THE VENICE IN PERIL FUND
NEWSLETTER SUMMER 2014
Dear Friend and Supporter, “Why doesn’t the Venice in Peril Fund change its name?” I was recently asked. “That ‘in Peril’ bit puts people off, added to which it’s not true any longer.” The questioner must have caught my unforgiving stare. “Well, is it?” Fortunately for us both, I hadn’t time to steamroller him with facts about population decline, rising sea levels, cruise ships or any of those myriad ills which make 21st-century Venice seem the perfect fulfilment of that ironic Chinese curse “May you live in interesting times!”

What I did instead was quietly to point out that others working, like us, to keep the city upright and alive have broadly similar notions of its endangered status. One of the many advantages for Venice in Peril of operating within the orbit of the Association of International Private Committees is the awareness that we’re not alone. Initiatives exactly like ours, within Italy itself, from Switzerland, Austria and the USA, from the Netherlands, Scandinavia and France, are dedicating money, enthusiasm and expertise to the recovery and conservation of a remarkably eclectic range of buildings, works of art, documentary archives, furniture, textiles, musical instruments and other precious artefacts.

Names like ‘Venetian Heritage Inc.,’ ‘Save Venice Inc.’ or ’Comité Français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise’ tell a similar story to our own. We are none of us rivals or competitors and from time to time several of us function as a team on individual projects.

In the late 1970s this included the conservation of the mosaics of the Basilica of Torcello (and a monitoring campaign 25 years later) and in the late 1980s, the wonderful 18th-century Sala della Musica at the Ospedaletto, on which 12 international committees collaborated. A current example of this co-operation is the project to conserve the late medieval crucifix in the church of San Zaccaria, where the Stichting Nederlands Venetië Comité has taken the lead to restore this harrowing image, so unusual in the Venetian artistic context of its period. The intention is eventually to hang it in a more easily visible location within the church, so that its powerfully evocative simplicity can be more readily admired.

All over Venice this kind of painstaking recovery goes on under the auspices of our sister committees. At San Sebastiano, for instance, the American Save Venice Inc. is well advanced in its programme of restoring Veronese’s magnificent pictorial scheme of canvases and frescoes. Amid the sober Renaissance grandeur of San Salvador, Venetian Heritage has been busy bringing the church treasury to life and in the Doge’s Palace the Italian committee is overseeing work on a Sansovino statue and financing historical research on the ducal chapel.

Venice in Peril (its name unaltered) takes inspiration and encouragement from enterprises like these. All of us on the various committees labour towards a common goal, in a city with more complex problems than any she has encountered in the past. Among her many churches are those dedicated to the Redeemer, the Saviour, Our Lady of Good Health and Our Lady of Miracles. Each of these different dedications is, in some sense, a challenge to us all in our work for Venice.

Jonathan Keates, Chairman
On the anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, St George’s Church in Campo S. Vio, Dorsoduro has opened an appeal for €17,000 towards the cost of conservation of its monumental bronze doors, which are designated as an official memorial to the British servicemen who died on the Italian front and at sea in the First World War. Venice in Peril Fund has pledged £3000 from its funds and hopes to match it by raising a further £3000 from supporters in this anniversary year. The doors were cast from two cannons provided by the War Council in London, one dating from the Crimean War and a larger gun dated 1795. These were transported from England to Venice freight free by a British ship of the Wilson Line, where, after their identifying marks were removed, they were melted down and the doors cast in the Arsenale, by courtesy of the Italian ministry of Marine.

The architect who advised the Memorial Committee on the design was Commendatore Luigi Marangoni, whose proposal, based on elements of Byzantine inspiration, was approved as designed by the sculptor N. Martinuzzi and carried out by L. Gaggio. The project was completed in 1926, after it was funded by numerous and distinguished benefactors who responded to the appeal chaired by Sir Ronald Graham, then Ambassador in Rome, supported by an Honorary Council drawn from the Army and Navy and ecclesiastical and diplomatic representatives as well as British residents in Venice.

The two doors bear reliefs with the words Ad Rerum Memoriam MCMXIV and Ad Nomimum Honorum MCMXVIII respectively with Latin inscriptions commemorating Ad Honorem soldiers, sailors and airmen. On either side of the doors two bronze panels are inscribed with the names of the cemeteries. To the left are Boscon, Barenthal, Magnaboschi, Cavalletto, Granezza and to the right are Graduscam, Ciarera, Tezze, Montecchio, Precalcino Dueville.

The doors are surmounted by a lunette with a figure bearing staff and orb. On the wall above the door a relief of St George and the Dragon is dated 1926, the date of the completion of the monumental doorway.

A Liber Honoris – Roll of Honour – recording the names of the Fallen is kept inside the church.

In 2008 (the 400th anniversary of St George’s church) Venice in Peril funded the restoration of seven stained glass windows commemorating eminent British residents of Venice — among others Ruskin and Browning. This followed a contribution from the Fund in 1988 when the interior of the church was redecorated.

Frances Clarke
The Arsenale: The Future

Venice has two core areas of open space—the Piazza which was formed to set the Republic’s main public buildings in a public context, and the Arsenale which, by contrast, was walled round, since it was both harbour and factory for the ships which were the motor of the Republic’s wealth. Both were essentially planned in their present form in the 13th century (but have since grown substantially, in area and architecturally). With the Unification of Italy 150 years ago, however, the Arsenale became a state property and naval base; only last winter its ownership was transferred to the Comune di Venezia. While there is logic in that, working out its future will be a demanding task.

Recently, the Arsenale has been known to an international public as the second venue of the Biennale, housing visual arts and architecture installations in its ample spaces like the 1000ft-long Corderie (or rope-works). The quays on the east side have become a promenade and so many have passed the towering and unique Armstrong Mitchell hydraulic crane, installed for the Italian navy in 1884, and learned of the Venice in Peril Fund’s drive to repair it. Today’s Italian Navy occupies structures west of the original entrance and its towers; and various contemporary users have developed along the northern quays, including marine and crane businesses, the Thetis conference venue, and

16th-century docks and the Porta Nuova tower of 1810 now visitor services in the tower by the Porta Nuova (the entrance from the northern lagoon made by the French about 1810).

The fact remains that with the Napoleonic conquest in 1797, and subsequent destruction of all evidence for designing and building Venice’s celebrated ships that was preserved there, the Arsenale has been overlooked. In the words of the Fund’s founding chairman, John Julius Norwich, this could become the greatest museum of the sea in the world. One small step has just been taken: laying the keel for a reconstructed Bucintoro (the gilded state barge of the Doges); presumably it will be moored in its original 16th-century boatshed near the entrance. If that could be followed by recreating a galleass, one of the formidable rowed warships known from many visual sources, some sense of excitement might develop.

In state hands, this finest of all shipyards fared quite well. For instance, when the Gaggiandre covered ship-berths were restored recently by the Venice Superintendency, it was found that while the brickwork standing in the water was 16th-century, the huge timber spans of their roofs dated from the 13th century. So the Comune is faced less with a daunting repair bill than questions of use and access in a large and singularly awkward site. As it happens, the British experience of restoring later naval dockyards, and the National Trust’s success with pioneering historic industrial sites, offers a source of reference. The Fund wishes the new Ufficio Arsenale the best of good fortune.

Richard Haslam
Accademia Galleries Double in Size: Tobia Scarpa’s New Interiors and Palladio Wing Revealed

In May Renata Codello, the Architect and Superintendent responsible for Architecture and Landscape of Venice and its Lagoon, gave a talk at the Italian Institute in London on the recently completed extension of the Accademia Galleries in Venice on the ground floor of the monastery complex of Santa Maria della Carità.

The restoration and conservation of the historic buildings were financed by the State, directed by the Soprintendenza and planned by the architect Tobia Scarpa, who trained in Venice. He is the son of the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa whose delicate touch, exercised between 1945 and 1959 is still visible in details of doors, stairs and display designs throughout the existing Galleries. The scheme includes a café, conference room and on the ground floor of the church an exhibition space for temporary exhibitions.

The museum has doubled in size and the lofty new flexible hanging spaces will be able to accommodate some of the very large works of art that are currently in the deposits. The picture hanging plan has been completed and it is expected that its opening will coincide with that of the Milan Expo on May 1, 2015.

Visitors will be able for the first time to visit the courtyard and see Andrea Palladio’s magnificent building which is illustrated in the Quattro Libri dell’Architettura and features Doric, Ionic and Corinthian orders on successive levels of the façade. In the Palladian wing, occupied until Napoleon suppressed the congregation, by the Canons Regular of the Lateran, visitors will be able to visit the Tablino, inspired by classical Roman interiors and the famous oval staircase described by Goethe in 1786 as “the most beautiful spiral staircase in the world – one never tires of going up and down it”.

Below the courtyard a basement level houses all the services. The museum is protected from acqua alta by water-tight barriers at all doors and openings and a vasca, or concrete raft, within the foundations, which, without interfering with supporting walls, prevents all ground water from rising within the building. Particular attention has been paid to the installation of services, security systems, fire protection, creating the best conditions for lighting the spaces and the works of art.

The new extension of the Galleries of the Accademia makes its own measured and thoughtful contribution to the history of this building and the city itself.

We are looking for a sponsor for our newsletter and the lecture series – please do contact us if you are interested.

Background: Façade by Palladio, 1563
Cattedra of the Accademia delle Belle Arti 1810–20: Furniture Conservation Appeal

The Venice in Peril Fund has opened an appeal to raise €25,000 for the urgently needed conservation of two pieces of Venetian furniture. We hope that furniture enthusiasts and Canova fans will want to make a contribution to the project.

The President of the Accademia’s Empire-style official chair and table, described as the ‘Cattedra Cicognara’, are key pieces of Venetian furniture for the history of the Accademia and for Venice in the post-Napoleonic era. They were made when Leopoldo Cicognara was its President between 1806 and 1827, in which role he also raised funds from across Europe for the cenotaph to Antonio Canova in the Basilica of the Frari. The monument is currently being restored by the Venice in Peril Fund.

The Cattedra Cicognara was designed by Giuseppe Borsato (1771–1849) and is illustrated as the frontispiece for his book of designs Opera Ornamentale of 1831.

Giuseppe Borsato (1771–1849) was an artist and designer who was responsible for a series of interiors in the Palazzo Reale, as well as temporary architecture including the triumphal arches on the Grand Canal for the arrival of Eugène de Beauharnais and later in 1807 for Napoleon. He studied scenography at the Accademia delle Belle Arti and designed for the theatre but he also painted views of Venice including one which features Leopoldo Cicognara showing visitors the monument to Canova in the Frari. Borsato was made Professore di Ornato – which covered the design of ornament, furniture and interiors – at the Accademia in 1812.

When the newly extended Accademia galleries are opened fully to the public in 2015, they will include Palladio’s famous Tablino, a room whose design is derived from Ancient Roman sources, for which it is thought the Cattedra Cicognara was designed. The hope is that the Cattedra project can be funded and the work completed so that it can go on display at the same time.

The imposing ebonised winged lions’ heads on both the chair and table and the porphyry inserts on the table are fully expressive of the neoclassicism which became so popular after Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign and which is best known through the work of Percier and...
One of the fundamental criteria the Fund applies before agreeing to finance a restoration is that the result must be visible to the public. Why then is this fresco, high up on the right-hand wall of the 11th bay in the Church of the Carmini nave, hidden from view?

Some years ago the Superintendency embarked on a systematic campaign to restore the series of late 17th/early 18th-century canvases decorating the wall above the colonnade dividing the nave from the aisles. When the paintings in the 6th to 10th bays were removed, investigations revealed a one-metre wide, late-Gothic frescoed frieze beneath several layers of whitewash, running just below the roof-line of the original 14th-century church.

When attention turned to the 11th bay, the Fund agreed to contribute €5,000, knowing that whatever was uncovered would shortly be concealed by one of the restored oil paintings. This was justified because the work had immediate relevance to studies on the architectural development of a church with which Venice in Peril has been associated over the last decade. The frieze that emerged was clearly intended as a continuation of the work decorating the Gothic church but it is stylistically quite different and must date from the late 1500s, after the church was lengthened and before the roof was raised.
Winged Figure with Elephant: An Update

Work started on 9 June on the conservation of this intriguing stone sculpture in a courtyard off Piazza San Marco. The project is being undertaken by Ducale Restauro and should be completed by November. Meanwhile we are very grateful to Professor Charles Hope's colleague Dr Paul Taylor at the Warburg Institute who, since the Spring 2014 Newsletter, has unlocked the meaning of the statue for us:

"In the Iconologia of Cesare Ripa, the most common source of personifications for artists, which appeared in dozens of editions in almost every language, Religion is accompanied by an elephant, because as Ripa explains, elephants, according to Pliny, are the most religious of animals, and worship the sun. That is why, according to Piero Valeriano, the elephant is a hieroglyph of Religion. Ripa includes several different images for Religion, with different attributes. Religione Vera Cristiana has wings. Of course, Ripa's figures have various other attributes, but it was common practice among artists to select such attributes as they chose. So I am pretty sure that this figure shows Religion."

In addition Charles Hope has pointed out that in 1603 the Elephant in this context was shown, curiously, with cow's feet, which over time became lion's feet.

Donations can still be accepted for this project, which iscosted at about £10,000.

Autumn Lecture Series 2014

All lectures will be held at the Society of Antiquaries, Burlington House, Piccadilly, W1J oBE.

Doors open at 6.30 and lectures begin at 7pm. Tickets (available by email or online – see details below) are £15 for members and £18 for non-members except for the Ashley Clarke Memorial Lecture – £20 for members and £25 for non-members. 10% members’ discount if you book all three lectures.

22 SEPTEMBER
Sheila Hale, author of Titian's biography published by Harper Collins in 2012, 'Titian: his life and the Golden Age of Venice'

13 OCTOBER

3 NOVEMBER
Ashley Clarke Memorial Lecture and Reception afterwards:

If you would like to know more about our projects or how you can donate please contact us at

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