

# Procession in Renaissance Venice

Effect of Ritual Procession on the Built Environment and the Citizens of Venice



Figure 1 | Antonio Joli, *Procession in the Courtyard of the Ducal Palace, Venice, 1742*. Oil on Canvas. National Gallery of Art  
Reproduced from National Gallery of Art, <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/Collection/art-object-page.32586.html>

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## Procession in Renaissance Venice

For Venetians, the miraculous rediscovery of Saint Mark's body brought not only the reestablishment of a bond between the city and the Saint, but also a bond between the city's residents, both by way of ritual procession.<sup>1</sup> After his body's recovery from Alexandria in 828 AD, Saint Mark's influence on Venice became evident in the renaming of sacred and political spaces and rising participation in ritual processions by all citizens.<sup>2</sup> Venetian society embraced Saint Mark as a cause for a fresh start, especially during the Renaissance period; a new style of architecture was established to better suit the extravagance of ritual processions celebrating the Saint. Saint Mark soon displaced all other saints as Venice's symbol of independence and unity.



Figure 2 | Detailed Map of Venice

Reproduced from TourVideos, <http://www.lahistoriaconmapas.com/atlas/italy-map/italy-map-venice.htm>

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 80-81.

The Renaissance period in Venice, lasting through the Quattrocento and Cinquecento, was significant because of the city's maintenance of civic peace; this was achieved in large part by the rise in number and importance of processional routes by the Doges, the elected leaders of the Republic.<sup>3</sup> Venice proved their commitment to these processions by creating a grander urban fabric. While every society had special ceremonies and occasions, civic ritual in Venice was notable for exceptional glory, and this theatrical tradition only grew after the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 3 | Ducal Palace with a Religious Procession, Oil painting by Richard Parkes Bonington, 1802-28. Oil on Canvas. Tate Modern. Reproduced from Tate Museum, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bonington-venice-ducal-palace-with-a-religious-procession-n05789>

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<sup>3</sup> Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 13; Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1997), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 83.

These civic processions in Venice created a need for a more identifiable “Venetian” style of architecture, rather than the assortment of Roman and Byzantine styles from its past. Venetian artists and intellectuals participated in the recovery of the ancient world, as the Renaissance is often characterized, but in their own way, and often ended up melding an array of styles resulting in an aesthetic diversity more fitting of the Venetian people. Although the Doges were not the most enthusiastic patrons of religious art or architecture, the *Scuole* (confraternities and guilds) in Venice provided an opportunity for non-noble Venetian citizens to control religious and civic patronage of the arts. They supplied schools, hospitals, relief to the poor, and general support for the social functions of the city (including ritual processions).<sup>5</sup> The influence of the *Scuole* was notable around the city in their construction and upkeep of religious and civic architecture and the promotion of the arts, especially during the Quattrocento and Cinquecento.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with small projects by artists and sculptors from Florence and Rome, the Renaissance influence finally took hold in 1460 with a gateway arch by Antonio Gambello as the first truly identifiable piece of Renaissance architecture, to be followed by the civic and private architecture reminiscent of ancient Rome.<sup>7</sup> “By the middle of the sixteenth century, a visitor could stand in the Piazzetta and take in at a glance Venice’s history. The Basilica of San Marco... a spiritually resonant Byzantine past. The Gothic architecture of the Doge’s Palace...On the west side of the Piazzetta, the Loggetta and the new library of San Marco designed by Jacopo Sansovino in a Roman Renaissance style.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, *Art and Life*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 105.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, *Art and Life*, 26.

Venice drew many distinguished architects from all around mainland Italy because of the interesting opportunities and challenges it offered in terms of design, and later because of the Doge Andrea Gritti's strong push for the renewal and aggrandizement of the city. Sculptor and architect Pietro Lombardo, with his sculptor sons, settled in Venice in 1464 and began what is now called the Renaissance style; taking cues from Alberti, the family erected elegant, sculptural archways throughout the city.

...the greatest ornament to the forum or crossroad would be to have an arch at the mouth of each road. For the arch is a gate that is continuously open... the most suitable place to build an arch is at the point where a road meets a square or forum, especially if it is a *royal* road (the term I use for the most important road in a city)...<sup>9</sup>

Most subsequent architects of Venice also used the Renaissance ideals of Alberti as their inspiration for redesigning the city. Mauro Codussi, Jacopo Sansovino and Andrea Palladio were three key players in bringing to Venice the Renaissance grandeur that was established following the Lombardo family's influence. The Sack of Rome in 1527 AD caused a scattering of the Papal city's architects. It brought both Jacopo Sansovino and Sebastian Serlio, amongst others, to Venice, where they set to creating a new Roman language in their architecture and published works respectively.<sup>10</sup> The Venetian government itself was based on the ideals of the Roman Republic so the appropriation of Roman architecture in Venice seemed fitting.<sup>11</sup> It was Palladio, who left Venice's last marks of Renaissance architecture,

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<sup>9</sup> L.B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building: In Ten Books*, trs. Joseph Rykwert, Neil Leach, and Robert Tavernor (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 1992), 265.

<sup>10</sup> Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 137.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

that said “in Venice where all the fine arts flourish and which is the sole remaining exemplar of the grandeur and magnificence of the Romans...” explaining succinctly the city’s reasoning for their continued obsession with the creation of a more elaborate urban fabric: to maintain the legacy Venice had created for itself and bring in the long-celebrated splendor of ancient and modern Rome.<sup>12</sup>

A reflection of the rise in popularity of processional routes during the Renaissance was evident in the built environment of the city. Entire portions of the city were redone in order to match the elaborate rituals.<sup>13</sup> Many artists and architects were commissioned by the city “in order to make [Venice] very beautiful for the glory of the land,” and for the glory of the success of the government.<sup>14</sup> Doge Andrea Gritti (doge from 1523-1528) was most well-known for his *renavatio urbis*, a major push for a renovation of the center of Venice; all architecture in the Piazza San Marco underwent significant transformation, or complete reconstruction.<sup>15</sup> To aid in this redesign process, Doge Gritti selected Jacopo Sansovino as *proto*, the city’s superintendent of building.<sup>16</sup> “The changes instigated by Gritti and executed under the supervision of Jacopo Sansovino were much more significant than hitherto realized” because they symbolized a shift in architectural thought from the Byzantine east, to the Roman west.<sup>17</sup> “Sansovino’s Roman experiences —his extensive studies and his

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<sup>12</sup> Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri Dell'architettura: Venice, 1570*, trs. Robert Tavernor, (Oakland, CA: Octavo, 2000), Preface 5.

<sup>13</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 60.

<sup>14</sup> M. Sanudo, *I Diarii*, ed. R Fulin, 58 vols., Venice 1879-1903, XV, col. 541; Venetian patriciate and historian (1466-1536); Quoted in Muir. *Civic Ritual*

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Hopkins, “Architecture and Infirmity: Doge Andrea Gritti and the Chancel of San Marco”, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 57 (2) (1998): 182–97.

<sup>16</sup> Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Hopkins, “Architecture and Infirmity”, 182.

knowledge of the works of Bramante and his successors —had provided him with the necessary equipment to propagate the new style in Venice.”<sup>18</sup>

The Ducal Procession through the city is the most identifiable example of a processional route causing changes in the built environment. When a law passed in 1485 making the coronation of the Doge a public event, construction began on a ceremonial staircase in the courtyard of Palazzo Ducale, beginning the Renaissance tradition of embellishment along processional routes.<sup>19</sup> “The ducal procession usually began at the Ducal Palace, wove around the periphery of Piazza San Marco, and ended in the basilica’s newly constructed Piazzetta. On occasion the paraders went afterward on foot or by boat to another site, usually a church, for a special commemoration, but the normal ritual territory was the centrally located Piazza.”<sup>20</sup> As one of the most significant and renowned civic rituals through the city, the Ducal Procession caused the political leaders of Venice to transform the city into a more purposefully planned layout, with new buildings, and new additions to old buildings along the entire length of the route. The ducal procession was noteworthy in its ability to display the Doge’s authority and to symbolize the hierarchical order of the republic, all while visually linking Palazzo Ducale with Saint Mark’s tomb, and other cult centers depending on occasion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Howard, *Jacopo Sansovino*, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Brown, *Art and Life*, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 209.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

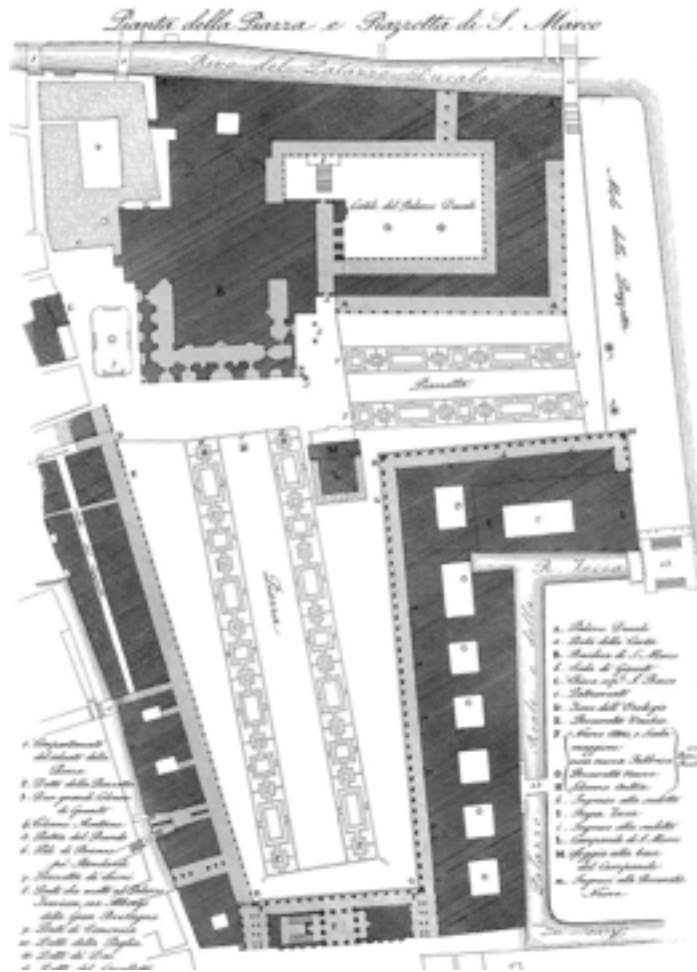


Figure 4 | Antonio Quardi, *Pianta della Piazza e Piazzetta di San Marco*, 1837. Etching on Plate.  
 Reproduced from Howard, Deborah, and Sarah Quill. *The Architectural History of Venice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002. p148

Piazza San Marco was the heart of the Ducal Procession and the site of the most apparent changes to the fabric of the city during the Renaissance. Only one square in town was called a piazza, that of S. Marco, with all other squares, which are smaller in size, called *campi*; clearly, the Piazza was already a key location in Venice, and the expansion upon the Ducal Procession only added to its significance.<sup>22</sup> “One of [Doge Andrea] Gritti’s major preoccupations during his dogeship, which ran from 1523-1538, was to elevate the republic’s

*nobilit * through reforming the annual ducal ritual and restructuring and re-embellishing the ceremonial spaces of the Piazzetta of the Ducal Palace and Piazza San Marco.”<sup>23</sup>

Sansovino restructured the Piazza and Piazzetta by first clearing away the shacks of butchers and salami-sellers that had infested the area. His greatest contribution to the city was not his redistribution of food stalls, but rather his plan to replace all dilapidated buildings with new ones.<sup>24</sup> He designed the famed Library of San Marco, the Procuratoria

<sup>22</sup> Marilyn Bradshaw, *Italian Renaissance Art: A Sourcebook*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson-Prentice Hall, 2009), 303.

<sup>23</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> Howard, *Jacopo Sansovino*, 14; Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 163.



Nuova, the Mint, and the Logetta at the base of the Bell Tower, thereby magnifying the splendor of the Piazza for state ceremonies. Sansovino took many cues from Vitruvius, Alberti, and ancient Roman cities in order to find a style that would fit Doge Gritti's desire for Venice.<sup>25</sup>

Through the example of our ancestors, therefore, and through the advice of experts and constant practice on our part, thorough understanding may be gained on how to construct marvelous buildings, and from that understanding well-proven principles may be deduced...<sup>26</sup>

The preoccupation of Alberti among Mauro Codussi's patrons paved way for Sansovino to bring Roman Renaissance ideals into Venice.<sup>27</sup> Sansovino planned for a transformation of St. Mark's Square into a unified arrangement of interrelated structures; according to his design (Fig. 4), the south side of the Piazza was realigned to make the space trapezium shaped. With this alteration the Basilica became the central feature, and the Palazzo Ducale was visible from anywhere in the Piazza.<sup>28</sup>

Sansovino's new Library of San Marco (Fig. 5) became the symbol for the Roman Renaissance in Venice. "It seems that to the Venetians the Library embodied exactly what they were seeking—a transposition of the ancient Roman style of building on to Venetian soil. Classical reminiscences abound..."<sup>29</sup> In a city finally ready to establish its ties with ancient Rome, any knowledge by architects of Vitruvius was welcomed, hence Jacopo

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<sup>25</sup> The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, "Jacopo Sansovino," Encyclopedia Britannica Online.

<sup>26</sup> L.B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building*, 159.

<sup>27</sup> Howard, *The Architectural History of Venice*, 163.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 150.

Sansovino's success in the city.<sup>30</sup> And yet, "despite Vasari's claim that the Library first demonstrated to the Venetians how to apply Vitruvian discipline in architecture, Sansovino did not adopt strictly Vitruvian proportions..."<sup>31</sup> so as to much better match the aesthetic diversity of the character of Venice.



Figure 5 | Canaletto, *Piazza San Marco with the Basilica, Venice, 1730-1734*. Oil on Canvas. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University.  
Reproduced from Wikimedia [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piazza\\_San\\_Marco\\_with\\_the\\_Basilica\\_by\\_Canaletto\\_1730\\_Fogg\\_Art\\_Museum\\_Cambridge.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piazza_San_Marco_with_the_Basilica_by_Canaletto_1730_Fogg_Art_Museum_Cambridge.jpg)

The library was not the only addition to the Piazza that furthered the notion of a Roman forum in Venice: the Loggetta and the Campinale were also both of *all'antica* character, but the Library was on a much grander, more elaborate scale, suggestive of the structures in the ancient Roman forum, and therefore it remains the most symbolic effort of the city's acceptance of Roman influence.

By the end of the Renaissance, the Venetian conception of ritual space was even more apparent. "Venice's natural beauty... was heightened by striking architecture, imposing

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<sup>30</sup> Howard, *Jacopo Sansovino*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

public monuments, and the vast Piazza..."<sup>32</sup> Venetians and the many visitors of the city often referred to the Piazza and Basilica of San Marco, along with the Ducal Palace and its Piazzetta, as a theatre; this grand theatre became a stage for the myth of Venice through civic rituals.<sup>33</sup> It was in these highly public areas that both Venetians and visitors encountered a perfected Venice; they embodied the image of peace and harmony that was so iconic to Venice. "More than merely reinforcing the ideology of Venice, the ducal processions helped create that ideology by serving as a conscious, visible synthesis of the parts of society: each symbol or person in the procession corresponded to a specific principle or institution; placed together and set in motion, they were the narrative outline for the myth of Venetian republicanism."<sup>34</sup>

Processions and their routes gave all citizens greater access to the government, but they also caused a more noticeable rift to appear between the nobility, merchant middle class, and the plebeian class. Three defined social classes existed: the patricians (or nobles) who held the most influence and wealth in the city; the *cittadini*, "a lower-level hereditary elite...who had special economic, social, and bureaucratic privileges that opened for them careers"; and the *popolini*, the great mass of Venetian plebeians. Hints about changes in social attitudes were discovered during the increase in civic ritual processions. "As one surveys the 13-16<sup>th</sup> centuries, most obvious is the sharpening of class distinctions. Nobles, cittadini, and plebeians were separated in rituals, and the first two groups were classified according to an elaborate hierarchy of official precedence. The Venetian republic was becoming more aristocratic, more concerned with class privilege, more socially rigid, and less a communis of

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<sup>32</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 15.

<sup>33</sup> Eric Dursteler, *A Companion to Venetian History, 1400-1797* (Brill, 2013), 503.

<sup>34</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 211.

free citizens.”<sup>35</sup> In effect, the Ducal Procession was the constitution for Venetian life, and the processional order was, therefore, extremely significant.<sup>36</sup> But while spectacles, such as the Ducal Procession, visually codified the social and political hierarchy of society, they also provided an area of cohesion and togetherness by allowing the participation in a civic ritual, transcending distinctions between classes.<sup>37</sup> The *Scuole* provided the essential manpower to march in these processions, evidence of the cross-societal reach the processions emphasized.<sup>38</sup> “During carnival every Venetian, whatever his or her social station, had a chance not only to witness but to participate in festive civic rituals, an important opportunity not often granted to every citizen in every city.”<sup>39</sup>

The processions themselves brought these class distinctions into question, but so did the architecture and redesign that Doge Gritti and Jacopo Sansovino set forth. All subsequent doges and *proto* felt the pressure to continue the aggrandizement of Venice Gritti had begun. The *Scuole* felt an equal push from the government to build more and better, especially during the Renaissance. The six *Scuole Grandi*, which were established by the end of the Renaissance era and controlled vast amounts of wealth, constructed elaborate new structures throughout the city using Roman Renaissance ideals, and the *Scuole Piccole*, made up of the less permanent artisans’ guilds and foreign contributors, built decorative altarpieces to show their own influence. All of these new constructions were openly visible to the public. Piazza San Marco is but one example of how the grandeur of architecture could possibly influence the citizens experiencing the spaces into realizing their true place in

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, *Art and Life*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>39</sup> Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 134.

society. While *nobilitas* were constructing beautiful new Palazzos, the *popolini* were left with the same small homes they had lived in for years; everywhere the *popolini* would look during the High Renaissance in Venice there was new embellishment and grandeur.



Figure 6 / Getnile Bellini. *Procession of the True Cross in Piazza San Marco, Venice*, 1496. Oil on Canvas. Galleria dell'academia, Venice, Italy  
Reproduced from Musée Historique Environment Urbaine, <http://www.mheu.org/en/timeline/procession-cross-piazza-san-marco.htm>

The significance of civic ritual in Venice was its tie to the people and its explicit expression of the social order of the city. In Renaissance Europe ceremonies were, in the broadest terms, an embodiment of the world order and, more narrowly, a formulation of political rules that governed cities.<sup>40</sup> These processional routes and the changes they caused in the built environment could be viewed by all, and therefore affected all. But, most important in Venice, was the fact that the processions trumped any of the turmoil the citizens might have otherwise brought into the peaceful society by proving that the governmental order was right and that it was productive for the organization of society.

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<sup>40</sup> Lawrence M Bryant, "Parlementaire Political Theory in the Parisian Royal Entry Ceremony," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 7, no. 1 (1976): 15.

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