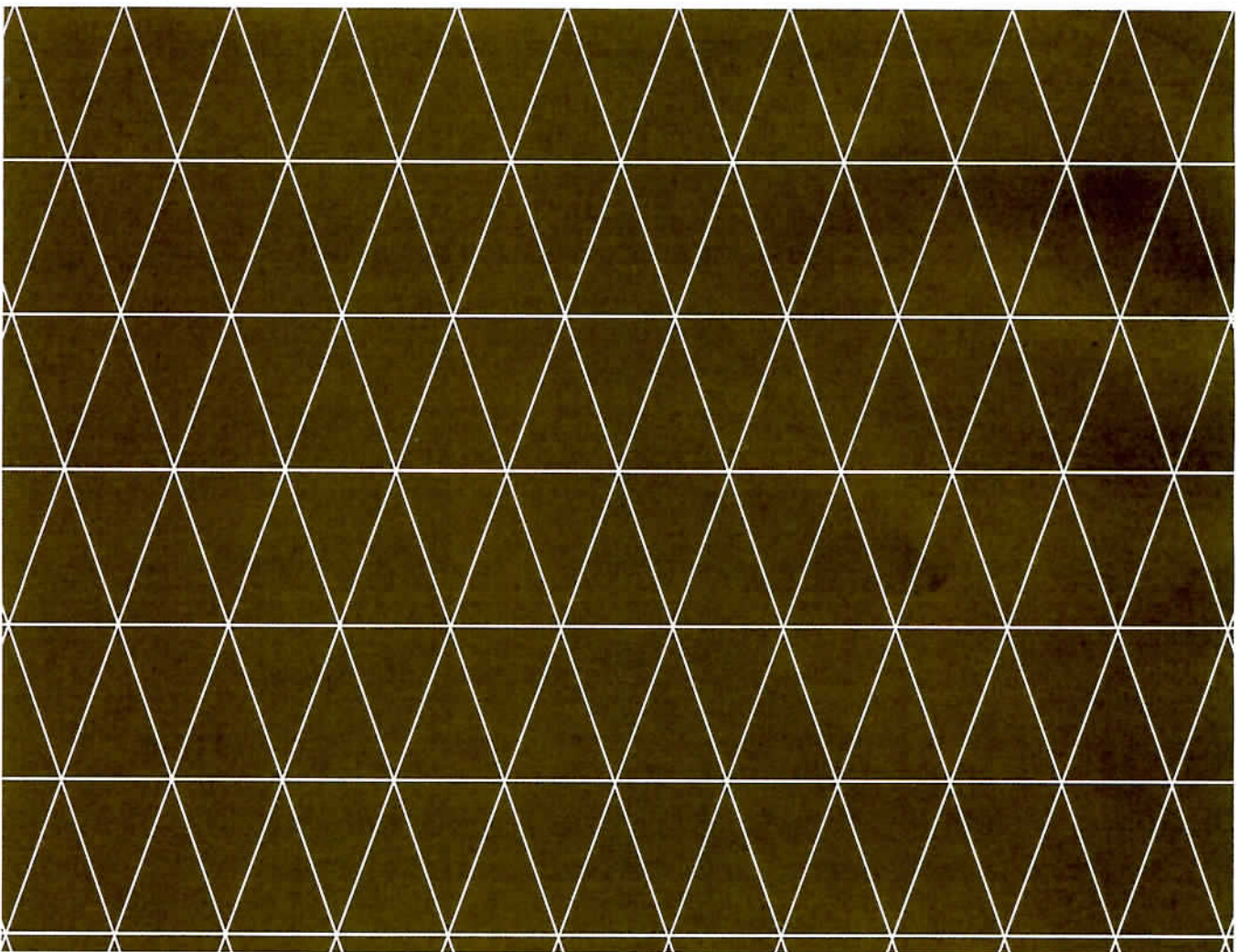


Center 29

National Gallery of Art

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts



National Gallery of Art

CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDY IN THE VISUAL ARTS

Center 29

Record of Activities and Research Reports

June 2008–May 2009

Washington, 2009

National Gallery of Art
CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDY IN THE VISUAL ARTS
Washington, DC
Mailing address: 2000B South Club Drive, Landover, Maryland 20785
Telephone: (202) 842-6480
Fax: (202) 842-6733
E-mail: casva@nga.gov
Web site: www.nga.gov/resources/casva.shtm

Copyright © 2009 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington.
All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part
(beyond that copying permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright
Law, and except by reviewers from the public press), without written
permission from the publishers.

Produced by the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts and the
Publishing Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington

ISSN 1557-198X (print)

ISSN 1557-1998 (online)

Editor in Chief, Judy Metro
Deputy Publisher and Production Manager, Chris Vogel
Managing Editor, Cynthia Ware
Design Manager, Wendy Schleicher
CASVA Project Manager for Center Reports, Karen Binswanger
Assistant Production Manager, John Long
Editorial Assistant, Magda Nakassis

Designed by Patricia Inglis, typeset in Monotype Sabon and Ellington display
by Duke & Company, Devon, Pennsylvania, and printed on McCoy Silk by
the Whitmore Group, Baltimore, Maryland.

Cover: Design study for the East Building (detail), I. M. Pei & Partners,
National Gallery of Art East Building Design Team, c. 1968. National Gallery
of Art, Washington, Gallery Archives

Half-title page: I. M. Pei, early conceptual sketch for the East Building profile,
with the Capitol, fall 1968. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gallery
Archives

Frontispiece: Fellows' tour of the print study room, March 2009



LUIGI SPERTI

Architectural Decoration and Classical Tradition in Early Renaissance Venice

It is well known that in Venice the progress of the Renaissance was slow, and that the Gothic tradition in art and architecture died hard. The new architectural style, launched in Florence in the early fifteenth century, was adopted in Venice only in the second half of the century: one of the earliest examples of true Renaissance architecture was the gateway of the Arsenal (1460), attributed to Antonio Gambello (died after 1479). The monument was surely intended as a restatement of one of the most famous themes of classical architecture—the Roman triumphal arch—and it was probably modeled on a surviving antique model, the Arco dei Sergi in the Istrian town of Pola.

Unlike Renaissance buildings erected in Florence and in many other Italian cities, this first Venetian example of the revival of antiquity shows a peculiar taste for richly decorated marble surfaces as well as a unique approach to the classical architectural tradition. We find the same characteristics in many monuments erected in Venice from about 1470 to 1530, particularly those attributed to Pietro Lombardo (1430/1435–1515) and his sons Tullio (c. 1455–1532) and Antonio (c. 1458–1516): a family, or better, a dynasty of architects and sculptors who played an important role in building in Venice over this time. My research focuses on the period that begins with the construction of the Arsenal gateway and the early works of Pietro Lombardo and extends to the 1530s.

The use of classical imagery in Venetian Renaissance architecture has often been noted, but a comprehensive survey of the topic is lacking. The

Antonio Rizzo and Pietro Lombardo, courtyard facade of the east wing of the Palazzo Ducale, Venice, begun 1485. Author photograph

aim of my research is to examine how Venice interpreted Renaissance classicism in the architectural decoration of buildings and monuments such as churches, *scuole grandi* (buildings for religious confraternities), private and public palaces, and funerary monuments. In the first stage of my research I focused on a single monument, the courtyard facade of the east wing of the Palazzo Ducale. The facade has never been the subject of a publication, except for the Scala dei Giganti, which has been studied by Anne Markham Schulz and others. This part of the Palazzo Ducale was completely rebuilt after 1485, when a fire destroyed the dogal apartments. Some documents testify that the *protomaestro* (superintendent) of the work was Antonio Rizzo (c. 1430–1499), one of the most famous architects of the period; for the facade, however, Rizzo was assisted from the outset by several Lombard stonemasons, probably under the direction of Pietro Lombardo.

One of the main issues of my research is to identify motifs and themes inspired by antiquity. Among major Italian cities, Venice was the only one that had no classical past. Sometimes Venetian artists could find inspiration in ancient architecture and sculpture preserved in extant Roman towns of the Venetian dominion, such as Padua or Verona. But more often the design of architectural ornament was taken from drawings and *taccuini*, such as the so-called Codice del Mantegna (Destailleur OZ 111, Staatliche Museen, Kunstbibliothek, Berlin), the Codex Escorialensis (Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial, Madrid), and the Zichy Codex (Fovarosi Svabó Erwin Königtvár, Budapest). The attitude toward ancient models is varied. True quotations, for example, are uncommon. More often the borrowings from the antique are transformed or mixed with motifs that do not belong to the classical vocabulary, for example, *grottesche* and images of sea creatures, which, not surprisingly, were popular in Venice.

Most of these complex iconographical programs (at least those for the major public buildings) were created to glorify the maritime and military power of the republic. But it is difficult for us to appreciate their symbolism, especially in the case of huge architectural complexes. Ornamental details without particular significance (such as candelabrum motifs or acanthus scrolls) are often repeated in different parts of a building. But there are also recurring combinations that are not fortuitous. For example, coats of arms and inscriptions containing the names of

doges are always linked to motifs that bear a particular meaning for the political propaganda of the period: weaponry in Roman style (and sometimes even Turkish scimitars and shields), the Roman eagle, heads of Roman emperors. Usually these motifs are placed symmetrically to decorate important parts of the facade, such as the main balcony of the doge's apartment. We cannot say that such associations constituted a figurative program, but they are not meaningless, even though they may seem incoherent to us.

The crisis of the "Lombardesque" tradition in early Renaissance architecture started after the 1530s when the sculptor and architect Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570) fled to Venice following the Sack of Rome in 1527. Supported by the ambitious doge Andrea Gritti and his cultural circle, Sansovino provided the city with the new architectural language of the so-called Roman Renaissance.

Università Ca'Foscari di Venezia
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Visiting Senior Fellow / Millon Architectural History Guest Scholar,
September 2–October 15, 2008

Luigi Sperti returned to his position as associate professor at the Università Ca'Foscari di Venezia.