left Venice to travel widely throughout northern Italy and northern Europe, adopting a somber palette which is distinctively his own. His picture of "The Ruins of the Kreuzkirche in Dresden" (1765) is shocking for its almost photographic realism, and at first glance one might think it depicts Dresden after the World War II firebombing.

Giandomenico Tiepolo, the son of the famous decorator, added a touch of melancholy irony to his drawings, paintings, and etchings which often surpass the productions of the slapdash father. His 24 etchings of the "Flight into Egypt" were certainly influenced by Rembrandt, not only in the technique of using black and white to achieve an incredible coloristic range of shades, but also in his imaginative creation of sub-episodes and sidelights of the bare Biblical narrative, reminiscent of Rembrandt's treatment of the story of Tobias.

Then there is Pietro Longhi, who specialized in the small narrative genre scenes which were often painted by other Venetian artists as a sideline. Longhi's insights into Venetian hypocrisy are delicate and ironical, as in the most famous of his pictures, featured in the Washington show, of masked

Venetian aristocrats viewing a rhinoceros.

A number of other genre paintings are witty documents of Venetian practices and ideology. The view painter Francesco Guardi gives a peek into the sinister environment of the gambling casinos where Giammaria Ortes developed his theories of statistical chance and probability, "The Ridotto," 1754-58, which corresponds in date precisely to Ortes's first writings.

Much earlier, Marco Ricci, a Venetian artist who traveled with his more famous relative Sebastiano Ricci to England in 1712-16, left a memorable image of an opera rehearsal in London from the days when opera was dominated by male castrati sopranos, one of Venice's leading exports of the day. The influence of Venice on musical life in Europe, particularly in Vienna and throughout the German-speaking countries as well as in England, can hardly be overestimated. Mozart's Italian librettist, Lorenzo da Ponte, was also Venetian, which affords something of an explanation of the immoral features of *Don Giovanni* which later perplexed Beethoven. Curator Robison pointed out that Sebastiano Ricci's picture, "The Punishment of Cupid" (1706-07), is typical of the Venetian/Enlightenment mentality, in that Cupid, shown being whipped and plucked by winged avengers after he abandons Psyche, is allowed to enjoy his illicit pleasures but that ultimately justice is done, as in the dénouement of the Mozart opera *Don Giovanni*, where the libertine hero is taken to hell after seeming to get away with everything until the end of the opera. One can't help suspecting that for Venice, which managed to maintain significant cultural influence long after the demise of the Republic in 1797, the pleasures still seem more important than the pain—especially if the pain can be passed along to others.