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Re-thinking, Re-making, Re-living Christian Origins

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with the collaboration of Sabina Rosenbergová

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Chiara Piva

Girolamo Francesco Zanetti and *Dell'origine di alcune arti principali appresso i Viniziani*

For centuries, the problem of Venice's origins have drawn the attention of historians and the endless fascination of lay people: the issue conflates the bewilderment of foreign travellers who discover the exceptional structure of the city, its inhabitants' admiring pride in their mythical national history, the questions of urban form [...] raised by art critics, and the historian's efforts to interpret the exceptional reasons which must have led to the foundation of the city.¹

Wladimiro Dorigo introduces his monumental reflection on *Venezia Origini* by means of this succinct list of the problems and wonders surrounding the origins of Venice throughout the centuries.

The present paper aims to analyse a text which has hitherto been ignored by historiographers, and to show how the long-standing *topos* of the origins of Venice became manifest as early as in the eighteenth century, guiding the attention of scholars and city connoisseurs toward the artistic production of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

The analysis of Girolamo Zanetti's text in its cultural framework also highlights the fact that, at least in specific geographical contexts, the study of medieval art originated in the eighteenth century, when it overcame the dimension of historical or religious erudition in favour of a first embryonic reading of formal characters. It is a presence which appears all the more significant at a moment when the figurative culture of the time seemed to be going moving in a completely different direction altogether.

If one may surprised by such an early attention to an artistic production that had hitherto been practically ignored or negatively judged, I would like to underscore the ideological and celebratory importance of Zanetti's text, rooted in the defence of Venetian art superiority and in a challenge of Vasari's position. Such early attention is far from surprising if the ideological and celebratory importance of Zanetti's text, rooted in the defence of Venetian art and in a challenge to Vasari's position, is taken into consideration.

1. Wladimiro Dorigo, *Venezia Origini. Fondamenti, ipotesi, metodi*, Milano 1983, vol. I, p. 9 (my translation).

Let us first provide some information about Girolamo Zanetti and his text, as both have so far remained entirely overlooked.

Girolamo was born in Venice in 1713, in a family that was rather well known at the time. One of his older cousins was Anton Maria Zanetti, a famous collector of drawings, well connected with European connoisseurs and a promoter of several publications on antiques collections.²

Girolamo's older brother was Anton Maria Zanetti the Younger, a librarian at the Marciana Library for more than forty years, author of the first history of Venetian paintings and *Ispettore alle Pubbliche Pitture* (Inspector of Public Paintings) in charge of preserving the city's artistic heritage.³

Thus, Girolamo grew up in an intellectual and well-connected family, protected by Pietro Contarini and by the senator Girolamo Grimani. He was educated by the Jesuits, learned ancient languages, studied jurisprudence and worked briefly as a lawyer.⁴

However, he preferred studying Greek and Roman scholars, local history, and in particular the medieval monuments of Venice.⁵

Not to be confused with Guid'Antonio Zanetti, a famous eighteenth century expert of medieval numismatics, Girolamo Zanetti soon became a reference for

2. Giulio Lorenzetti, "Un dilettante incisore veneziano del XVIII secolo: Anton Maria Zanetti di Girolamo", *Miscellanea di storia veneta della Regia deputazione di storia patria*, XII (1917), pp. 1-147; Fabia Borroni, *I due Anton Maria Zanetti*, Firenze 1954; Alessandro Bettagno, "Anton Maria Zanetti collezionista di Rembrandt", in *Scritti in onore di Giuliano Briganti*, Marco Bona Castellotti, Laura Laureati eds, Milano 1990, pp. 241-256; Valentine Toutain-Quittelier, "L'expérience du regard. Zanetti et Mariette, ou la genèse d'une amitié professionnelle", in *Connoisseurship. L'oeil, la raison et l'instrument*, Proceedings of the conference (École du Louvre, 2011), Patrick Michel ed., Paris 2014, pp. 55-68; Enrico Lucchese, *L'album di caricature di Anton Maria Zanetti alla Fondazione Giorgio Cini*, Venezia 2015; Anna Kowalczyk Bozena, "Delle antiche statue greche e romane e i due Zanetti", in *Venezia Settecento. Studi in memoria di Alessandro Bettagno*, Anna Bozena Kowalczyk ed., Milano 2015, pp. 221-227; Marina Magrini, "Anton Maria Zanetti e Dresda", *ibid.*, pp. 229-237.

3. Nicola Ivanoff, "Antonio Maria Zanetti critico d'arte", *Atti dell'Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere e Arti*, CXI (1952-1953), pp. 29-48; Franco Firmiani, "Anton Maria Zanetti il giovane tra illuminismo e neoclassicismo", *Arte in Friuli, arte a Trieste*, 3 (1979), pp. 73-76; Edward Grasman, *All'ombra del Vasari. Cinque saggi sulla storiografia dell'arte nell'Italia del Settecento*, Firenze 2000; Chiara Piva, "La fortuna del Medioevo veneziano nel Settecento. Anton Maria Zanetti e i mosaici di San Marco", in *La storia dell'arte a Venezia ieri e oggi: duecento anni di studi*, Proceedings of the conference (Venice, 2012), Xavier Barral i Altet, Michele Gottardi eds [=Ateneo Veneto, CC (2013)], Venezia 2013, pp. 127-149; Ead., "Anton Maria Zanetti e la tradizione della tutela delle opere d'arte a Venezia: dalla critica d'arte all'attività sul campo", in *Il restauro come atto critico: Venezia e il suo territorio*, Proceedings of the conference (Venice, 2012), Chiara Piva ed., Venezia 2014, pp. 83-114; Ead., "Le copie a colori delle "Varie pitture a' fresco dei principali maestri veneziani" di Anton Maria Zanetti", *Arte Veneta*, 72 (2015), pp. 155-165.

4. He died in Padua 7 December 1781; biographical details are in the eulogy published by Giuseppe Gennari, "Accademici defunti", in *Saggi scientifici e letterari dell'Accademia di Padova*, Padova 1789, vol. II, pp. XVI-XXII.

5. The list of his publications is impressive: Gennari, *Accademici* (n. 4), pp. 20-21 and Girolamo Dandolo, *La caduta della Repubblica di Venezia ed i suoi ultimi cinquanta anni*, Venezia 1855, pp. 428-430.

Italian scholars well beyond the city borders.⁶ He was in touch with numerous scholars of his time, such as Anton Francesco Gori, Giuseppe Pelli Bencivenni and Scipione Maffei, whose correspondence testifies to the notoriety and circulation of his texts, to the point of even receiving a posthumous *Elogio* (*Eulogy*) in the *Antologia Romana*.⁷

From a young age, Zanetti took part in some of his elder cousin's publishing ventures, starting from the edition of his collection of precious stones and cameos, one of the most highly valued of its time, published in 1750 with the title *Le gemme antiche illustrate*. Girolamo translated into Italian Gori's scholarly commentary in Latin to the text.⁸ Along the same lines, he edited the library catalogue of Joseph Smith, the British consul at Venice who had numerous connections with the city's artistic community.⁹

Zanetti's lifelong passion for glyptics and numismatics led him to delve into hitherto under-investigated historical periods.

An active scholar of news regarding excavations and archive research in Venice's most ancient churches, he worked as a prolific journalist and polemist for various periodicals and was the protagonist of a brand of erudite journalism that aimed to rejuvenate the profession through a renewed attention for literary themes and ground-breaking issues.¹⁰ In particular, with *Memorie per servire alla storia letteraria*, published in collaboration with Angelo Calogerà and Zaccaria Serimàn, Zanetti launched a series of booklets featuring various kinds of dissertations, often of high quality.¹¹

6. *Giovanni Brunacci tra erudizione e storia*, Proceedings of the conference (Padua, 2011), Antonio Rigon, Flaviano Rossetto eds, Padova 2014; Luisa Ciammitti, "Reassembling a Dismembered Archive: Tomitano's Eruditi Italiani Archive at the Getty Research Institute", *Getty Research Journal*, 5 (2013), pp. 41-54.

7. "Elogio di Girolamo Francesco Zanetti Veneziano", *Antologia Romana*, LI (1783), pp. 411-418.

8. Zanetti Anton Maria, *Dactyliotheca Ant. M. Zanetti Hier. Filii ab Ant. Franc. Gorio notis inlustrata, o Le Gemme antiche di Anton-Maria Zanetti di Girolamo illustrate colle annotazioni latine di Anto-Francesco Gori volgarizzate da Girolamo Francesco Zanetti di Alessandro*, Venezia 1750, where he specifies: «Ad imitazione poi della celebre Opera del P. Montfaucon, ho voluto ancora, che le mentovate Sposizioni Latine recate fossero diligentemente nel nostro Italiano idioma da Girolamo-Francesco Zanetti mio Cugino». See Diana Scarisbrick, "Gem connoisseurship: the 4th Earl of Carlisle's correspondence with Francesco de' Ficoroni e Anton Maria Zanetti", *The Burlington Magazine*, 129 (1987), pp. 90-104; Roberta Bandinelli, "I due Zanetti ad Anton Francesco Gori", in *Lettere artistiche del Settecento veneziano*, Alessandro Bettagno, Marina Magrini eds, Vicenza 2002, vol. I, pp. 343-370.

9. Girolamo Zanetti, *Bibliotheca Smithiana, seu Catalogus librorum D. Josephi Smithii Angli per cognomina authorum dispositus*, Venetiis 1755; the author is explicitly mentioned in the dedication at «Benevolo lectori» (p. 3).

10. *Giornali veneziani del Settecento*, Marino Berengo ed., Milano 1962; Mario Infelise, "Europa". Una gazzetta manoscritta del '700", in *Non uno itinere. Studi storici offerti dagli allievi a Federico Seneca*, Venezia 1993, pp. 221-239 (pp. 2, 10, notes 26, 15-16).

11. *Memorie per servire alla storia letteraria*, vol. II, p. VI, pp. 35-45 with a letter dated 10 December 1753 on new documents about Murano and Torcello in tenth century. For the friendship

Some of his manuscripts, kept at the Marciana Library, record the main political and cultural events of the city in the early 1740s, accompanied by various and often acerbic observations regarding the society of his time. His writings also paid considerable attention to the theatre and art life of the city, such as the well-known painting exhibitions in front of the church of San Rocco.¹²

The diversity of his interests and publications is the measure of eighteenth century erudition: he translated Molière into Italian,¹³ penned a number of librettos (a family passion), and studied, among other topics, the Etruscan language, medieval diplomacy, and several ancient bas-reliefs from the Nani collection in Venice.¹⁴

Unedited until 1818 and still relatively unknown, his *Elogio di Rosalba Carriera* reveals Zanetti's remarkable capacity to appreciate and judge the art of his time, a talent that was certainly fostered by his family ties with the well-known woman painter.¹⁵

His multifaceted talents earned him numerous tokens of international recognition. He became member of the Accademia Galileiana in Padua and, in the 1760s, was awarded by the Académie des Inscriptions in Paris.¹⁶

Compared to a historiographical production that mainly consisted of pamphlets, *Dell'origine di alcune arti principali appresso i Viniziani (On the Origins of Some of the Main Arts Among the Venetians)* certainly constitutes one

with Calogera see Cesare De Michelis, "L'epistolario di Angelo Calogera", *Studi Veneziani*, X (1968), pp. 621-704; Id., *Letterati e lettori nel Settecento veneziano*, Firenze 1979, pp. 90-127.

12. Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, *Codici Italiani* (XI, cod. LVIII); See also *Annali della città di Vinegia, ne' quali si contengono le cose degne di memoria... Tomo primo che abbraccia il primo semestre dell'anno 1766*, Venezia 1766 and "Memorie per servire all'istoria della inclita città di Venezia", *Archivio veneto*, XXIX (1885), pp. 93-148.

13. *Giorgio Dandino ossia Il marito confuso commedia di Moliere. Traduzione del signor Girolamo Zanetti*, Venezia 1794; *Il siciliano ossia L'amor pittore commedia di un atto solo con balli e canti di Moliere. Traduzione del signor Girolamo Zanetti*, Venezia 1794.

14. Girolamo Francesco Zanetti, *Il Ciclope d'Euripide tradotto e illustrato con note*, Padova 1749; Id., *Dell'origine e della antichità della moneta viniziana ragionamento*, Venezia 1750; Id., *De Nummis Regum Mysiae seu Rasciae ad Venetos Typos percussis Commentariolum*, Venezia 1750; Id., *Osservazioni intorno a un papiro di Ravenna e alcune antichissime pergamene viniziane ora per la prima volta pubblicate*, Venezia 1751; Id., *Nuova trasfigurazione delle lettere etrusche, s.e.*, Venezia 1751; Id., *Varj epigrammi della Greca Antologia recati in lingua volgare, e indirizzati a sua eccellenza il signor Tommaso Mocenigo-Soranzo P.mo nell'occasione delle sue felicissime nozze con sua eccellenza la sig.ra Elena Contarini*, Venezia 1752; Id., *Due antichissime greche iscrizioni spiegate e indirizzate a s.e. Il signor Giacomo Nani*, Venezia 1755; Id., *Osservazioni sopra un antico bassorilievo votivo del museo Nani in Vinegia indirizzate al sig. D. Clemente Grubissich rettore del Seminario Arcivescovile di Spalato*, Venezia 1761; Id., *Breve sposizione di un marmo antico figurato del Museo Nani in Vinegia con pochissime, e tutte necessarissime citazioni agli onorati coltivatori della buona antichità*, Venezia 1761; Id., *Lettera intorno ad alcune iscrizioni votive e militari scopertesi nella Dalmazia, nella quali si fa menzione di un municipio romano finora sconosciuto, scritta al signor conte Giandomenico Polcastro gentiluomo padovano*, Venezia 1764.

15. Girolamo Zanetti, *Elogio di Rosalba Carriera*, Venezia 1818.

16. First award is in 1764 for a lesson about *Sulle vesti usate in Egitto dagli uomini e dalle donne prima dei Tolomei*; second award is in 1769 for a lesson about *Sulla differenza di attributi di Saturno e di Rhee tra i Greci e i Romani*.

of his most substantial and ambitious texts (Fig. 1). It was published by Stefano Orlandini in 1758, at the peak of Zanetti's maturity and activity.¹⁷

Despite its current obscurity, I was able to ascertain that his text was quite widespread in the main libraries of the time, from the one of Cardinal Garampi to that of the Pisani family in Venice.¹⁸ The book was also known in France, receiving numerous positive reviews.¹⁹ In 1821, the catalogue of Leopoldo Cicognara's books mentioned that «all the works of this most erudite author are to be highly valued».²⁰ The innovative value of the volume and the contribution of new documents to the history of Venetian arts are further confirmed by a new edition issued, unsurprisingly, in the mid nineteenth century.²¹

The text immediately opens with a very explicit claim: according to Zanetti, Venice is one of the first cities in Italy to witness a revival of the arts.

It is well known that, regarding the issue of the revival of the arts, a number of different positions had emerged within the post Vasari debate, with a consolidation of the matter of antiquity and nobility for each pictorial school, seen as – in the words of Previtali – «nobility of ancestry and hence of origin».²²

Zanetti devotes the entire volume to supporting its initial assumption, arguing for the superiority of the Venetian school from the viewpoint not only of the city's political and cultural history, but also from that of medieval architecture, sculpture and gold working.

The myth of the foundation of the city is what explains this early revival of fine arts, according to Zanetti: after the Romans settled down in the fifth century «to live in full liberty on those small islands», Venice remained virtually untouched, politically autonomous and free from the decadent influence of the Goths and of the Barbarian tribes that descended upon Italy. Thanks to their exceptional position, and being unable to practice agriculture, Venetians devoted themselves to commerce and exchanges, thus developing the arts to the point that they became «among the first to restore the arts back to their former splendour and to raise them up from the thorns and muck where the Barbarians had left them bedraggled and crushed».²³

17. It is dedicated to the Count Francesco Lionessa of Padua, who donated to Gerolamo the ancient coin drawn at the beginning of the book (p. I).

18. See Mariano De Romanis, *Bibliotheca Josephi Garampii cardinalis catalogus materiarum*, Roma 1796, p. 306; *Bibliotheca Pisanorum Veneta annotationibus nonnullis illustrata*, Venezia 1807, vol. II, p. 173; Cornelis van der Ouder-Meulen, *Recherches sur le commerce ou idées relatives aux intérêts des différens Peuples d'Europe*, Amsterdam 1779, pp. 243-248, who translates in French a long excerpt of the Zanetti's book and considers it an important source for understanding how ships were built in thirteenth century.

19. See *Giornale letterario* (1783), p. 223; Joseph Fr. Michaud, Louis Gabriel Michaud, *Biographie universelle, ancienne et moderne*, Paris 1828, vol. LXII, *ad vocem*.

20. «[...] tutte le opere di questo dottissimo autore sono da tenersi in pregio», *Catalogo ragionato dei libri d'arte e d'antichità posseduti dal conte Cicognara*, Pisa 1821, vol. II, p. 96, n. 3081.

21. The book is published for the second time in 1841 by the Tipografia Santini.

22. Giovanni Previtali, "La controversia seicentesca sui 'Primitivi'", *Pagarone. Arte*, X/119 (1959), pp. 3-28, sp. p. 6.

23. «Una delle prime città d'Italia che pensassero a far rifiorire le Arti dopo il loro universale decadimento, si fu certamente quest'inclita nostra Patria Vinegia; [...] benché poi certamente fra'

In these first pages, Zanetti clearly brings back to memory all the elements of the foundation myth of Venice and of the first *dogi*, such as the physical and geographical isolation as well as the administrative and legislative autonomy that were the pride of the *Serenissima* in the early elaboration of the myth. According to this myth, dating back to the Early Middle Ages, the city was founded on 25 March 421, the presumed date of the laying of the first stone of the church of San Giacomo in Rialto. The date significantly coincides with the day of the Annunciation to the Blessed Mary.²⁴

If Zanetti takes up what was already a privileged theme of art history in the second half of the seventeenth century, interestingly he develops it on the basis of markedly ancient chronologies and associates it mainly with the direct autopsy of artworks.

This can be seen in Zanetti's appreciation for the production of the time of Theoderic. Mostly relying on sources gathered by Giovanni Cocleo and Muratori,²⁵ he reminds us that the emperor was «by far not as barbaric as it is believed, having being raised and acculturated at the court of Emperor Zeno in Constantinople». Zanetti not only considers him a patron of the arts and appreciates his commitment to the preservation of the artistic heritage, but even goes so far as expressing his interest in the Ravenna mausoleum (Fig. 2), whose «huge carved stone that serves as its roof will always be an object of wonder for our descendants as it is today for us».²⁶

In order to understand the novelty of these claims, we should consider the extent to which the art history of his time was still deeply influenced by the

primi a farle risalire all'antico splendore, e a sollevarle dalle spine e dal fango, ov'erano state da Barbari involte e calpestate», Girolamo Francesco Zanetti, *Dell'origine di alcune arti principali appresso i Viniziani*, Venezia 1758, pp. 1-2.

24. The myth of Venice's foundation was also a title of Carlo Goldoni's piece: *La fondazione di Venezia. Divertimento per Musica da cantarsi dalla Compagnia de' Comici nel Teatro Grimani a S. Samuele la prima sera delle recite autunnali in Venezia in quest'Anno 1736*. On this topic see Mario De Biasi, "Leggenda e storia nelle origini di Venezia", *Ateneo veneto*, XXIII/1-2 (1985), pp. 77-101; Antonio Carile, "Le origini di Venezia nelle più antiche cronache veneziane", in *In memoria di Sofia Atoniadis*, Venezia 1974, pp. 27-40; T.S. Brown, "History and myth. Medieval perceptions of Venice's Roman and Byzantine past", in *The Making of Byzantine History. Studies Dedicated to Donald M. Nicol*, Roderick Beaton, Charlotte Roueché eds, Aldershot 1993, pp. 145-157; Eduard Hüttinger, "Venezia come mito", in *Venezia da Stato a mito*, Catalogue of the exhibition (Venice, 1997), Alessandro Bettagno ed., Venezia 1997, pp. 9-36; Elizabeth Crouzet-Pavan, *Venezia trionfante. Gli orizzonti di un mito*, Torino 2001.

25. Giovanni Cocleo, *Vita Theodorici, regis quondam Ostrogothorum et Italiae querela item de reipublicae sub Justiniano imp.*, Ingolstadt 1544; edited again by I. Peringskiöld in Stockholm 1699.

26. «Teodorico inoltre lor capo e Re in queste parti, era assai men barbaro di quel che si crede, perché allevato e ingentilito alla corte dell'Imperatore Zenone in Costantinopoli; [...] e ciò in segnalato modo riguardo alle Arti si vede, le quali si Egli come i suoi successori, almeno finché fiori e visse in quella corte Cassiodoro, sostennero sempre e professero. [...] Comunque si fosse, Ravenna ci conserva ancora, nel Mausoleo di Teodorico una segnalata prova di quanto valessero gli Architetti di que' tempi usciti certamente anch'essi dalle Scuole Romane. Quello scavato smisuratissimo sasso, che gli serve da tetto, sarà sempre com'è ora per noi, un oggetto di stupore a' tardi nipoti», Zanetti, *Dell'origine* (n. 23), pp. 5-7.

model of Vasari, who had dismissed Theoderic's buildings as «barbarian in their style, opulent and grandiose rather than well planned and well designed».²⁷ Even Venetian historians who wished to move on from Vasari had never gone so far: for instance, Scamozzi, while acknowledging the importance of Theoderic's attempts to renovate the cities with new buildings, described the latter as «devoid of architecture, layout or any kind of arrangement that would give some grace and beauty to the whole and its parts».²⁸

If the art of Ravenna remained in any case a crucial and pivotal moment, Zanetti's words are markedly less flattering when describing the Longobards and the Franks, who according to him «maintained in all things a character of unsophistication and ignorance».²⁹ The only exceptions are constituted by the basilica of San Pietro in Benevento and the paintings of the church of San Giovanni Battista in Monza, exempted from the negative judgment passed on the art of those populations, which was known to him mostly through literary sources such as Paul the Deacon.³⁰

In any case, if Venice could claim a primacy in the revival of the arts, it was for being «a land where the Barbarians never laid a foot».³¹

Zanetti's book demonstrates this assumption by following some of the city's typical productions: naval architecture (intended as the art of building ships), the design of geographical maps and globes, and, which is more interesting to us, civil architecture, sculpture and gold working.

On the subject of civil architecture, let me mention that Marc-Antoine Laugier, an essential theoretician of the time and author of *Histoire de la République de Venise* (published in Paris in 1759), referred to the history of the *Serenissima* in terms of the «purity of its origins»³² and by observing that «the Venetian people is almost unique in its straightforward origins, at a time when most of the nations dominating the universe were still confused in the shapeless chaos of barbarity».³³

27. «Pur di maniera barbara e più tosto ricchi e grandi che bene intesi o di buona architettura», Giorgio Vasari, *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori scritte da M. Giorgio Vasari pittore et architetto aretino, di nuovo dal Medesimo riviste et ampliate con i ritratti loro et con l'aggiunta delle Vite de' vivi, & de' morti Dall'anno 1550 infino al 1567*, Firenze 1568, vol. I, p. 76.

28. «Senza Architettura e disposizione, o ordine tale, che potesse render gratia o vaghezza alcuna al tutto, et alle sue parti», Vincenzo Scamozzi, *Dell'idea dell'architettura universale*, Venezia 1615, lib. I, capo VI, p. 18.

29. «Mantenero sempre un'indole di rustichezza e d'ignoranza nelle cose loro», Zanetti, *Dell'origine* (n. 23), p. 10.

30. The history of Longobards has new critical attention in XVIII century thanks to a publication as Camillo Pellegrini, *Historia principum Langobardorum*, Napoli 1751.

31. «Paese in cui i Barbari non giunser mai a porre piede», Zanetti, *Dell'origine* (n. 23), p. 15.

32. «Pureté de son origine», Marc-Antoine Laugier, *Histoire de la République de Venise*, Paris 1759, vol. I, p. 4.

33. «Le peuple Vénétien est presque le seul qui montre une origine décidée dans les temps où la plupart des nations qui dominant aujourd'hui l'univers, étoient encore confondue dans le chaos informe de la barbarie», *ibid.*, p. 8.

For Zanetti, the events surrounding the foundation of the basilica of San Marco, reconstructed from extensive Venetian chronicles,³⁴ represent an early instance of the revival of architecture on the lagoon.

Regarding sculpture, Zanetti dates its revival back to the eleventh century, when «amongst the thick obscurity and deep silence of our Authors, I seem to discern some ray of light that gives us reason to believe that our fellow citizens did practice such an art at the time, and not without merit».³⁵

A clear example is provided by the ciborium of the high altar in San Marco's (Fig. 3), to which Zanetti devotes a detailed formal and stylistic analysis by describing every single element in order to distinguish the column capitals of Eastern origin from the decorated columns that he attributes to Venetian sculptors from the eleventh century. Zanetti judges the whole ensemble as «most excellent and unique».³⁶

I do not intend to judge such claims in terms of their historiographical soundness, but rather to emphasise how they represent one of the first, and most refined for the time, readings of the formal qualities of these works. The numerous descriptions of San Marco's basilica found in Venetian historiography did not always succeed in assessing the stylistic qualities of the medieval pieces; mostly overlooked and undescribed, these works were at best attributed a historical or religious significance, without receiving any critical attention from an art historical perspective.

In this light, Zanetti's passage on the bronze gates of the basilica is just as noteworthy.

The external gates, on which he reads the signature «Magister Bertucius Aurifex Venetus», originate in his opinion from the same forge. They «are not to be despised and, in the century in which they were made, their artfulness and decorations were considered quite beautiful and praiseworthy».³⁷ It is worth noting that Zanetti shows a capacity to formulate a critical appraisal that is not based on the aesthetic canon of his time, but on the formal values of the «century in which they were made».³⁸

Regarding the entrance gates of the basilica, Zanetti also extensively discusses their attribution and the traditional belief that they were all imported to Venice from Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.

34. See Macro Foscarini, *Della letteratura veneziana libri otto*, Padova 1752.

35. «Fra il buio di alte tenebre, e il profondo silenzio de' nostri Scrittori parmi ravvisare qualche raggio di luce che ci porga argomento di credere essere stata in quel tempo coltivata anche da' Nostri quest'Arte, e non ispregevolmente», Zanetti, *Dell'origine* (n. 23), p. 86.

36. «Eccellentissima e singolare», *ibid.*, pp. 86-88.

37. «Non debbono dispregiarsi, e nel Secolo in cui furon fatte sì per artificio come per gli adornamenti potevano riputarsi assai belle, e degne di lode», *ibid.*, p. 92.

38. On this, Zanetti seems to echo the words of Giulio Mancini: «in order to judge a painting, one must consider the time in which it was made», *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, Adriana Marucchi, Luigi Salerno eds, Roma 1956, vol. I, p. 61, my translation. Whether Zanetti was familiar with Mancini's text remains to be verified.

By comparing the stylistic features of the figures, the formal features of the inscriptions and the execution, Zanetti suggests that only the gate on the right, next to the Zen Chapel, is «clearly of Greek making»³⁹ and imported from Constantinople, but dating from the ninth century. According to Zanetti, however, the main and the lateral gates were manufactured in Venice following the taste of the imported gate.

The various iconographies represented on the gates (Fig. 4), alternatively featuring saints of the Eastern and Latin churches, further supported Zanetti's distinction, and the *procuratore* Leo da Molino, represented on one of the tiles with a dedicatory inscription, is identified as the Venetian patron, thereby confirming the hypothesis of a local Venetian production by «fellow citizen artists» and allowing to date the work after the conquest of Constantinople.⁴⁰

It is not my intention, especially in this context, to discuss the credibility of Zanetti's interpretation, as there would be no point in doing so after so many centuries. I merely wish to point out as an aside that the attribution of the central gate remained controversial in Matthiae's famous 1971 study on bronze gates across Italy, while in a recent conference devoted to the "Gates of Paradise" (*Le porte del Paradiso*) Andrea Paribeni took up the question again and favoured the hypothesis that they were all commissioned by a Venetian patron who instructed the artists of Constantinople about his iconographic preferences.⁴¹

Zanetti's passage testifies to his remarkable analytical capacity and unprecedented keen eye for these artworks: he no longer regarded them as mere historical documents, as Domenico Martinelli, Giovanni Antonio Meschinello, and Flaminio Corner had done a few years before, but he appreciated them for their formal qualities.⁴²

This is doubtlessly a first timid opening, but considering the date of publication of the volume, 1758, it arguably is a remarkable novelty.

Zanetti's time saw a surge of scholarly interest for medieval artistic production: Giovanni Lami, for instance, had devoted an entire study, written in

39. «Chiaramente di Greco lavoro», Zanetti, *Dell'origine* (n. 23), p. 92.

40. Zanetti read and copy the inscription: «Leo da Molino hoc opus fieri iussit».

41. Giglielmo Matthiae, *Le porte bronzee bizantine in Italia*, Roma 1971, p. 97-106; *Le porte del Paradiso. Arte e tecnologia bizantina tra Italia e Mediterraneo*, Proceedings of the conference (Rome, 2006), Antonio Iacobini ed., Roma 2009, sp. Andrea Paribeni, *Le porte ageminate della basilica di S. Marco a Venezia tra storia e committenza*, pp. 301-317 and Ettore Vio, *Le porte bizantine di Venezia. Storia e restauri*, pp. 283-300.

42. Domenico Martinelli, *Il ritratto ovvero le cose più notabili di Venezia*, Venezia 1705, pp. 1-12; Flaminio Corner, *Notizie storiche delle chiese e monasteri di Venezia, e di Torcello*, Padova 1758; Giovanni Antonio Meschinello, *La chiesa ducale di S. Marco colle notizie del suo innalzamento: spiegazione delli mosaici, e delle iscrizioni, un dettaglio della preziosità delli marmi, con tutto ciò che di fuori e di dentro vi si contiene e con varie riflessioni e scoperte*, Venezia 1753-1754, sp. p. 21; Antonio Zatta, *L'Augusta ducale basilica dell'evangelista San Marco nell'inclita dominante di Venezia colle notizie: del suo innalzamento, sua architettura mosaici, reliquie, e preziosità che in essa si contengono, arricchite di alcune annotazioni, e adornate di varie tavole in rame dissegnate da celebre architetto, ed incise da perito artefice*, Venezia 1761.

1757 but published only in 1792, to paintings and sculptures from the eleventh to fourteenth centuries.⁴³

This taste was shared by several scholars outside of Italy, such as John Talman, whose drawings include one of the panels of San Marco's central gate. Talman, however, did not comment on its artistic qualities but rather, according to his custom as a convert to Catholicism, on the liturgy of the Catholic ritual represented on the panel.⁴⁴

In order to understand the cultural context in which Zanetti was operating, we should not forget the role of Scipione Maffei, who successfully looked at the developments in France and England and was ahead of his time in dispelling several historiographical stereotypes, such as the attribution of Gothic to the Goths or the origins of the Italian language.⁴⁵

In his *Verona Illustrata* from 1732, Maffei turned his attention to medieval art, with a tendency to backdate, as noted by Previtali, the works of Verona's early artists, in a «campanilistica» (parochial) and anti-Tuscan bias.⁴⁶ In his book Maffei analyzed artworks with observations on the links between different artists, but also a broader framework of figurative art. Proud supporter of autochthony of Italian culture, based on what Malvasia has done in Bologna, Maffei intended redeem figurative experiences of Verona, from the first centuries of the Christian era, emphasizing continuity with the classical period.⁴⁷ In line with Muratori or

43. *Dissertazione del dott. Giovanni Lami relativa ai pittori e scultori italiani che fiorirono dal 1000 al 1300*, published in *Trattato della pittura di Leonardo da Vinci ridotto alla sua vera lezione sopra una copia a penna di mano di Stefano Della Bella con le figure disegnate dal medesimo, corredato delle memorie per la vita dell'autore e del copiatore di Francesco Fontani*, Firenze 1792, pp. LIII-LXXII; see Giovanni Previtali, *La fortuna dei primitivi. Dal Vasari ai neoclassici*, Torino 1989, p. 85.

44. John Talman. *An Early-Eighteenth Century Connoisseur*, Cinzia Maria Sicca ed., New Haven-London 2008, sp. Antonella Capitanio, "John Talman and the Liturgy of the Catholic Church", pp. 225-245, sp. p. 226, n. 6; and Marco Collareta, "John Talman and the Arts of the Italian Middle Ages", pp. 211-223; Antonella Capitanio, "Immagini del Medioevo nella collezione di disegni di John Talman. Sguardi tra erudizione e culto di un "virtuoso" di primo Settecento", in *Immagine e ideologia. Studi in onore di Arturo Carlo Quintavalle*, Arturo Calzona, Roberto Campari, Massimo Mussini eds, Milano 2007, pp. 509-516; Ead., *Viaggio nel rito. John Talman e la costruzione di un Museo Sacro Cartaceo*, Firenze 2008.

45. Franco Barbieri, "Scipione Maffei storico dell'arte", in *Miscellanea Maffeiana*, Verona 1955, pp. 25-44; Giuseppe Silvestri, *Scipione Maffei, europeo del Settecento*, Vicenza 1968; Alessandro Bevilacqua, "Scipione Maffei storico e critico d'arte", *Archivio Veneto*, CIV-CV/139 (1975), pp. 95-138; Gian Paolo Marchi, *Un italiano in Europa. Scipione Maffei tra passione antiquaria e impegno civile*, Verona 1992; *Scipione Maffei nell'Europa del Settecento*, Proceedings of the conference (Verona, 1996), Gian Paolo Romagnani ed., Verona 1996; Fabio Forner, *Scipione Maffei e Gianfrancesco Baldini: erudizione antiquaria e dispute teologiche nel secolo dei lumi*, Verona 2005.

46. An interesting analysis of the adjective *campanilistico* (parochial) in eighteenth century studies is Giovanni Previtali, "Bottari, Maffei, Muratori e la riscoperta del medioevo artistico italiano", *Paragone. Arte*, IX/115 (1959), pp. 3-18.

47. Barbieri, *Scipione Maffei* (n. 45); Previtali, *La fortuna* (n. 43), pp. 76-80, sp. p. 77; Bevilacqua, *Scipione Maffei* (n. 45).

Bottari, he was engaged in a historical re-evaluation of the Middle Ages: in the *Verona illustrata* we can read a comparison of the bronze doors of San Zeno portal and those of Monreale with a judgement completely positive on Bonanno Pisano. The works of the Early Christian ages were valued using the critical categories of "truth", the historical interest allowed to re-evaluate some miniatures of the ninth and tenth century or the sculptures of the Saints Sergius and Bacchus sarcophagus (Fig. 5).⁴⁸ The Maffei's openness is evident in the description of the altarpiece of Lorenzo Veneziano, where he exhorted the reader not to judge it with the critical categories of his time, but with those of the period when it was built.⁴⁹

In his Museo Lapidario, founded between 1736 and 1745 after many years of planning, Maffei created a section devoted to epigraphs from the *aevo medio*, which his chronological-topographic system placed after Christian ones.⁵⁰ Maffei's appreciation of medieval art was also that of a collector, if we are to believe the claim, which he reported, that he owned a painting by Lorenzo Veneziano, signed and dated 1356.⁵¹

In Veneto, the best-known collection of Byzantine icons and medieval paintings by those «very first Venetian artists who had learned their trade from the Greeks» was certainly that of abbot Lodoli. Unfortunately known only through Andrea Memmo's description, the collection followed a chronological order and was intended by the owner to illustrate the evolution of art, significantly starting from the Byzantine period.⁵² However significant, the case was clearly quite unusual for its time and caused considerable surprise among its contemporaries.

48. Scipione Maffei, *Verona illustrata*, Verona 1732, vol. III, pp. 99, 122, 353.

49. Maffei, *Verona* (n. 48), vol. III, pp. 269-270.

50. Scipione Maffei, *Museum Veronense hoc est antiquarum inscriptionum atque anaglyphorum collectio*, Verona 1749, *Prefatio*, p. V: «Christianas quoque, aevoque medio exaratas inscriptiones coniuixi»; cf. Giordana Mariani Canova, "Il Museo Maffeiiano nella storia della museologia", *Atti e memorie dell'Accademia di Agricoltura Scienze e Lettere di Verona*, XXVII (1976-1977), pp. 177-191; Lanfranco Franzoni, "Origine e storia del Museo Lapidario Maffeiiano", in *Il Museo Maffeiiano riaperto al pubblico*, Verona 1982, pp. 29-72; Sergio Marinelli, "La posa degli illuminati: sull'iconografia di Scipione Maffei e Alessandro Pompei", *ibid.*, pp. 85-110; Licisco Magagnato, "Dalla collezione privata al museo pubblico: Scipione Maffei", *Ateneo Veneto*, XXII/1-2 (1984), pp. 91-105; Bruna Forlati Tamaro, "Il museo lapidario di Scipione Maffei", in *Studien zur spätantiken und byzantinischen Kunst*, Otto Feld, Urs Peschlow eds, Bonn 1986, vol. III, pp. 163-173.

51. «Piccola tavola presso di noi si conserva, sotto la quale: MCCCLVI hoc opus Laurentius pinxit», Maffei, *Verona* (n. 48), vol. III, p. 272.

52. Memmo describes the collection as follows: «Being by his own admission a poor man, the priest could not afford to purchase the paintings of the most renowned masters, whose exorbitant prices forced the penniless to settle for admiring them in someone else's home; therefore he decided to gather a collection quite unlike the ones we are used to seeing, but possibly more useful: a series of paintings that would illustrate the gradual progression of the art of drawing from its Italian revival to artists such as Titian, Raphael, Correggio, Buonaroti (sic) and Paolo. [...] He started his collection from the ancient remnants of some Greek painter, not too difficult to find in Venice - a city which, until the revival of the arts in Italy, owed all its good and beautiful pieces to Greece [...]. Then came the paintings of the very first Venetian artists who had learned their trade from the Greeks, and whose names have remained forgotten until Andrea da Murano and Jacobello del Fiore [...]. Those were followed by a few paintings by Gentile da Fabriano», Andrea Memmo, *Elementi*

We can suppose that Girolamo knew Lodoli's collection, as his correspondence indicates that he was familiar with the abbot and theoretician of architecture, as well as with his cultural *entourage*.⁵³

I have analysed elsewhere how Girolamo's brother, Anton Maria the Younger, paid in his study *Della pittura veneziana* unprecedented attention to the beginnings of art in Venice and how he devoted an entire chapter to the mosaics of San Marco, including the most ancient ones.⁵⁴

This early attention for a hitherto ignored artistic production can be arguably justified by the familiarity of the two Zanetti brothers with the Marciana Library and its manuscripts, which they edited; the illuminated codices could indeed serve as a key to understanding their interest in medieval art and growing appreciation of its forms.⁵⁵

To conclude, it clearly appears that Zanetti's attention for the eleventh and twelfth centuries as proof of the early origins of Venetian arts should also, but not only, be read as a way to counter Vasari.

If Vasari was enjoying a renewed popularity in the eighteenth century, thanks to Giovanni Gaetano Bottari's critical edition, Zanetti's focus on the Venetian production of the eleventh and twelfth centuries could only be read as an attempt to bypass his historiographical model. It is well known that Vasari considered 1250 as the symbolic date of the revival of the arts, when «Heaven took compassion on the fine minds [...] and directed them to the original forms».⁵⁶ In the preface to the *Lives of the Artists*, he unconditionally condemned the time of «the old artists of Greece, who still survived, making images of clay or stone, or painting grotesque figures and only colouring the general outline».⁵⁷ Among the works of «the surviving Greeks, of the old and not the ancient manner», Vasari included

d'architettura lodoliana, o sia, L'arte del fabbricare con solidità scientifica e con eleganza, Zara 1834, vol. I, pp. 78-81.

53. Girolamo Zanetti, *Memorie per servire all'istoria Letteraria*, vol. III, part VI, pp. 65-66; letter of 16 June 1754; from the letter it's clear that they had considerable confidence, because Zanetti says that Lodoli will be one of the first to read his finished text. See also *Vico e Venezia*, Cesare de Michelis, Gilberto Pizzamiglio eds, Firenze 1982, sp. Pietro Giuseppe Gaspardo, Gilberto Pizzamiglio, *La pubblicazione dell'Autobiografia vichiana nella corrispondenza di Giovan Artico di Porcia con Muratori e Vallisnieri*, pp. 107-130.

54. Piva, *La fortuna* (n. 3), pp. 127-149.

55. Alan Noel Latimer Munby, *Connoisseurs and medieval miniatures 1750-1850*, Oxford 1972; Fabrizio Crivello, «Il Medioevo riprodotto: incisioni e litografie negli studi storici antiquari», in *Arti e storia nel Medioevo. Il Medioevo al passato e al presente*, Enrico Castelnuovo ed., Torino 2004, vol. IV, pp. 623-649; Simona Moretti, «La miniatura medievale nel Seicento e nel Settecento fra erudizione, filologia e storia dell'arte», *Rivista di storia della miniatura*, 12 (2008), pp. 137-148; Valentina Cantone, «L'oro di Bisanzio» nei cataloghi della Biblioteca Marciana tra XVIII e XIX secolo, in *La storia dell'arte a Venezia* (n. 3), pp. 169-179.

56. «Pur gli spiriti di coloro che nascevano, aitati in qualche luogo dalla sottilità dell'aria, si purgarono tanto che nel MCCL il cielo, a pietà mossosi dei belli ingegni che 'l terren toscano produceva ogni giorno, gli ridusse alla forma primiera», Vasari, *Vite* (n. 27), p. 80.

57. «Un residuo di vecchi artefici di Grecia facevano o in immagini di terra e di pietra o dipingendo figure mostruose e coprendo solo i primi lineamenti di colore», *ibid.*, p. 80.

the basilica of San Marco, whose mosaic he dismissed in rather harsh tones that betrayed his difficulty to approve and understand its figures «with frightened eyes, outstretched hands and on the tips of their toes».⁵⁸

Challenging Vasari had almost become a literary *topos* for seventeenth century art historians, and not only in Veneto; it was Carlo Ridolfi, more than Marco Boschini, who proposed the first timid re-evaluation of Venetian-Byzantine works, although he was unable to mention any name in his historiographical system and ended up defending their quality in generic terms, confirming the ancient origins of Venetian paintings rather than reading their formal qualities.⁵⁹

58. Vasari, *Vite* (n. 27), p. 80, where he continues: «These artists were invited to Italy for they were the best and indeed the only representatives of their profession. With them they brought the mosaic, sculpture, and painting as they understood them, and thus they taught their own rough and clumsy style to the Italians, who practiced the art in this fashion up to a certain time, as I shall relate. As the men of the age were not accustomed to see any excellence or greater perfection than the things thus produced, they greatly admired them, and considered them to be the type of perfection, barbarous as they were» («Questi artefici, com'e' migliori, essendo soli in queste professioni, furono condotti in Italia dove portarono insieme col musaico la scultura e la pittura in quel modo che la sapevano, e così le insegnarono agl'Italiani – goffe e rozzamente; i quali Italiani poi se ne servirono, come si è detto e come si dirà, insino a un certo tempo. E gl'uomini di que' tempi, non essendo usati a veder altra bontà né maggior perfezione nelle cose di quella che essi vedevano, si maravigliavano, e quelle, ancora che baron[c]esche fossero, nondimeno per le migliori apprendevano»). Vasari also wrote: «another sort of work called German [...] monstrous and barbarous [...] sickened the world» («quella specie di lavori che si chiamano Tedeschi [...] mostruosi e barbari [...] ch'hanno ammorbato il mondo»), Vasari, *Vite* (n. 27), p. 43. See Previtali, *Fortuna* (n. 43), pp. 9-11.

59. Ridolfi is openly polemical against Vasari when claiming the primacy of Venice in the revival of the arts: «The Greeks continued to paint on their tables various images of the Saints by always following the same forms, as they do to this day: hence it is clear that Painting in modern times was renewed in Venice before it was introduced in Florence, as claimed by Vasari, who says that the Florentines sent for some painters from Greece in the year 1240 to restore the art of painting in their city, and then proceeds, with much ostentation, to describe the works of Cimabue [...]. But as the events that occurred in Venice led to the destruction of the works of the artists who followed (either the works were destroyed by fire, or the name of their authors failed to be recorded), we shall begin our History with those artists of whom we have some news, and whose paintings we have seen» («Seguendosi poi a dipingere con le istesse forme da' medesimi Greci sopra delle tavole imagini varie de' Santi; come da quella nazione tuttavia si costuma: di donde si viene in chiarezza, che la Pittura ne' moderni tempi si rinnovasse in Venetia, prima che fosse introdotta in Firenze, come riferisce il Vasari, dicendo che da Fiorentini l'anno 1240 furono chiamati di Grecia alcuni pittori per rimetter l'arte nella Città loro, seguendo egli con molta ostentazione à descrivere le opere di Cimabue [...]. Ma essendosi in Venetia per le vicende de' tempi annichilate le opere di quegli artefici che indi seguirono: o per i molti incendi accaduti incenerite; e per difetto degli scrittori trascurati i nomi di quelli, che per avventura con più accomodato stile dipinsero, noi daremo principio all'Historia nostra da quegli Autori, de' quali habbiamo qualche notitia, e vedute Pitture»), Carlo Ridolfi, *Le meraviglie dell'arte, ovvero le vite de gl'illustri Pittori veneti e dello Stato*, Venezia 1648, p. 13. Marco Boschini, in *Le Ricche Minere della pittura veneziana*, Venezia 1674, was starting his historiographical path by Giovanni Bellini. See Anna Pallucchini, “La posizione critica di Marco Boschini”, *Arte Veneta*, 18 (1984), pp. 89-98; Franco Bernabei, “Il problema dell'identificazione stilistica in Marco Boschini”, *Arte Veneta*, 17 (1983), pp. 109-119; Philip L. Sohm, *Pittoresco. Marco Boschini, his critics, and their critiques of painterly brushwork in seventeenth-and eighteenth-*

In this sense, Zanetti's emphasis on the ancient origins of autochthonous art through a new appreciation of local early-medieval art can be compared to the position of Bernardo de Dominici who, in the preface to his *Vite*, re-evaluated the artistic production from the time of Constantine to that of Angevins; in close analogy with Zanetti, de Dominici claimed that the art of Naples was superior to the art of Florence because the former had its origins in Magna Grecia and could boast an uninterrupted connection with that culture, although the lack of documents forced him to make up a series of invented biographies.⁶⁰

Zanetti's method, supported by a solid scientific and philological culture, appears to build upon his illustrious predecessors. It allowed him to considerably extend his chronology and most importantly gave him the time to carry out an autoptic exam of the works. His positive reading of eleventh and twelfth century Venetian arts and his critical re-evaluation of Byzantine models were not only a means to challenge Vasari's model, but also a way to emphasize the originality of local artistic production: on the impetus of a need for historiographical self-celebration, it had been made acceptable again also on a formal level.

century Italy, Cambridge 1991; Marc-Joachim Wasmer, *Marco Boschini: breve instruzione. Eine stilkritische Einführung in 'Le ricche minere della pittura veneziana'*, Bern 2009; *Marco Boschini. L'epopea della pittura veneziana nell'Europa barocca*, Proceedings of the conference (Verona, 2014), Enrico Maria Dal Pozzolo, Paolo Bertelli eds, Treviso 2014, sp. Andrea Polati, *Da Ridolfi a Boschini: il contesto, le strategie letterarie e il pubblico*, pp. 176-189.

60. I really thank Stefano D'Ovidio for suggesting this comparison during the debate of the conference. See *Bernardo De Dominici, Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti napoletani*, Ricciardi, Napoli 1742, Fiorella Sricchia Santoro, Andrea Zezza eds, Napoli 2003-2008; sp. *Proemio delle Vite*, pp. 41-67 with introduction and notes of Pierluigi Feliciano (pp. 39-40); and *Life of Tauro, mastro Fiorenza and mastro Agnolo Cosentino*. See also Stefano D'Ovidio, "Cernite Robertum Regem Virtute Refertum: la "fortuna" del monumento sepolcrale di Roberto d'Angiò in S. Chiara", in *La chiesa e il convento di Santa Chiara. Committenza artistica, vita religiosa e progettualità politica nella Napoli di Roberto d'Angiò e Sancia di Maiorca*, Francesco Aceto, Stefano D'Ovidio, Elisabetta Scirocco eds, Battipaglia 2014, pp. 272-312.



Fig. 1. Girolamo Francesco Zanetti, *Dell'origine di alcune arti principali appresso i Viniziani*, Venezia 1758, frontispiece.



Fig. 2. Mausoleum of Theoderic, Ravenna (© C. Piva).

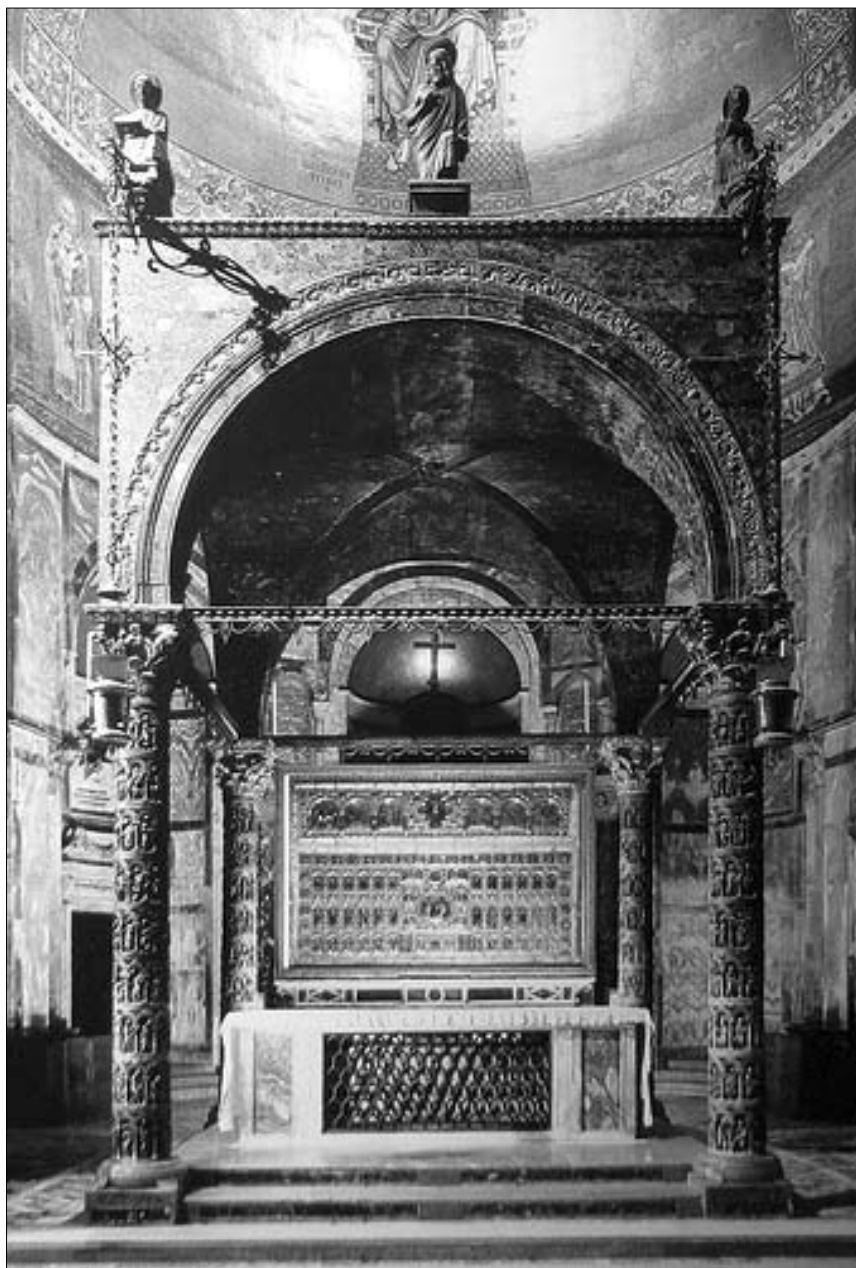


Fig. 3. Ciborium of San Marco basilica, Venice (© C. Piva).



Fig. 4. Bronze gate of San Marco basilica, Venice (© C. Piva).

Fig. 5. Saints Sergius and Bacchus sarcophagus, Verona, Museo di Castelvecchio (© C. Piva).