

Fondazione Prada—
Ca' Corner della Regina

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Venice, 4 June –
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This publication is being realized on occasion of the exhibition "Fondazione Prada—Ca' Corner della Regina," curated by Germano Celant. It is divided into sections that address the Fondazione's activities both present and future, the architectural and restorative work conducted on the eighteenth-century Venetian palazzo hosting the exhibition, as well as special projects realized in collaboration with international institutions like the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Qatar Museums Authority in Doha.

The various projects were developed in collaboration with architects, artists and curators. Nicholas Cullinan investigates relationships between protagonists of Italian art from 1952 to 1964, while Thomas Demand interwove his photographic work with a selection of Venetian antiques, glasswork and art. Jean Paul Engelen brought an exchange between history and contemporaneity in Middle Eastern culture to the fore in the relationship between a seventeenth-century astrolab and the installation of Buthayna Ali, while Marco Giusti developed an osmosis between cinema and art, bringing together Todd Solondz's films and Nathalie Djuberg's claymation video work. A novel relationship and dialogue between Meissen porcelain and Jeff Koons' artwork was sparked by Lydia Liakhova, while Rem Koolhaas conceived the OMA project presentation for Fondazione Prada's new Milan headquarters.

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PALAZZO CORNARO DELLA REGINA

A house and a family

by Martina Frank

The palazzo on the Grand Canal in the Santa Croce district of the parish of San Cassiano owes its name to the Cornaro branch of the patrician family that boasts Caterina, the Queen of Cyprus, among its ancestors. Caterina used this house as an alternative to her country residence in Altivole near Asolo and, like the *barco*, the Venetian home was the setting for receptions and celebrations whose spectacular nature is recorded in various chronicles. The noblewoman, widow to Giacomo II Lusignano, King of Cyprus, returned to Venice in 1489 and placed the crown of the kingdom of Cyprus in the hands of the Seignior, receiving in exchange an allowance of 8,000 ducats annually and the land and castle of Asolo, of which she became the "Domina" or Sovereign Lady. The Venetian home was sold in 1458 by the Mocenigo family to Caterina's father, Marco Cornaro, for the handsome sum of 12,000 ducats. Its appearance must have been similar to that of Ca' Favretto, the gothic palace located alongside today's Ca' Cornaro that was to play an important role in the future of the latter. The powerful family owned many other palazzi in the city and various buildings, including at least two worthy of mention. From 1460 the Cornaro family was present in San Polo, where it occupied a fourteenth-century building it received from Francesco Sforza in exchange for the Ca' del Duca, which Sforza hoped to finish building. Soon after, Caterina's brother, Giorgio or Zorzi Corner, acquired another large home on the Grand Canal at San Maurizio from the merchant Bartolomeo Malombra. At Zorzi's request, and in accordance with a Venetian custom, the immense heritage was to be enjoyed by his sons in a *fraterna*, meaning that the sons should share the buildings collectively. Nonetheless, it was a very particular *fraterna*. In just a few years Zorzi had become one of the leading figures in the politics and economy of Venice, so to avoid unpleasantness and jealousy in the face of so much power, he had decided to have three of his sons marry and launched the ecclesiastical

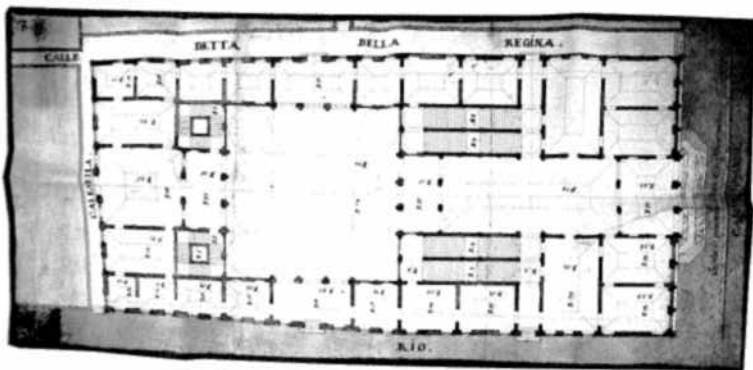
careers of the other two. While the latter two were successfully appointed cardinals, the unusual decision to grant matrimony to several sons laid the grounds for the imminent ramification of the *casato* (House). In 1532 a devastating fire destroyed the Cornaro palazzo in San Maurizio and its inhabitants Zuanne and Giacomo Cornaro were obliged to seek refuge with their brother Gerolamo in the house in San Cassiano. Cohabitation could not have been easy as the brothers moved to the palazzo in San Polo soon after. But very soon destiny forced them to develop other strategies. The San Polo building also burned, and the brothers were forced to return to San Cassiano, but this forced cohabitation led to a quarrel that brought on the clamorous decision to break the *fraterna* instituted by their father and to entirely renounce the commitment to shared possession. It took a full five years to formalize division of the properties and from 1545 three branches could be distinguished: that of San Maurizio with Giacomo as its progenitor, that of San Polo founded by Zuanne, and that of San Cassiano descending from Gerolamo, which would bequeath its name to the memory of the Queen of Cyprus. The testament of Zuanne made out in 1551 clearly implies that this fragmentation of the family unit was perceived as a traumatic event. Zuanne recalls "the bodily and spiritual pains and the misery one feels fighting with one's relatives in forums and public palaces" and thus wishes his own sons will be spared from similar experiences: "that your good mastery over concord and alliance, and your riches and your descendants shall last over time and every State."

A fundamental difference between the San Maurizio and San Polo branches with respect to that of San Cassiano lies in the fact that the first two took advantage of the misfortune of the fires to build monumental palaces that became symbols of the new family status. Giacomo called Jacopo Sansovino to San Maurizio and Zuanne entrusted the work to Michele Sanmicheli, whereas the descendants of Gerolamo in San Cassiano continued living in a building stylistically from a previous era. This situation proved to be one of the cornerstones of the future architectural history of Ca' Corner della Regina.

A GRANDIOSE PROJECT THAT WENT UNREALIZED

When, under the guidance of the parish priest of San Cassiano, Nicolò Posea, the solemn ceremony was held for the laying of the first stone of the new Palazzo Cornaro on May 10, 1724, a decades-long period of great ambitions, rethinking, quarrels and uncertainty came to a close. The property begun in 1724, which today appears of monumental size, is actually only a fragment of a much more ambitious project that aimed at transforming an entire *insula* into a residence for the branch of the patrician Cornaro family, referred to as the San Cassiano or Regina branch. Planning of this grandiose but unrealized project was begun in 1718 by the architect Domenico Rossi (1657–1737), who at that time had already left his mark on that part of the Grand Canal. In 1709 he won the competition to rebuild the façade of the Church of Santo Stae, a project stipulated in the will of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo. The imposing mass of the façade is of Palladian derivation but the touches of chiaroscuro and the lively and refined sculptural and decorative apparatus give them a wholly Baroque spirit. As for the palace, the design elaborated by Domenico Rossi to satisfy the demands of the Cornaro family is only known of through the plan for the first floor, but this evidence is enough to understand the essential qualities of his design. The façade on the Grand Canal is shown with a width of 120 Venetian *piedi*, meaning just under 40 meters, while the depth of the complex was destined to extend to roughly 80 meters. The surface area outlined corresponds to a block of

land bordered by the Grand Canal, the Calle della Regina, the Ramo del Rosa and the Rio di San Cassiano. The distribution of the internal spaces was meant to follow the rules of symmetry and be organized around a large courtyard into which the three secondary entrances and the large atrium facing the Grand Canal were to lead. The plan was conceived entirely to emphasize the very long prospect that was to guide the eye from the *riva maggiore*, where the building meets the canal, through the *portego* (the reception hall on the ground floor punctuated by detached pilasters) and through the brightness of the courtyard to the atrium on the *calle* at the rear. To satisfy his client's desire for a building of such magnificence that it would reflect on himself, Domenico Rossi chose to combine two types of Venetian palace on an unprecedented scale of grandeur: sixteenth-century renaissance and seventeenth-century. Although the floor plan does not allow us to make an accurate hypothesis about the elevation of the building, it seems obvious that Rossi relied on the sixteenth-century model of the Palazzo Corner in San Maurizio, called Ca' Granda, designed by Jacopo Sansovino. Commissioned by Giacomo Cornaro, the head of the San Maurizio branch, Ca' Granda is one of the most eloquent Venetian renaissance buildings, and Francesco Sansovino, the son of its creator, did not hesitate to recognize this in his famous *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare*, published in 1580, when he referred to it as one of the most outstanding palazzi in the city: "It should be known that there are four *principalissimi* Palazzi on the Grand Canal (in terms of architecture, contrivance of the living stone, mastery, size, splendor, and expense, for these each cost over 200 thousand ducats). They are the Loredano in San Marcuola, the Grimano in San Luca, the Delfino in San Salvatore, and the Cornaro in San Maurizio." Sansovini's palazzo in San Maurizio introduced a wholly Romanesque language to Venice, with its façade marked by half columns and the monumental columned atrium that leads into a square courtyard. More than 150 years later, Domenico Rossi re-proposed this same typology but associated it with more contemporary references. In point of fact, the immense residence of the Pesaro family had only recently been completed in the immediate vicinity of the



DOMENICO ROSSI
Project for Palazzo Cornaro first floor plan, ca. 1724

Cornaro property in San Cassiano. The edifice was planned around the mid-seventeenth century for Giovanni Pesaro, doge during the two-year period 1658–59, by the leading sixteenth-century Venetian architect Baldassare Longhena, who was also Rossi's master. But even at the start of the next century the construction, which had only risen to the level of the principal *piano nobile*, was nothing more than the base. The work was continued by Antonio Gaspari, who completed the palazzo just when the Cornaro were making plans for a neighboring residence. It is thus perfectly reasonable to hypothesize that the plans for Ca' Cornaro were conceived from a competitive standpoint with regard to the recently completed monumental building that dominated the view in that stretch of the Grand Canal.

The basis of the grandiose project for Palazzo Cornaro della Regina was laid out by Ferigo di Andrea Cornaro (1638–1708), who in his testament of 15 October, 1706, had expressed the desire to rebuild the dominical house and incorporate into it several adjacent houses that had been acquired previously. To that end he had left much of his immense property to his nephews: "Since the old dominical house is subject to the orders of the testament of my forbearer the prosecutor, the contiguous property acquired by Signor Gerolamo my brother, and the houses within are incorporated and inhabited by us, and they are also subject to the orders of the testaments, I can only hope and exhort my nephews to incorporate them all into the palace to be built to make it a nobler and better structure [...] and make the entire edifice best fulfill our needs, that it may suffice for our future family, and that it may ornament and add luster to our household."

Ferigo, who had never married, committed his entire life to the service of the Repubblica Serenissima, and led an important and prestigious career. The scion of a family belonging to the small oligarchy that held the highest positions in the government, his *cursus honorum* had taken him to the positions of ambassador of Venice to Spain and Vienna, of Procurator of San Marco, *savio del Consiglio*, or councilor, Minister of Commerce and superintendent of the Artillery. In his last will and testament Ferigo attempted to improve a difficult family situation and relaunch the policy of concord between brothers that had always

been central to Venetian patrician society. When the testament was being drawn up, the descendants of Ferigo, Andrea and another Ferigo, sons of his brother Gerolamo, had long been caught up in a major quarrel that had paralyzed almost every attempt to reach an agreement on the layout of the residence. In his will of 1706 Ferigo remembered how the last years of his life had been distressed by "troubles and regrets" due to this lack of family cohesion and how that feeling was amplified in his bitter observation that the house remained "without matrimony and without posterity." Entrusting his descendants with the job of rebuilding the *casa*, not just in terms of the physical building (house) but also the family (household), represented a desire, a necessary premise, for the return to concord and the implementation of plans looking to the future. Ferigo, the last of four brothers who had lived to an advanced age, was well aware of the importance of his act because as will be seen in greater detail, his own life too had been jolted by conflicts that had endangered the unity of the properties and threatened to disperse or at least chip away at the family patrimony. He was thus also perfectly aware of the substantial difference that existed between the danger of dividing up property between his inheritance and the legendary sixteenth-century division that lay at the origin of his branch of the family. Ferigo had been closely tied to his older brother Caterino, Superintendent in Chief of Maritime Affairs who had died in battle in Candia in 1669. The state held official exequies for Caterino but it was Ferigo who in 1674 erected a sepulchral monument to his memory in the Basilica del Santo in Padua. Designed by Baldassare Longhena and the sculptor Giusto Le Court, the basilica would later be the burial place of Ferigo himself.

ANTECEDENTS

Ferigo's commitment developed out of events that had taken place in the seventeenth century and provided the seed for ambitions to expand and modernize the old family house. Documents from 1602 record the name of the architect and Minister of Waters, Tommaso Cornaro who was entrusted by Gerolamo Cornaro (1562–1634) "to build two mezzanine floors" and in 1614 this same master presented a "Drawing of the great house"

desire that his four sons would continue to live together in the house and specified the sum of 8,000 ducats as the "house is in need of help for [the improvement of] security and adornment, also for the memory of the Queen who lived there"; in other words, the memory of Caterina Cornaro was used to justify the project for the construction of a new façade.

that year another Gerolamo (1632–1690), a grandson of the former, bought a small Gothic palazzo from Giovanni Grimani located to the left to the old Cornaro house, looking over the Grand Canal and separated from the Cornaro property by Calle del Rosa. In the deed of sale the building is described as a “una casa grande da statio a pepiano et in solaro [...] very ancient and in need of much repair throughout”; also included were “six adjacent empty houses in poor condition.” Whereas the act of enlarging the property suggests harmony and a flourishing family economy, the truth is quite different and reveals a Gerolamo whose talents, which were amply demonstrated in a brilliant political career, found no parallel in his private life. Gerolamo and his three brothers lost their father Andrea in 1646 during the defense of Retimno in the War of Candia. His death revealed a staggering

On reaching their maturity, the sons of Gerolamo—Andrea and yet another Ferigo—appeared to have inherited not only their father's property but also his less than accommodating character. In 1699 a group of experts was charged by the administrators of Gerolamo's will to find a legal solution to allow the equal division of the immovable and movable assets, including a collection of paintings that would be appraised by the painter Agostino Lama. As for the home in San Cassiano, Andrea's interests were looked after by the *proto*, or head architect, Giovanni Battista Gornizai, while Alessandro Tremignon acted on behalf of Ferigo. The two presented a floor plan in which two independent residential units were created out of the old house and the Gothic palazzo that been bought by Giovanni Grimani. Nonetheless the assessors stressed how difficult the operation



Project for Palazzo Cornaro and
Ca' Grimani, first floor plan after 1699

would be due to "the many defects in the same [building] that would be difficult to resolve, and the said house will remain forever divided in two parts." The solution was to overlap the properties, assigning each of the brothers areas in both the old

and the new houses, with certain rooms on the upper floors acting as bridges between the two. The end section of the public way Calle del Rosa would thus have run beneath these aerial passageways between the two buildings, and the façade on the Grand Canal would have been restructured to form a continuous front that left only free access to the bank of the canal. Not even the assessors were convinced by this solution and warned the brothers of the necessary, costly, but unsatisfactory restoration works involved. In conclusion they recommended making over the entire property to one of the brothers and assigning the other an appropriate annual income, or to rent out the property and split the revenues. But the brothers insisted, leading to further rulings and estimates, until Alessandro Tremignon declared he was no longer available to take care of this problem and the magistrate was forced to order Andrea Cornaro to find a new assessor within three days. The architect's exasperation was probably transmitted also to the quarrelsome brothers as on

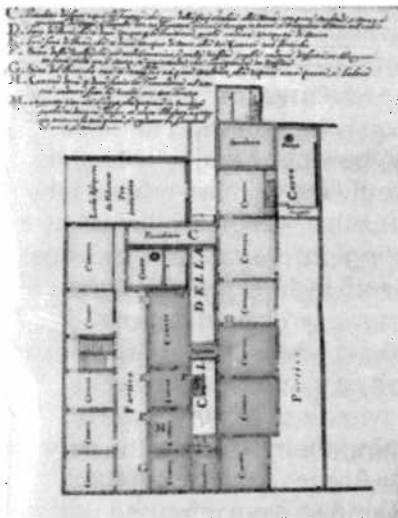
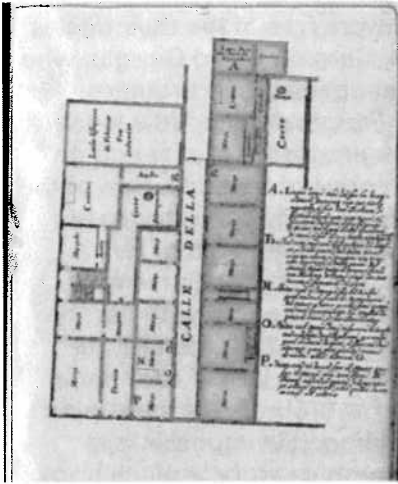
16 August, 1700, they surprisingly came to an agreement based on a more rational division of the assets. The new plan required the creation of residential units and was entrusted to *proto* Paolo Rossi, while the mason Valentin Sardi was commissioned with the construction.

But with the will and testament of their Uncle Ferigo, who continued to live in a third area of the property that was the subject of so many quarrels, the brothers ran up against a completely new situation.

As has been seen, Ferigo's immense legacy was bound up with the creation of a new *fraterna*. He allowed his nephews ten years to save up revenues from his properties that would then be legally tied to the construction of a new palazzo that would have the purpose of erasing the family discord from memory and relaunching the notion of a big and united family. This was the premise for Domenico Rossi's gigantic project of 1718, which was drawn up at the end of this ten-year period when the brothers had the necessary funds to build the new home that should have become the most grandiose of the "*principalissimi*" palazzi in Venice.

THE PALACE IS REALIZED

This time, external factors held up the project. In 1720, Giovanni Grimani's descendants succeeded in annulling the deed of sale that their ancestor had signed in 1678. The building located between Calle del Rosa and Rio di San Cassiano was in fact bound by a *fideicommisso*, or trust, created by Francesco Grimani in 1539 that rendered the property inalienable. To circumvent this constraint, the building was declared a "damaged property" and on this basis Francesco presented an appeal for the revocation of the *fideicommisso*. Neither cunning nor entreaty served any purpose and the Cornaro brothers were forced to return the house to its original owners and restrict their project to the area defined by their old palazzo. Domenico Rossi, whose name is mentioned incessantly in the documents, was thus called upon to adapt his first plan to the new situation. So that the walls could meet at right angles, he devised a single but sizeable alteration that was to result in the disagreement between the Cornaro and Grimani neighbors being prolonged further. In 1723 the Cornaros presented an application to the Senate to advance the façade on the Grand Canal by five *piedi* (circa 1.65 m). More precisely the plan was to move the façade leading up to the corner with Calle del Rosa forward to as to align it with the opposite corner that remained unchanged. The brothers explained that "by slightly shifting [...] a single side towards the Grand Canal where the width is greatest [...] it would be possible to balance the appearance of the new building [which] would contribute to the embellishment of



PAOLO ROSSI

Project for Palazzo Cornaro and Ca' Grimani, *piano nobile* and upper floor plans, after 1699



Ca' Corner della Regina
from the opposite side of the
Grand Canal, 2011

the Canal itself, rendered so admirable and illustrious by the nobility of so many other buildings." The survey by the assessor of the Minister of Waters, Angelo Minorelli, offered a positive opinion, which was then confirmed by a vote in the Senate. But a few days later Antonio Grimani appealed to the *Giudici del Proprio* (Property Magistrate) and asked for the works to be suspended, which he claimed would cause "severe damage" to his home. His claim was first declared groundless but,

although available documents make no mention of the true reasons for its stoppage, the Cornaros were not allowed to realign the building. The works, planned by Domenico Rossi and led by the master builder Valentin Sardi, however, proceeded quickly and after demolishing the old buildings and laying new foundations on May 10, 1724, the start of the real building phase was sealed with the symbolic laying of the first stone. While the works were underway, the Cornaros moved into the house of the Correggio family, who lived just opposite the

worksite on the opposite side of Calle della Regina. Expecting a fairly long stay in this temporary residence, it too was appropriately decorated by the stucco decorator Giovanni Battista Muttoni and the *quadatura* painter Ferdinando Focchi.

Domenico Rossi laid out the new palace with respect to the axes of the original walls, incorporating a series of small houses which looked onto Calle della Regina in the construction in order to make the perimeter regular. The façade that looks onto the Grand Canal is remarkable for its sense of verticality. This is suggested by its very high rusticated expanse, which rises a full two stories, and is accentuated on the floor of the upper mezzanines where the windows break up the continuity of the trabeation, whose fragments seem restricted by the limited dimensions of the structure they exist in. The orderliness and horizontal solidity of the elevation, which provide a balance to the vertical thrust, are created by the three arches separated by portals and by the sense of horizontality reinforced in the *piano nobile* by the unbroken balustrade and shifting of the double columns to either end. The plan to move the façade forward, tantamount to a small though not insignificant rotation of the orientation, would have provided the building with much greater visibility, which would have been advantageous when viewed in relation to the nearby Ca' Pesaro. Despite having the work of his master Baldassarre Longhena literally under his nose in the form of the Pesaro palace, Rossi tempered the Cornaro façade with the use of composed, linear forms and the harmonious treatment of sculptural decoration borrowed from classicism. This trend, begun in Venice by Andrea Tirali and Giovanni Scalfurotto, may have been related to the presence on the worksite of the latter, a relation moreover of Rossi, who was paid in 1725 for services as a "*proto aggiunto*," or associate *proto*.

The external appearance and internal layout are closely related but not everything on the façade corresponds perfectly with the distribution of the spaces inside. The three arches of the portals are all functional but their design solution is extraordinary: the central arch leads into the very deep *portego*, while the lateral ones are aligned with symmetrical stairways on either side (the one on the left was already present in the original



Ca' Corner della Regina entrance from
the Grand Canal, 2011



Palazzo Cornaro façade elevation drawing highlighting the three portals



Palazzo Cornaro first floor atrium before 1927

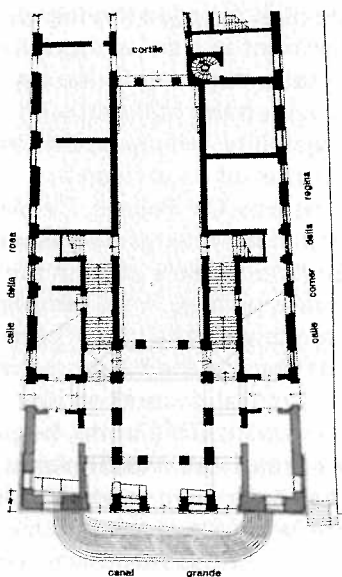
building). The space in the atrium thus creates a kind of peristyle on free columns that extends beyond the confines of the *portego*. The scenographic effects of this design solution are now compromised, or at least altered, by the staircase and landing built at the center of the portego in

1927. The layout explains why Rossi used the unusual solution of three portals set far apart: the lower part of the elevation, joined to the canal bank by a staircase, is presented as though "with open doors," like a *frons scenae* whose perspectives have not been designed to create an illusion of depth but are truly practicable. This theatrical space seems to be a last reminiscence of the court of Caterina Cornaro and her famous entertainments. In the upper floors, where the integrity of the portegos has been observed, the layout is more standard, but the widths of the central salons and adjacent rooms are not apparent in the façade as the double columns suggest the presence of load-bearing walls that

do not in fact exist in that position. The less harmonious portion of the complex is undoubtedly the right wing on the courtyard, which was erected on the site of the old houses. Here the insertion of a spiral

staircase terminating in a panoramic lantern above the roof necessitated the mutilation of arches, trabeations and cornices on the courtyard elevation. This intervention was part of the eighteenth-century works but most certainly is not ascribable to Domenico Rossi. The architect and master builders were supported by a great many laborers with long experience gained on other Venetian worksites, who could be trusted to take trouble over details. Examples are the stonecutters and carvers Giacomo Bragato, Iseppo Armelini and Giuseppe Torretti, to whom a few of the fine heads on keystones may be attributed.

The earliest information about the interior decoration dates back to the 1740s when a payment was made for unspecified work to the painter Gaetano Zompini, another figure tied to the world of the theater and who may have been responsible for the paintings in the first bedchamber on the mezzanine. The most extensive documentation, however, comes from after the death of the brothers. Andrea, who died in 1741 without children, left all his property to his brother Ferigo, who in turn named his four sons as his heirs in his 1743 will. On his death an inventory was drawn up of the furnishings in the new palace and in 1747 these goods and chattels were included in the trust *fideicommissio*, thereby preventing their sale. The collection of paintings included a few valuable pieces but it is very probable that a few works included in the previous inventory of 1699 had been sold off to pay debts. However, new works had also entered the collection, for instance, "discovery of Moses by Tiepolo elder," a reference to *The Finding of Moses* by Giambattista Tiepolo,



Palazzo Cornaro first floor plan before 1927

now in Edinburgh. It appears that Caterino Cornaro, Ferigo's younger son, wished to complete the internal decoration of the palazzo. On 3 April, 1773, the stucco decorator Vincenzo Colomba and the painter Costantino Cedini record payment for works executed in the house, most probably in the ceilings of the mezzanine. And ten years later Cedini signed the contract



The portego of Ca' Corner della Regina in the 1960s and in 2011

to depict the deeds of Alexander the Great on the ceiling of the *portego* on the principal *piano nobile*, a work to be carried out with the *quadratura* painter Domenico Fossati, who painted the architectural perspectives on the walls. Caterino's preference for Cedini is also reflected in San Cassiano church, where Cornaro financed the ceiling fresco. Caterino seems nonetheless to have had a change of heart regarding the author and the iconography of the decoration in the principal salon in the palazzo. The compartments in the ceiling now contain allegories and mythological scenes, which might possibly be ascribed to Giovanni Scajario, while wall frescos, perhaps

painted by Giuseppe Montanari in 1793 and framed by stuccos by Giuseppe Castelli mark—almost as a testament—the return to the great theme in the family's history: the memory and celebration of the queen of Cyprus, Caterina Cornaro.

AFTER THE CORNARO FAMILY

At the time Caterino commissioned these works, he was already certain to be the last male descendant of his branch. In 1781 his brothers Andrea and Alvise had died childless, and Caterino had abandoned his political career to become a priest. After the end of the Repubblica he became the secret valet of Pope Pius VII, who was elected to the papal throne in Venice in 1800. In his will of 22 September, 1802, Caterino bequeathed the family palace to the pontiff, including the "picture gallery [...] currently in the care of professor [Carlo] Gaspari." His nephews attempted to invalidate the will in order to recuperate at least the works bequeathed to various charitable institutions but they lost the case. After the death of Caterino, the collection was inventoried by two exceptional assessors, Pietro Edwards and Giovanni Maria Sasso, who drafted a list of nearly four hundred paintings located in the different rooms of the palace and to which another hundred or so works can be added, which had already been rejected due to their paltry value. The overall opinion is not very favorable and other than Tiepolo's painting of the *Finding of Moses*, the highest appreciation was given to a battle scene by Jacopo Bellini "painted with legions of figures, on wood, and well preserved." The total value of the works, however, did not exceed 350 ducats. In 1817 Pius VII donated the building to the Venetian brothers and priests, Marco and Antonio Cavanis, founders of the Scuole di Carità, who immediately sold the property to the Municipality. Used as the headquarters of the Monte di Pietà until 1969, Palazzo Cornaro was purchased by the Venice Biennale for its Historical Archive of Contemporary Art in 1975.

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