

BARTOLOMEO COLLEONI



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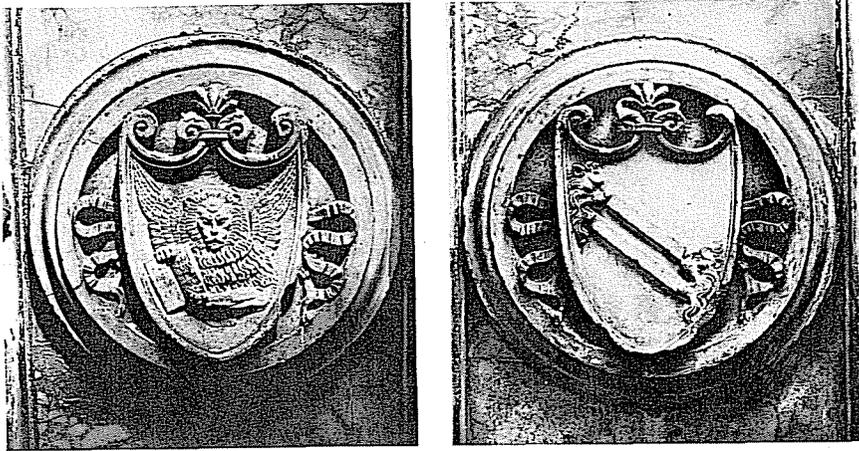


by
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Cover: View of Colleoni monument in the Piazza S.S. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice. Bronze equestrian portrait was modeled by Andrea Verrocchio. Marble pedestal was designed by Alessandro Leopardi.
 Above: Details of pedestal - Left: symbol of the city of Venice; Right: Coat of arms awarded Colleoni by Queen Joan.

Drawing of Malpaga Castle on p. 1. by Marin Sanudo, 1483, from «Itinerario per il Territorio di Terraferma».

During the 13th & 14th centuries, political power in the various Comuni of northern and central Italy was contested among a relatively large number of people, who were often divided into warring factions. By the 15th century, a few dominant families had taken control of these states and replaced the Comuni by Signorie. From these few families came the Signori, or rulers of the Signorie, who surrounded themselves with sumptuous courts and based their position, both internally and externally, on military force. These were the circumstances that created the "condottieri", who began as the courageous leaders of armed groups of citizens at the service of a Signore, and evolved into military commanders of great power and renown whose allegiance was contended among various Italian states. Thus, for reasons of advancement or of court intrigue, one condottiero would find himself within the space of a few months leading the forces of his former enemy against those of his former ally - and a few more months could well see the situation reversed yet again!

Probably the most famous of these condottieri was Bartolomeo Colleoni, born in Solza near Bergamo in the year 1400. The Colleoni were among the foremost Guelf families of Bergamo, and were heavily involved both in the constant disputes between Guelfs and Ghibellines and in wars over possessions with the Visconti of Milan. Thus Bartolomeo grew up in a very turbulent atmosphere, rendered more troubled by family feuds and rivalries after the death of his father in 1405. At the age of 19 he entered the forces of the Queen of Naples, Joan II of Anjou, serving first under the condottiero Braccio da Montone, and then, after Montone's death, under Captain Caldora. The exceptional bravery and strategic intelligence shown by Colleoni in each battle that he fought caused Queen Joan to award him the right to a coat of arms - still to be seen at the Castle of Malpaga - consisting of the heads of two lions joined by two white stripes enclosing a vermilion stripe.



Detail of Colleoni Monument.

After a few years at the court of Naples, Bartolomeo Colleoni requested permission to return to his native Bergamo which was being threatened by the troops of Filippo Visconti, Signore of Milan. In the same year as his return, 1428, Bergamo became part of the Republic of Venice and thus Colleoni entered the Venetian army. He subsequently fought for Venice in several campaigns, mainly against the Visconti of Milan, first under the leadership of Carmagnola, then of Gianfrancesco Gonzaga of Mantova, then of Erasmo da Narni known as the Gattamelata, each of whom in turn held the position of commander in chief of the Venetian forces.

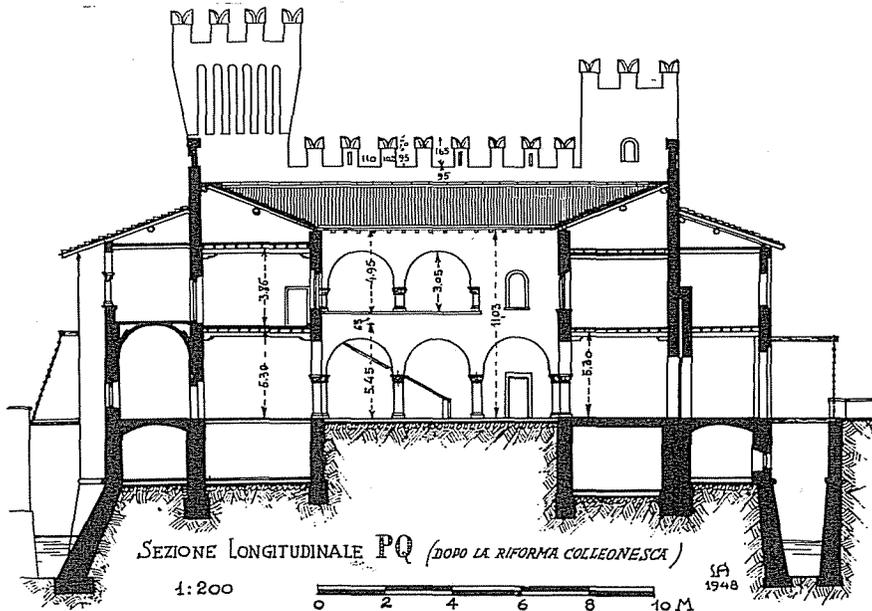
An increasing number of Venetian troops were placed under Colleoni's command and his military fame and power grew steadily until about 1441, when the Venetian Republic began to reduce her military expenditures and consequently change her attitude towards the condottiero. The Serenissima finally antagonized Colleoni to such an extent that, after being captured and imprisoned by Filippo Visconti in Monza from 1446 until Visconti's death in 1447, he joined the Milanese to fight against a French army that had invaded that state, and later even fought an unsuccessful battle against the Venetians. However, Colleoni was not entirely happy with his new position and in May 1448 he returned to the Venetian army, where he was greeted with much joy and honour, and immediately set to fighting against his allies of a few weeks before, the Milanese. Following the alliance between the Venetian Republic and Francesco Sforza, Colleoni became the principal instrument of the fall of the three year old Ambrosian Republic and the succession of Sforza to the Duchy of Milan.

In 1451 the Serenissima nominated Gentile della Leonessa to succeed Sigismondo Malatesta of Rimini as commander in chief of her army, thereby causing such resentment in Colleoni that for the second time he renounced all connection with Venice. As all attempts to reach an agreement proved fruitless, the Venetians would have taken Colleoni by force, as they once took the condottiero Carmagnola, if he had not evaded them by escaping to Mantova. This is how, from 1453 until the Peace of Lodi of April 9th, 1454, we once again find Colleoni fighting with the Milanese army (this time of Francesco Sforza). At last Venice had learnt her lesson. Determined not to let the most courageous, brilliant and famous man at arms in Italy slip out of her hands again, she opened negotiations with Colleoni even before the Peace of Lodi, offering him feudal rights over the towns of Martinengo, Cologno and Urganano, and finally, with the ducal decree of March 10th, 1455, naming him commander in chief of the forces of the Serenissima. In return, Colleoni promised to spend the rest of his

life in the service of Venice, and this he did, even though many years later, he made a few unsuccessful attempts to be released from his undertaking.

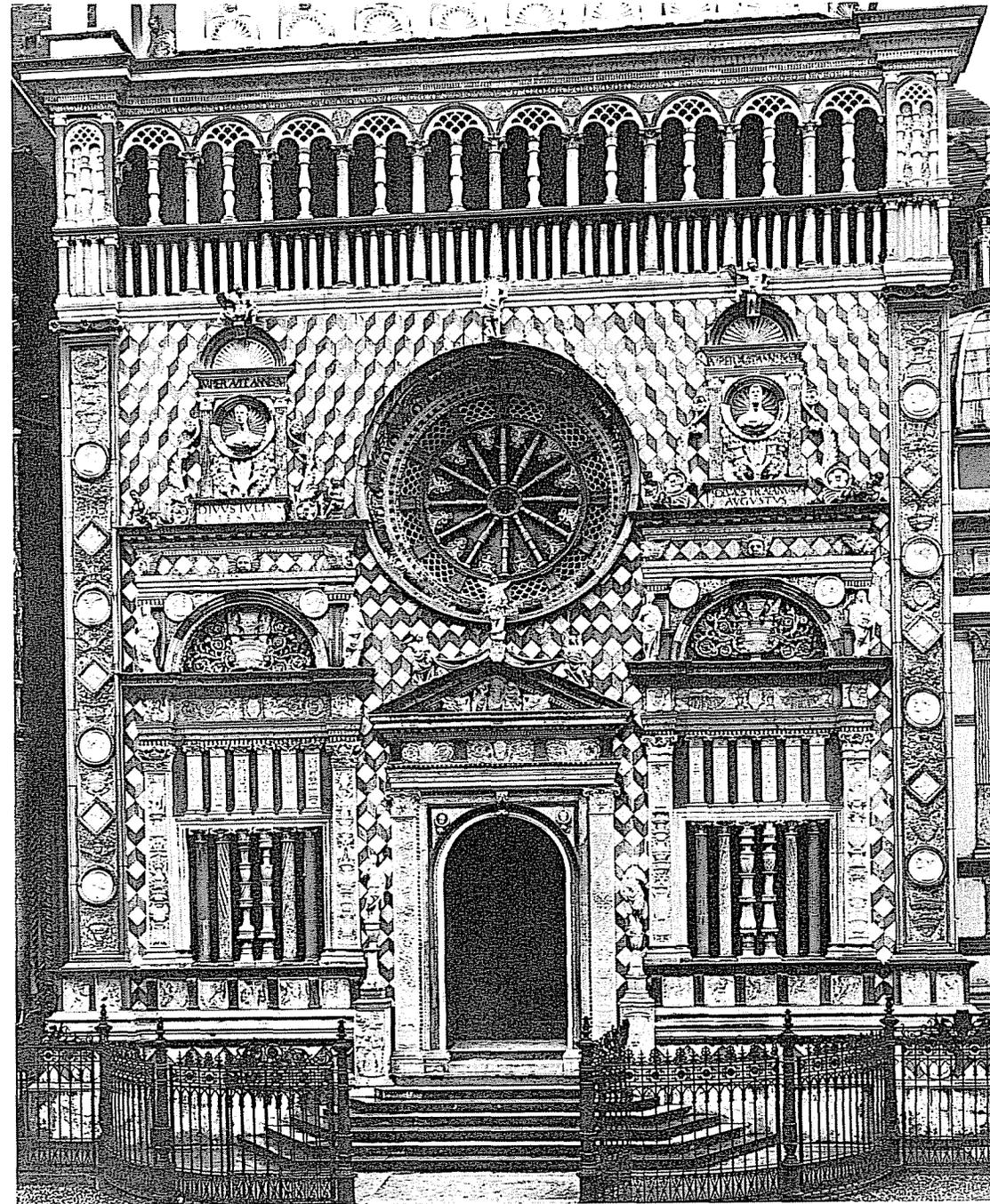
Although Colleoni had no intention of giving up his military exploits, he now began to dedicate more of his time to his home life and surroundings. On April 29th, 1456, for a mere hundred gold ducats, he bought the abandoned castle of Malpaga near Bergamo from the Venetian Republic. By the spring of 1460 his work of restoration had progressed to the point that he could take up residence in the castle with his wife, Tisbe Martinengo, and the two youngest of his five daughters. In the years that followed, Colleoni created a small court at Malpaga, surrounding himself with artists and men of culture and organizing great feasts and tournaments. In 1466 he also founded an institution in Bergamo for poor young women, the "Istituto della Pieta", which still exists today.

*Below: Plan of medieval castle of Malpaga, near Bergamo, renovated for use as family home by Colleoni.
Right: Detail of Colleoni Monument, frontal view.*



The death of Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, in March 1466, and the designs of Louis XI of France on northern Italy and of René d'Anjou on the Kingdom of Naples, were to break the fragile peace existing between the Italian states and Colleoni was to become the most important figure in the ensuing struggle. It was at this time that he began calling himself Bartolomeo Colleoni "de Andegavia" or "of Anjou" and carrying the Anjou coat of arms, the right to do so having been granted to him by René d'Anjou while the latter was seeking the support of Venice and her famous commander in chief. In 1467, Colleoni led the forces of Venice, united to those of Alessandro Sforza and Ercole d'Este, in various battles against the combined troops of Florence, the Duchy of Milan and the Kingdom of Naples. A truce was called in August 1467 after the Battle of Riccardina, an indecisive battle, very costly in terms of lives lost on both sides, that in effect meant that Venice had lost the war. The battle is commemorated in the frescoes painted in the courtyard of Malpaga by Brescian artists in 1530. By May 1468, Pope Paul II had succeeded in badgering the various parties into agreeing to a peace settlement, at the same time impressing upon them the need for unity in the face of a probable expedition against the Turks under the leadership of Colleoni (a plan that was never carried out).

Bartolomeo Colleoni returned once again to Malpaga, saddened by his lack of success and irritated by the constant presence of spies, paid by Milan and other states to watch him. There he was soon to lose the two people who were closest to him: his young daughter, Medea (whose beautiful sarcophagus sculpted by Giovanni Antonio Amedeo is now in the Colleoni Chapel in Bergamo alta), died in February 1470, and his wife died in April 1471. Shortly after this, Italy was shaken by the news of an extraordinary challenge made to Colleoni by the Duke Galeazzo Sforza of Milan. The Duke's terms -



Right: Cappella Colleoni: façade of Colleoni Family chapel in Bergamo.



Cappella Colleoni: Detail from the sarcophagus of Colleoni's daughter, Medea, sculpted by Giovanni Antonio Medea.

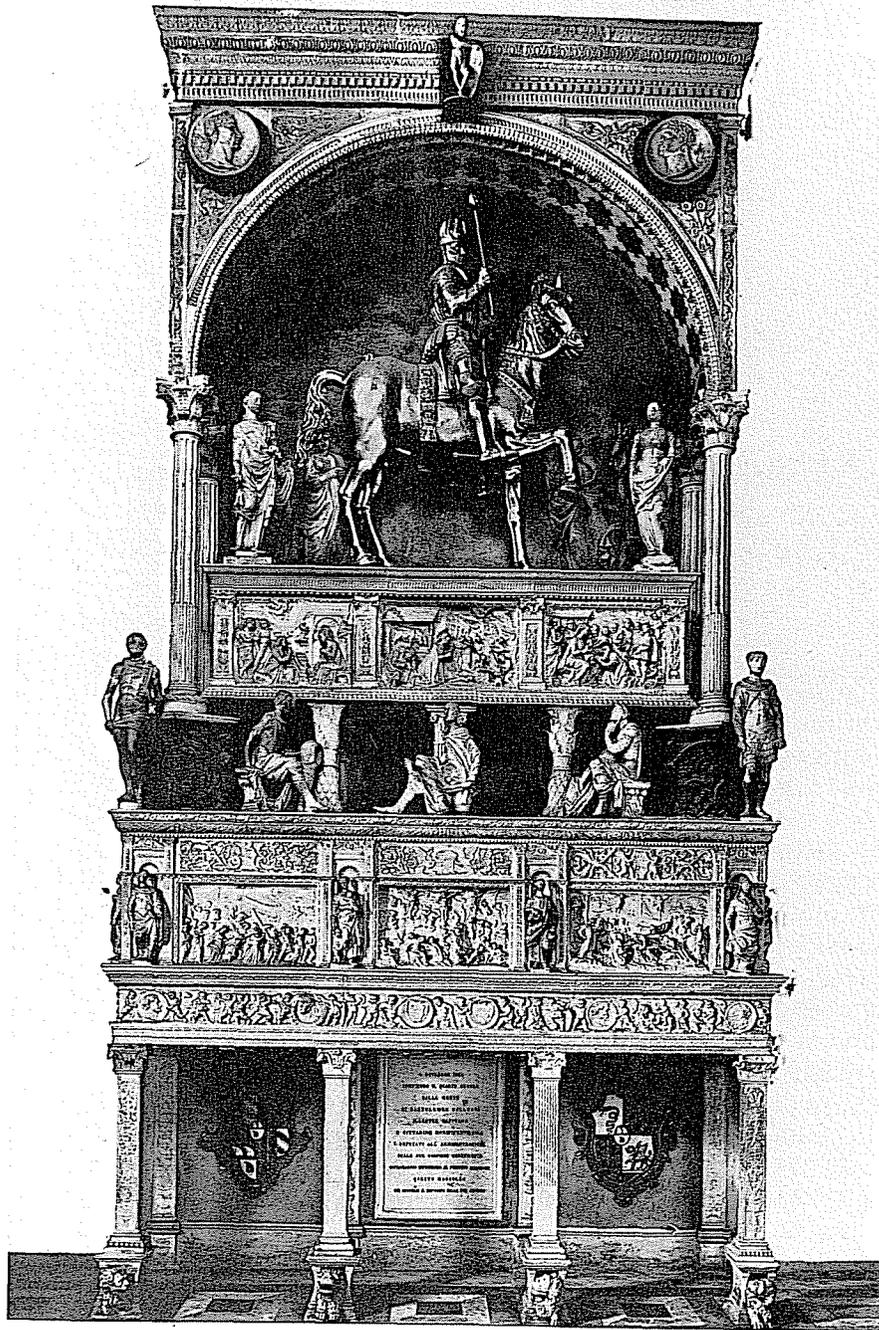
that there should be from eight hundred to one thousand men at arms on each side; that if he, the Duke, lost, he would forfeit the city of Imola whereas if Colleoni lost he would have to pay one hundred thousand ducats; that if Colleoni should be killed, his body would be buried in the Duomo of Milan while if he won he would have the right to decide on his enemy's treatment - were accepted in full by Colleoni who immediately set to collecting his army. It took the united efforts of the Pope, the King of Naples and the Republic of Venice to persuade the two men to desist from their plans - efforts that were nearly rendered useless by Colleoni's discovery, in 1472, that two members of his household

had been paid by the Duke of Milan to poison him. It was not until the end of 1474, when a league was formed between the Republic of Venice and the Dukes of Milan and Florence, that the two erstwhile enemies made their peace and marked it by a solemn exchange of gifts.

In 1473, Charles the Bold, Duke of Bourgogne - yet another leader who sought the services of the man considered to be the greatest condottiero of the time - gave Bartolomeo Colleoni the right to use the name and coat of arms of Bourgogne. Again, it took a year of concentrated diplomacy on the part of Venice to make Colleoni give up his dream of leading a European war and agree to stay in Malpaga as commander in chief of the Republic's forces. Fortunately some satisfaction was given to the condottiero's ambition by the visit of the King of Denmark and Norway to Malpaga in March 1474, a visit that is illustrated in the 16th century frescoes in the east wing of the castle.

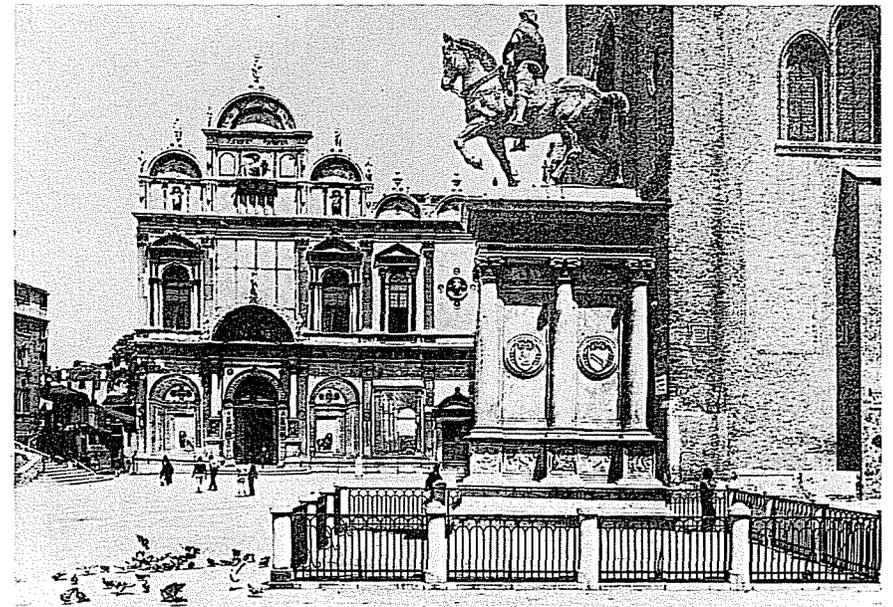
Bartolomeo Colleoni was now 74 years old and, although he had the energy and courage of a much younger man, his health began to deteriorate rapidly. A grave illness throughout the autumn of 1474 marked the beginning of a veritable gathering of vultures around Malpaga: spies, mainly in the pay of Venice, were to keep the Republic informed of every detail connected with the condottiero's health and actions and with the eventual destination of his vast patrimony, as well as ensuring, in the event of his death, that his troops remained united in order to maintain Venice's western line of defense.

By January 1475, Colleoni was well enough to fulfill the vow made during his illness to go on a pilgrimage to the Madonna of Loreto. Upon his return to Malpaga, he made a final attempt to ally himself with the Duke of Bourgogne and enter the



field of battle once more. He therefore twice sent the insignia of his command back to the Republic of Venice, who twice refused to accept them, returning them with all possible marks of honour and appreciation. The great condottiero was not destined, however, to disturb the diplomats and politicians of Italy much longer. At dawn on November 2nd, 1475, Bartolomeo Colleoni died in his castle of Malpaga, whispering his last words to a magistrate of St. Mark's: "Tell Venice to never again give to one person as much trust and as much power as she gave to me for twenty years". Colleoni's body rested in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo until January 4th, 1476, when the sepulchre made by Amedeo in the Cappella Colleoni was ready to receive the remains of the man who had been at the focal point of Italian political life for most of the 15th century.

*Left: Cappella Colleoni: burial sepulchre and monument to Colleoni designed by Giovanni Antonio Amedeo.
Below: Colleoni Monument showing the Scuola Grande San Marco in the background.*



The condottiero's will, which included a generous legacy to the Republic of Venice, divided the greater part of his wealth and properties among members of his family and various beneficial institutions in which he had interested himself while alive. In spite of this, within a few days of his death long lines of carriages loaded with money and virtually all of his movable possessions began setting out from Malpaga bound for Venice, so that in less than two months most of his patrimony had found its way to the treasury of the Venetian Republic. In addition, a decree of the Venetian Senate dated December 2nd, 1475 reclaimed all the properties conceded to Colleoni during his lifetime except for Malpaga and Cavernago, the protests of his legitimate heirs proving of no avail against the power of the Serenissima.

The Republic was equally inattentive in carrying out Colleoni's stipulation, on which his legacy of over 100,000 ducats depended, that a bronze equestrian monument be erected to his eternal memory in Piazza San Marco in Venice. The instructions to make the monument were not given by the Senate until 1479, and then, by a most ingenious and what turned out to be a most fortunate misinterpretation of the will, its placing was changed to Piazza SS. Giovanni e Paolo, in front of the Scuola Grande di San Marco. The monument to Bartolomeo Colleoni, of which John Ruskin said: "I do not believe . . . that there is a more glorious work of sculpture existing in the world", was modelled by Andrea Verrocchio between 1481 and 1488, then cast by Alessandro Leopardi, who also designed the magnificent marble pedestal, and finally erected, in Piazza SS. Giovanni e Paolo, in 1495. *AK*





ANCHOR AND DOLPHIN SYMBOL

When the famous XVI Century Venetian printer Aldo Manuzio received an ancient Roman coin from a friend, he so much admired its anchor and dolphin design that he appropriated it for his printer's mark which, because of the high quality of his work, became possibly the best known typographic mark of the Renaissance. In 1969, when Venice Committee was being organized, it sought as its symbol a design which was distinctive and representative. It decided upon the Manuzio anchor and dolphin and reproduced it with all of its ragged edges. Venice Committee asks your help in reviving the fame of the attractive design, this time as a symbol of the ongoing program to save the treasure of the lovely city with which it has long been associated.

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