



NEWSLETTER  
Winter 2020



VENICE IN  
PERIL

## DEAR FRIEND AND SUPPORTER

Over the past year Venice's endurance has been tested as seldom before. I am writing this on the anniversary of the November 2019 floods and at a time when the city and its adjacent mainland areas are undergoing the second spike of that coronavirus pandemic which earlier made such a devastating impact on Italy, particularly in its northern regions. Can Venice as an urban community survive further such onslaughts?

On October 1 several Venice in Peril representatives were able to attend a conference proposing a new charter for the city's future, chaired by Dr Paola Marini, former director of the Accademia Gallery and now leading the Association of International Private Committees to which we belong. The sense of the meeting and the overall feeling among delegates was that even if struggles and obstacles, natural or manmade, were always looming, Venice's survival in the 21st century remained a realistic goal, but one which must depend on responsible long-term objectives, not just for its fabric and natural environment but also for a viable resident population. Pertinent to these issues is a compelling vision for such a future from Professor Shaul Bassi, of Venice's Ca' Foscari University, which he has kindly allowed us to publish here.

On the days surrounding the conference we visited the various conservators at work on our current

projects and admired the expertise, enthusiasm and dedication involved in the different restoration processes. We were also lucky enough to be present on the morning when the MOSE flood barriers were lifted for the first time and we watched as the acqua alta suddenly stopped its ominous rise, a thrilling moment. Ongoing technical adjustments are required but the system can visibly be made to work. Not quite 'put away your wellies' yet, however. For some wise reservations and caveats, see the recent 'Art Newspaper' article by my predecessor as Venice in Peril chair, Anna Somers Cocks.

Meanwhile we are approaching our fiftieth anniversary in the confidence that our work is as valued as ever in Venice, though several of our celebrations, including an exhibition and a commemorative project, will have to be put on hold until COVID restrictions are over. The coming year also sees the 1,600th anniversary of the city's traditional foundation. Historical scholarship may not care to be quite so precise as to dating this event to 15 March, 421, yet Venice – thanks in part to your love and generosity as our supporters – is still herself.

Jonathan Keates  
*Chairman*

## VENICE – MY CITY IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

*Shaul Bassi is Professor of English Literature and Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari The University of Venice, where he directs the Center for the Humanities and Social Change.*

I am a Venetian citizen and a university professor. I probably belong to the last generation born and raised in a historic Venice, where schools had eight parallel classes instead of two, and the tourists were the ones you led astray when they interrupted your football matches in the street. I consider it an extraordinary privilege to have been able to remain here, find a job, and raise a child. I know the temptations of nostalgia. Yes, I would also like to go back to the old Venice, which meant the Lido in the summer, the grandparents in Mestre with the magical courtyard full of cars, the pre-match anxiety touring the football fields of the lagoon and the province with our SaccaFisola team; dancing to the music of Madonna in Piazza San Marco during the legendary '80s carnivals. But to go back is not possible, and frankly worse than nostalgia - which if nothing else can caress your soul - there is the whining, the hypocritical protest of those who defend their privileges without admitting that one dies of tourism alone, and the lack of perspective.

Now, to quote two illuminating recent books, the stark alternative is between the wild touristic extractivism analysed by Giacomo-Maria Salerno in *Per una critica dell'economia turistica* (Quodlibet, 2020), and the myriads of cultural and economic projects mapped in *Venezia Secolo Ventuno* (Anteferma 2020) by Sergio Pascolo, who also reminds us how most cities of the world aspire to the liveability standards that we already enjoy here.

Venice may be the most livable city in the world but to simply remain a city it needs more residents and fewer tourists. This is why it can and must invest in becoming an international centre of art and research. These are hardly new ideas but they need to be placed in the context of the planetary environmental emergency that risks submerging us within my son's life span. The Indian author Amitav Ghosh has remarked in his fundamental book *The Great Derangement* (2016) that we live in the awareness that within a few decades Kolkata, New York, Bangkok, Venice could be completely under water, yet our art and culture is mainly concerned with other issues. He warns us that posterity will accuse us of having been blind to this condition and he chooses Venice as the city in which to observe the epochal combination of climate change and mass migration. He considers it a city so important for the fate of the world that he has dedicated his compelling novel *Gun Island* (2019) to it. The protagonist is a book dealer whose travels between the Querini Foundation, the Ghetto, and the Salute Church showcase the extraordinary cultural heritage and creativity that characterize our history and contain the key to our future.

Venice can repopulate itself by focusing on students, scholars and creative professionals (artists and artisans), a population that is, in the short term, less profitable than the hit-and-run tourist, but which is less volatile and



brings extended benefits, creating the need for other services and other types of residents. What did the catastrophic high water of last November and the long confinement of the Coronavirus show us if not that no city can survive without enough electricians, plumbers, inhabited houses, and young volunteers? And even if you decide to cynically eschew any other economy and live off tourism, how long will the Venetian floors, the frescoes and the Istrian stones that make up the beauty of Venice last, if we no longer have the artisans and restorers who know how to take care of them? Now that we are struggling out of the pandemic, let us remember the example of the Serenissima, which after the plagues was able to recover by building magnificent works of art and importing new citizens and knowledge.

Here the art of the last thousand years is summarized, and the best contemporary art is showcased. Here the effects of the environmental crisis are observed, studied and, alas, experienced on a daily basis. Whether it is the high water or the deserted streets of the lockdown, the world always looks to Venice, and by questioning Venice, it questions itself. Venice can remain the passive object of this compassionate gaze or become the subject and guide of interdisciplinary environmental research. Investing in art and research also means investing in a healthy economy that creates new jobs and new residents and, in turn, encourages sustainable tourism.

The international institutions that have settled in Venice in recent years are there to prove it: they have redeveloped

spaces, hired people, launched programs that involve different audiences, attracted respectful and intelligent tourism, promoted the city in the international media. A virtuous example for all is that of Ocean Space, which manages to concentrate the two cornerstones of my argument, art and environment. This investment in art and research can paradoxically be helped by a side effect of the pandemic, which has made working remotely not only a habit but also a necessity. So why not work in the most beautiful city in the world if what you need is only a good network connection and if when you have finished your eight hours on the computer (maybe in shared workspaces so as to have a healthy separation between home and office) you can be in a city that for hundreds of millions of people in the world is a dream place? Of course, houses and international schools must be offered to help international families make the city their home (with benefits also for local families) and all this requires policies. We must embrace the dimension of a European and international city, not treating foreigners as visitors or, at best, as generous and worthy patrons. It takes a strong alliance between the public and private cultural institutions of Venice, which can only have a political direction capable of intercepting European funding and global collaborations.

Here are two intertwined proposals. The first is that Venice, in a desirable partnership between the Biennale, university and public administration, should create a Sustainability (or Ecotopian) Pavilion where scientific, technical, artistic and artisanal knowledge come together to cope with

the challenge of the environmental crisis. It will attract visitors from all over the world and will allow us to import and export ideas on how to create more sustainable cities everywhere. The second is that the next municipal administration, reminiscent of the great Venetian diplomatic tradition, should establish a sort of Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a group of ambassadors which also include the city's universities and cultural institutions, and which travel the world to convince their counterparts to set up their programmes in Venice. Each institute would create jobs for researchers; researchers would need a home, schools and dentists for their children. Each foreign university would create jobs for teachers, cleaners and accountants, and would bring a constant number of students to live here.

The philosopher Bruno Latour has warned us that the Coronavirus crisis could only be the 'dress rehearsal' of the real crisis, the environmental one. Let us then make Venice the international capital of thought and action on this looming crisis. Only in this way will the children continue to play in the streets, and will we make a unique contribution to the planet.

*This article first appeared in the online magazine [luminosigiorni.it](http://luminosigiorni.it)*

*With thanks to Jill Kerby & Gregory Dowling for the translation.*

*Photo (left), by Sarah Quill*

## CANOVA MONUMENT

*Investigations reveal the technical problems facing conservators*

The first phase of this project, conducted, as all our projects are, under the supervision of the Italian Ministry of Culture, is being led by Giovanni Giannelli who has taken over at the Bologna firm of Ottorino Nonfarmale after the death of its founder the 'maestro' of conservation, in September this year.

The firm has worked with Venice in Peril many times in the last 50 years on, for example, the Palazzo Ducale capitals in the 1990s and the stained-glass window in the basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in the 1980s. For Giovanni Giannelli there are parallels between the Canova Monument project and the work he is currently carrying out on the marbles in the crypt of San Marco following the floods of 2019.

So far, his investigations have revealed a range of problems. A hole opened up in front of the monument reveals the water level rising and falling and this is the source of the moisture which over the years has travelled upwards into the monument using the major routes provided by the mortar between the bricks in the core. The bricks themselves were fired at high temperatures so they are dense, though saturated, and therefore structurally sound. However the moisture has caused the mortar to disintegrate contributing to structural problems which can be seen at the front of the monument where the Istrian stone slabs have fallen forwards, partly also as a result of inadequate anchoring to the brick core and the rusting of iron

clamps used in the construction.

Some figures (like that representing Architecture) have suffered more than others because they were carved complete with sections of the steps on which they stand so the rising salt water found a direct route into them. By contrast others like the lion, which simply sit on their steps show far fewer signs of surface efflorescence.

The decision made in the 1820s to use less expensive marble, rather than statuary quality Carrara, has left its legacy. The patches of iron-red staining on the monument, which were reported by the Accademia delle Belle Arti within 20 years of its construction are, in some areas, a sign of pyrite inclusions in the marble. These have released iron oxide that is drawn to the surface by environmental conditions around the monument. However most areas of staining are a sign that iron, rather than best practice lead, clamps were used to secure the marble steps and the shin of one of the figures.

As in many conservation projects, quite recent solutions turn out to have deleterious effects and in the case of the Canova Monument a 1993 intervention – extensive application of Paraloid, an acrylic resin protective coating and consolidant has caused two particular problems. In areas where the surface was still healthy the resin acted like a barrier to prevent moisture escaping, but behind it the mineral salts broke down the marble into powder.



This has destroyed the definition of some carving, particularly on the chest of the Youthful Genius.

Where the resin was applied to areas which were already disintegrating it temporarily halted that process but was used in such quantities that it penetrated below this layer, coagulated and formed a barrier at a deeper level. Today's challenge lies in finding a way to remove this substance by dissolving it. Tests are currently being done on patch areas using dibasic ammonium phosphate as a possible alternative consolidation treatment.

For both Canova and his pupils perfection in the finishing of their

sculptures was integral to their vision which, ironically, has led to less than ideal solutions of wax and other substances being repeatedly applied over the years creating challenges for conservators now.

The investigative phase is now drawing to a close. It has required a combination of expertise in engineering, scientific analysis and long familiarity with the lagoon environment to reach a diagnosis. The findings have provided a sure footing for the design of the main project which, it is hoped, can begin in the Spring.

*Photo Above, Cannova restoration*

## COMPLETED PROJECT

*Conservation, repair and new costumes for 20 eighteenth-century marionettes from Ca' Goldoni*

In September Chiara Olimpia Angolani, a Venetian conservator and puppeteer, began the Venice in Peril funded project to restore 20 eighteenth-century marionettes that had been left to the Ca' Goldoni, the theatre museum in the San Polo district, where the famous Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni was born.

The museum, which also has an important library devoted to theatre studies, is one of the MUVE network of civic museums and a visit there is a wonderful introduction to the world of Venetian theatre and entertainment of which puppet theatre productions were a part.

The 20 marionettes were in various states of disrepair, with broken and detached limbs rusted metal components. Many had lost their costumes or were dressed in fragile remnants. The conservation approach proceeded from examining and recording the marionettes and the assortment of fragments to repairing as many as possible. Among the discoveries made, were the use of everyday as well as luxurious 18th century fabrics, a piece of table linen or sheeting might have been used for a shift or a remnant of silk waistcoat or trimming for a bodice. Since these marionettes were created for private homes, they are very likely to have been dressed in household cast-offs. Glass beads were sometimes used for eyes and secured with wax, while tow was used for upper arms and for hair, and often fixed with gesso.

In cases where the original costumes had not survived a decision was taken to make new ones using old fabrics or, where this was not possible, new natural fabrics, some of which were treated to 'age' them.

Among the figures who have had new costumes made for them is the figure of Dottor Balanzone recognisable from his mask, the little devils in black linen with their real bird claw feet and the character of Polichinelle in his buff and red patched outfit. (As a variation on the Neapolitan Commedia dell'Arte figure he is something of an anomaly in the Casa Goldoni collection.) Historic fabric was also sourced for the dress of a female character and the Venetian textile company of Bevilacqua provided trimmings. For a Chinese figure the original costume was faithfully copied and a missing hat made up after one that is featured in paintings by Pietro Longhi which hang in the museum.

The resourcefulness shown by the original creators of the marionettes is reflected in today's conservation choices which, alongside careful maintenance, have made it possible to display the puppets successfully. As the project completes, curator, Francesca Pederoda, is considering how the characters from this most aristocratic of theatrical entertainments might best be enjoyed and understood in a future display, by visitors who can already view a scene from Goldoni's 1745 play 'A Servant of Two Masters', in the 18th century puppet theatre in the museum.



*Photos: Completed project, restored marionette dolls*

## ACQUA ALTA '19 PROJECT

*Windows at St George's Anglican church*

Venice in Peril has had a long and good relationship with St George's in Dorsoduro. The Fund has been a major supporter, both financially and advisory, over many years and has close personal links with the church. In 2008 it contributed to the restoration of the distinctive stained glass windows and in 2014 VIP financed the conservation of the First World War Memorial bronze doors.

In the November storms and floods last year, the two south windows of the church were badly damaged and considered by Venice in Peril to be in urgent need of repair. These windows are historic, dating back to the original conversion of the building, at the end

of the 19th century. They provide an elegant framing for the historic Mascioni organ and have a symbolic significance, illuminating the church. At the same time, the Horatio Brown stained glass window was also damaged. From a practical point of view repair is critical as two glass have already fallen out of the right window, the lead needs replacing, the wood is swollen and the windows open and close with difficulty. In 2020 the conservation of these windows has been taken on as a unique project - although part of a larger ongoing restoration of the church.

*We reported on the progress of San Nicolo dei Mendicoli and the Tablino in the Accademia – both Acqua Alta '19 projects - in the Summer Newsletter*

## CHRISTMAS BOOKS ON VENICE

### **Venice: The Lion, The City and The Water by Cees Noteboom £20.00**

For those who like their Venice hazard, spontaneous and unpredictable, Noteboom's notebook is the perfect gallimaufry. The prizewinning Dutch author has the beadiest eye for arresting detail and significant image, matched by Simone Sassen's superb photographs. A book for walkers and worshippers.

### **Venice Odyssey: Hope and Anger in The Iconic City by Neal E Robbins £16.99**

A serious and intensive attempt by an American journalist at engaging with the manifold problems of being Venice and being Venetian in the 21st century. Impressive in its trawl of research and the writer's readiness to understand that the city is about people, space and dimension as well as history and heritage.

### **The Water's Daughter by Michelle Lovric £7.99**

Lovric, endlessly knowing and skilful in her fictional handling of Venice, delivers a winner in a tale of eighteenth-century skulduggery, shape-changing, djinns and pirates, fusing magic realism, fairy tale and a few shrewd and unexpected parallels with problems in the present-day lagoon.

### **The Life and Work of Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757): The Queen of Pastel by Angela Oberer £108**

Rosalba Carriera is unsurpassed as a pastel artist, whose portraits were eagerly sought by 18th-century Grand Tourists to Venice. This is the first major study of her astounding achievement as the Serenissima's queen of crayons.

### **Il Bresciano: Bronze-Caster of Renaissance Venice by Charles Avery £40**

Little-studied until the millennium Alessandri dai Bronzi, commonly known as Il Bresciano, was a gifted sculptor and craftsman who worked alongside his major contemporaries, Jacopo Sasovino and Alessandro Vittoria in 16th-century Venice, and has now been given his due in this meticulously researched book.

And we mourn the death of the writer Jan Morris, whose incomparably stylish, witty and sensitive writing in Venice, published in 1960, remains one of the liveliest evocations of the place ever created.

*Buy books on Venice and Italy from the dedicated Venice in Peril Booklist online at [www.johnsandoe.com](http://www.johnsandoe.com) or call 020 7589 9473 and 10% of the cover price will go to Venice in Peril*

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## BELLINI NATIVITY TRIPTYCH

The cover of this Winter Newsletter shows a detail of the central Nativity panel of the Bellini workshop triptych after conservation revealed the very fine quality of drawing under the paint and rapidly applied fine brushstrokes which indicate the involvement of Giovanni Bellini.

The triptych is one of four commissioned for the 'barca', a structure between sanctuary and nave, in the Cappella della Carità which is now part of the Accademia Galleries. The project has been funded by Venice in Peril supporters and will soon be completed.

The conservation of another of the four triptychs is being funded by Banca Intesa Sanpaolo and the Accademia Galleries hopes that donors will come forward to sponsor the remaining two, making it possible to reassemble the series and understand more about their role and significance in the 15th century.

**The same detail is reproduced for this year's Venice in Peril Fund Christmas Card.**

## ARCHIVE PROJECT

One of Venice in Peril's achievements during lockdown has been a project to archive 50 years' worth of material that had to be gathered from several different places in Venice and in London. This involved a meticulous raking through a huge quantity of boxes of papers going back to 1971 covering over sixty projects. Hector Mir, an archivist from Taragona, did an incredible job in exactly six months faced with mountains of paper in Italian and English, which he sifted and sorted and now sit in beautiful archive boxes locked in cupboards in the London office. It has already proved useful in the planning of the project at San Nicolo dei Mendicoli following the Acqua Alta flooding of 2019.

## BECOME A FRIEND OF VENICE IN PERIL

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	ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP	STANDING ORDER
FRIEND	£60	£50
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## SPRING 2021

### *Event series*

As a result of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic we will be holding our Spring lectures online via Zoom. The best way to keep abreast of online events is to sign up for e-news at [www.veniceinperil.org](http://www.veniceinperil.org)

**We ask those who register for each event to make a donation in lieu of tickets. In this way as you discover more about Venice, you will also be funding its conservation.**

19 JANUARY

### **Carlo Goldoni and a miniature world of marionettes**

*Jonathan Keates*

The famous 18th-century playwright Carlo Goldoni captured the essence of Venetian life in the much-loved genre of the marionette theatre in many of his comedies. Jonathan Keates introduces us to this world and shows us how Venice played a major role in the history of theatre and opera and illustrates his talk with examples from Venice in Peril's recent project restoring 18th-century marionettes from Casa Goldoni.

23 FEBRUARY

### **Venice's Secret Service – the world's earliest centrally-organised state intelligence service**

*Ioanna Iordanou*

Venice's 'Secret Service' played a pivotal role in the defence of the Venetian empire. The Council of Ten were Venice's spy chiefs, running intelligence and covert operations, deploying analysis, cryptography and steganography, cryptanalysis, and even developing lethal substances. Ioanna Iordanou's acclaimed history *Venice's Secret Service*, draws on archival documents in Venice, Rome, Simancas and London.

23 MARCH

### **The Old Church of San Zaccaria in the XVth Century**

*Bernard Aikema*

*A joint event with the America-Italy Society of Philadelphia and the Stichting Nederlands Venetië Comité*

Bernard Aikema, Chairman of the Dutch Committee for Venice, will show how the church of San Zaccaria owes its exceptional architecture, altarpieces, decoration and choir stalls to the family of Doge Foscari. A recently discovered crucifix, the subject of a current joint conservation project by Venice in Peril, The America-Italy Society of Philadelphia and the Dutch Committee, is an important element in the ensemble.

To find out more about our projects and how you can donate please contact Venice in Peril Fund, Hurlingham Studios, Ranelagh Gardens, London SW6 3PA

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