

*The Bovolo Staircase of the Palazzo
Contarini in Venice was restored with
contributions from the Minnesota
Chapter of World Monuments Fund.*



This photographic exhibit, celebrating the work of Venetian artisans, opened in the World Monuments Fund-Venice Committee Visitors Center in Venice in the summer of 1986. It is touring the United States during 1987.

*Cover
Gold Leaf does not decay, but the
underlying surface sometimes
disintegrates. Today, missing pieces
are not replaced but the remaining
gold is cleaned with an organic solvent.*

The World Monuments Fund is the only U.S. non-profit organization that sponsors the preservation of cultural heritage worldwide. The Fund's Venice Committee has an office and a Visitors Center in the Church of the Pietà in Venice. It has supported the restoration of more than 20 major buildings, works of art and conservation laboratories since the disastrous floods of 1966.

Venice Committee

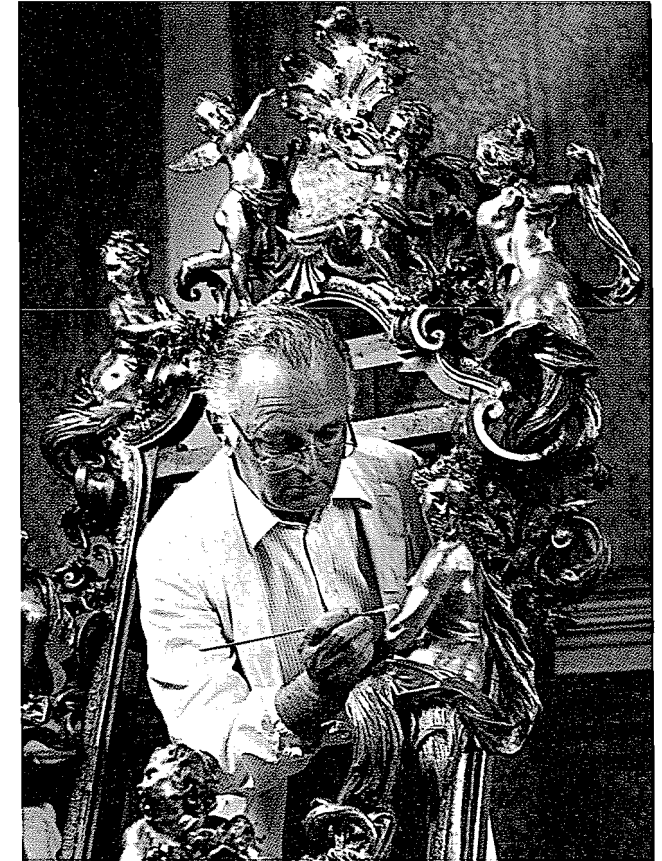
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Restorers at Work 20 Years' Achievement in Venice 1966-1986




Photographs by Edmondo Tich

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Venice Restored

A remarkable number of organizations, both public and private, from almost all the major countries of the Western world have been working for the past 20 years to restore the buildings of Venice and its art treasures. This international effort, unique in its scope and ambition, has come about as a result of the threefold attack that the city faces: from the sea, from the land and from the air.

The danger from the sea is essentially that of flooding. The Venetian lagoon is almost landlocked, being cut off from the open Adriatic by a line of long, low sandbanks – the *lidi* – which is broken only by three relatively narrow channels. Over the centuries these sandbanks have usually afforded adequate protection. However, the slow but steady rise in the mean level of the Mediterranean has left the lagoon increasingly vulnerable to a number of dangers. The tide is obviously one. The wind, rather less obviously, is another, since the frequent southeasterly *scirocco*, if it blows for any length of time up the axis of the Adriatic, and particularly if it then chances to coincide with a build-up of low atmospheric pressure in the area, has the effect of piling up the waters at the northwestern end, from which there is no natural outlet. The consequence is the *acqua alta* – high water – which manifests itself not as an inrushing wave but as a slow, deadly welling up of water around the city's buildings.

Every few years, the greater part of the city is inundated to a depth of several feet. The most disastrous flood of all came on Saturday, November 4, 1966, when the waters rose more than six feet (1.8m) above the mean sea level and much of the city was submerged, not only in water but in every sort of detritus: garbage, sewage and – most damaging of all – fuel oil.

The second attack that Venice has to face is from the land: in a word, subsidence. Some of the 117 interconnected islands on which the city is built may be stronger and firmer than others, but all are essentially composed of the sand and mud of the lagoon, and it is one of the many miracles of Venice that her immense marble churches and palaces have not centuries ago crumbled into the canals.

Here again, there has been a serious aggravation of the problem in recent years, due this time to the activities of the huge industrial zone at Mestre and Porto Marghera on the mainland shore. As the new industries pumped out more and more water, so the bed of the lagoon began to sink, and Venice with it.

Lastly, there is the attack from the air. Venice is not the only city to suffer from atmospheric pollution, but its unique location greatly intensifies the problem. It is surrounded, and to a large extent permeated, not just by water but by salt water; and the

Restoration of mosaics involves careful cleaning, followed by the reattachment of loose pieces to the supporting surface with a mixture of marble dust, lime and liquid resins.



sulphur dioxide issuing from the industries of Mestre (and, until they were all converted to gas, from the oil-fired central heating systems in the city itself) combined with these exceptional degrees of humidity and salinity has proved quite terrifyingly corrosive. Stone, marble, brick, even bronze: nothing is safe.

The Italian Government, realizing after the great flood of 1966 that the problem was far too wide-ranging and urgent to be tackled by itself alone, appealed to UNESCO. In its turn, UNESCO appealed to its constituent members, an impressive number of whom responded at once. Simultaneously, an even greater number of private organizations from both Italy and abroad – charities, educational foundations, and several individual funds established specially for the purpose – proclaimed their readiness to contribute.

The private international funds are directed primarily towards the restoration of buildings damaged in the past. By the late 1960s there were literally hundreds of buildings in desperate need of attention and fast deteriorating. A system was accordingly evolved by which each private fund would adopt one or more buildings and make itself responsible for its restoration; not only the architecture but also the contents would be restored, for Venetian churches and *scuole* are quite astonishingly rich in paintings and sculptures, a large proportion of the latter forming part of the exterior decoration and being therefore totally unprotected from atmospheric pollution. All the restoration is, of course,

In the restoration of an organ, its tuning and voicing are of primary concern to achieve the desired pitch, temperament and quality of the sound.



carried out with the approval and under the supervision of the Italian Government authorities – the Superintendent of Works of Art and the Superintendent of Monuments – in Venice. All restoration work is carried out by local artisans and, with few exceptions, under the direction of Italian experts. It ranges in technical complexity from the cleaning and consolidation of stone (the major part of many restoration projects) to the meticulous repair and restoration of works of art.

It should be emphasized that the entire international effort, impressive as it is, is by no means the whole story. The list given here is of private funds only and consequently makes no mention of the work of the Italian Government itself, which makes a large annual contribution to Venice, as to all the other historic cities of Italy. To quote just two examples, it has been responsible for the restoration of the *Ca' d'Oro* – recently opened as a museum – and is now working on the immense Palazzo Grimani at *Santa Maria Formosa* to which, it is hoped, the outstanding collection of classical sculpture amassed by the Grimani family in the 16th century (and at present in the *Archaeological Museum*) will eventually return.

Excerpted from the special section on restoration by John Julius, Viscount Norwich in the World Monuments Fund edition of The American Express Guide to Venice.