



## CELEBRATING A FOUR-DECADE COMMITMENT TO ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT YET IMPERILED CITIES

by JOHN JULIUS NORWICH

I first came in contact with the International Fund for Monuments—as it was then called—in Venice. The great flood of November 3–5, 1966 was still a recent and terrible memory. The waters had risen to well over two meters above their normal level and had remained there for more than 24 hours, undermining the foundations of many of the city’s most important buildings and leaving most them on the verge of collapse. The disaster had prompted an exhaustive inquiry by UNESCO into the present condition of the city—which, it reported, could hardly have been worse. Unless a huge conservation program could be launched on a global scale, they said, it seemed likely that within a hundred years the Venice that we all knew and loved would effectively cease to exist. UNESCO accordingly appealed to its members to rally all their resources to avert catastrophe, and some two dozen countries responded by establishing special foundations with the preservation of Venice as their object. One of these was Britain, which established the Venice in Peril Fund, with which I have been affiliated since its founding in 1971.

The United States did not need to start from scratch since the World Monuments Fund—which I shall call it throughout this article, although until 1985 it was still operating under its old title—was already in existence. Superbly equipped to operate in Venice, it created a Venice Committee, a body dedicated to carrying out restoration in the city and funded by various local “chapters” throughout the United States.

Under the chairmanship of John McAndrew, of Wellesley College in Massachusetts, the Committee wasted no time in buckling down to the job. By the end of 1969, it was hard at work on

two major projects. The first of these was the restoration of the façade of the Ca’d’Oro, the finest and most elaborate late Gothic palazzo in the city. The second was one of the six *scuole grandi* of Venice—that of S. Giovanni Evangelista, just behind the great Franciscan church of the Frari.

The *scuole grandi* were the principal private charitable foundations of the Venetian Republic, founded by confraternities of rich citizens who were determined that the buildings in which they were housed should adequately reflect their wealth and splendor. S. Giovanni Evangelista, which was established as early as 1261, was lent particular distinction by its possession of a fragment of the True Cross. The side façade, with its Gothic windows, dates from the middle of the fifteenth century; but the front is a superb example of early Renaissance work, featuring a marble screen by Pietro Lombardo. Inside is a vastly impressive double staircase by his contemporary Mauro Coducci, the only one of its kind in Venice. Sadly, the building was systematically stripped by Napoleon, who actually stabled his horses in the Gothic entrance hall. By the time WMF appeared on the scene, its condition was little short of desperate. The outer walls were on the point of collapse into the canal, and everywhere there was a deep and dangerous infiltration of water and salt. WMF introduced damp courses, restored beams and pavements where necessary, and undertook a complete rewiring. In gratitude, an apartment in the building was made available for the organization’s Venice office.

In that same year, 1969, WMF also began work on the Scuola Grande of S. Rocco. It is the largest and richest of all the *scuole*, a sumptuous Renaissance building of the early sixteenth century,





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but today it is principally known for its 58 enormous canvases by Jacopo Tintoretto, depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments and including what is perhaps the greatest of all representations of the Crucifixion. With the dissolution of all such institutions following the fall of the Republic in 1797, however, the building was abandoned; wind and rain were allowed to do their worst. In 1850, John Ruskin had reported that three of them were “hanging down in ragged fragments, mixed with lath and plaster, round the apertures made by the fall of three Austrian heavy shot.” Soon afterwards, the worst of the damage was repaired, but the paintings remained covered with the dust and candle smoke of five centuries. “Incurable blackness,” wrote Henry James some 30 years later, “is settling fast upon all of them, and they frown at you across the sombre splendor of their great chambers like gaunt twilight phantoms of pictures.” With invaluable help from the Edgar J. Kaufmann Charitable Trust, WMF was able to embark on a six-year program of cleaning. If only, one feels, Ruskin could return there now....

With the 1970s, WMF found its stride. One of its first and most important challenges was the complete restoration, inside and out, of the church of S. Pietro di Castello. This building, now relatively unvisited in its distant location at the far eastern extremity of the city, was in fact the official cathedral of Venice throughout the period of the Republic. In the early seventeenth century, it was remodelled according to a design by Andrea Palladio. Fortunately, Mauro Coducci’s lovely snow-white campanile was left untouched. Its great cracked bell was, almost unbelievably, refounded in situ, a huge furnace was constructed immediately beneath it, causing alarming columns of smoke to billow out of the upper openings. Then came the church of the Pietà, with its two ceilings by Giambattista Tiepolo and its associations with Antonio Vivaldi, its *maestro di cappella*. Thanks to the composer, the church was the center of music in Venice in the mid-eighteenth century, its

orphanage of female foundlings providing the best music, vocal and orchestral, to be heard anywhere in the city.

But WMF did not limit itself to Christian places of worship. It also turned its attention to the Scuola Canton. There had been a vast immigration of Sephardic Jews into Venice after their eviction from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492; a quarter of a century later the entire community was contained in the ghetto, where several synagogues were immediately built to serve their needs. The Scuola Canton was the second of these, but the first to be primarily intended for the Ashkenazim. The restoration began in 1973, with an emergency grant from the Chicago Committee of WMF after it was discovered that the building which housed it on the second floor was in danger of collapsing into the adjacent canal. After the building was made secure, WMF embarked on the second stage of the work: a full restoration of the synagogue itself, which was completed in 1989 and underwritten in large part by the J.M. Kaplan Fund.

Then, in 1977, WMF joined with several other private committees to help one of the loveliest and most precious of Venetian buildings, the ancient Cathedral of S. Maria Assunta on the island of Torcello. This is basically an early eleventh-century building, though built on foundations much earlier still—and is famous for its astonishing thirteenth-century Byzantine mosaics. Mosaic is normally one of the most permanent of artistic techniques: the tiny tesserae of which it is composed are fired in a kiln over their color and gold leaf, giving them the durability of glass or ceramic. What can happen, however, is that with rising damp the mortar bed in which they are set can pull away from the masonry behind it, loosening its grip on the tesserae themselves. This is what was happening at Torcello: gradually a golden rain of mosaic pieces was beginning to fall to the floor beneath. To deal with this involved work of considerable technical sophistication, using such instruments as stethoscopes and tuning forks; the cost was to prove far





**AMONG THE RESTORATIONS CARRIED OUT DURING THE 1970S AND 1980S WERE OF A TINTERETTO PAINTING CYCLE IN THE SCUOLA GRANDE DI SAN ROCCO, ABOVE; THE SCUOLA CANTON, A SYNAGOGUE BUILT IN 1531, RIGHT; AND CEILING FREScoes BY TIEPOLO IN THE CHURCH OF THE PIETÀ, FAR RIGHT.**



greater than any one committee could hope to meet on its own. It proved, however, triumphantly successful: the mosaics are now as breathtaking as they ever were.

In 1979 WMF's Minnesota Chapter assumed responsibility for the restoration of the Scala del Bovolo, one of the most extraordinary buildings in all Venice with its unique early Renaissance staircase set into a circular Byzantine tower. It is a piece of typically Venetian *bragadoccio*—the palazzo of which it is a part has a perfectly good inside staircase of its own—the more extraordinary since it can be admired only from a tiny concealed courtyard behind Campo Manin.

With the immense number of major restorations in progress by the beginning of the 1980s, Venice was feeling the increasing need for a major laboratory for stone and marble conservation. A perfect site for it was found in the Scuola Vecchia della Misericordia. This magnificent old building was begun in the thirteenth century and gradually added to over the next 300 years. In 1634 it had lost its religious function and had subsequently been used by silk weavers; later still it became a residence. In 1980, together with the Samuel H. Kress Foundation—and what a friend and supporter that wonderful organization has shown itself over the years—WMF helped to create a state-of-the-art stone conservation center, one of the best in the world and now financed entirely by the Italian government.

Among the many individual works of art restored by WMF, two in particular deserve a special mention. The first, one of my favorite paintings in Venice, is to be found in the little church of S. Giovanni in Bragora—in which, incidentally, one may still see the font in which Vivaldi was baptized. The Baptism of Christ by Cima da

Conegliano was painted between 1492 and 1494, and is thought to be the earliest surviving large-scale representation of this subject. It is certainly one of the most beautiful. Set in an exquisite marble frame—the remains of what was once a choir screen—it seems to transform the whole church. The second is the famed equestrian figure of Bartolomeo Colleoni by Andrea del Verrocchio. Magnificently arrogant, the horseman swaggers on his high pedestal in the Campo SS Giovanni e Paolo. Colleoni—the quintessential *condottiere*, or mercenary soldier of fortune—claimed, as his name implies and as is confirmed by his coat of arms on the plinth, to be superendowed with certain male attributes.

Looking up at him, one is not entirely surprised. At the time of this writing he remains encased in scaffolding; but it will not be long before he is once again unveiled, doubtless looking more virile than ever.

Far from an exhaustive list; this sampling offers a fairly accurate picture of what one single charitable organization has been able to achieve during the past 40 years. The program is by no means over. Venice is a small city—one can walk from one end to the other in less than an hour—but her architectural wealth is virtually incalculable, and her perilous situation would alone be enough to ensure that there will always be work to be done. Incalculable too is the debt that we all owe her: for the unique contribution that she has made—far greater than any other city of similar size—to the culture of the Western world, in painting and sculpture, architecture and music, and not least in the art of elegant and civilized living. Now is the time for us to repay a small fraction of that debt; and the World Monuments Fund, looking back on half a lifetime of effort, has good reason to be proud. ■