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St. Mark's Revisited by Otto Demus

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A work of art has to be judged as an aesthetic phenomenon, by its own standards. But a work of art isn't only an aesthetic phenomenon; to regard it only as such would often deprive it of the meaning it had for its own time. This meaning is as much a part of it as its individual aesthetic qualities, and so research into the historical background of a picture or piece of sculpture isn't just a pastime for academic minds, but necessary for the understanding of it as a whole. Works of art weren't created in a void and can't be properly understood in the airless sphere of aesthetics. I shall try to illustrate this by an example.

The stage is Venice in the 13th century; Constantinople had been taken in the Crusade of 1204, and of the booty which the Venetians crusaders brought home, St. Mark, the patron saint of Venice, as befitted his zoomorphic symbol, got the lion's share. His church, the chapel of the Doge and state sanctuary when built at the end of the 11th century must at first have been a bare, austere place. It received most of its present splendid decoration in the first half of the 13th. Some of this decor consists in spoils from the conquered capital. Most of it was created in Venice itself by artists who were trained in the "Byzantine manner."

The distinction between spoils and Venetian works is not always easy to draw - this is in fact the crux of the problem facing any student of Venetian art. About some parts of the decoration, however, there can be no doubt. I shall begin with these.

You may remember, for instance, the charming mosaics



of the Atrium, the entrance hall. They represent scenes from the Genesis in many small-scale figures set into the gold of the vaults and cupolas. They look very naive and very archaic but they are affixed to 13th century vaults and can, therefore, not be older than these. Now, as has been known since the '80s of the last century, when the Finnish scholar Tikkanen made the discovery, that the scenes of these mosaics are more or less faithful copies of an early Byzantine illuminated Manuscript, rather like the Cotton Genesis of the British Museum; most probably they're copies of the Cotton Genesis itself. Regarded as an isolated fact, this is an oddity. Scholars have so far accepted it as such and assumed that the illuminated book which must have reached Venice as part of the Constantinople booty, simply caught the eyes of those in charge of the mosaic decoration of the state church and was used by them as a pattern book. I have never felt that this explanation will really do. It is, after all, rather extraordinary, that a model book of the early 6th century should inspire artists who lived 700 years later. There must have been good reasons why they should have turned to it.

Some years ago when I began to prepare a comprehensive monograph on the mosaics of St. Mark, this was one of the problems which I set out to solve. Very soon I discovered that the case of the Genesis mosaics wasn't an isolated one. There is, at least one more mosaic of the 13th century in St. Mark's that follows a 6th century prototype. - It is in the interior of the church, on your right. It shows the Doge and the Clergy receiving the relics of the Patron Saint of Venice. Its prototype quite obviously is the famous dedicatory panel of Justinian in San Vitale, Ravenna. In both there is a cortège of almost frontally represented figures, assembled round the central figure of the ruler. In spite of their frontality they seem to be moving in a given direction.



There can be no doubt that the later St. Mark's mosaic stems from the one in St. Vitale.

Another thing that struck me was the grouping of the St. Mark mosaics as a whole. The entire mosaic decoration of St. Mark's is arranged according to a plan which has many characteristics in common with that of the lost mosaics of the Holy Apostles' Church in Constantinople. The distribution of the 5 Cupola scenes, so that the Pentecost dome is to be placed in the westernmost cupola, with the legends of the Apostles immediately below it, is common to both churches. Now the Apostoleon had been built by the same Emperor Justinian whose dedicatory image was the model of the reception mosaic of St. Mark's. This seemed to me more than a curious coincidence and made me look for further parallels. I got them handed on a platter by an Austrian scholar, Miss Lucchesi-Palli, who has published an iconographical study of some Venetian sculptures, hitherto believed to be works of the 6th century and part of the booty brought from Constantinople after the fourth Crusade.

All these sculptures are small figured, high reliefs in marble or alabaster; some of them are set in the facade, others adorn the interior of St. Mark's. To my mind, Dr. Lucchesi-Palli has shown convincingly that these sculptures cannot date from the 6th century, but we must be the products of various Venetian workshops or artists of the 13th century, who deliberately followed 5th or 6th century prototypes. Dr. Lucchesi-Palli reached her conclusions by way of iconographical evidence, but they can be corroborated by stylistic analysis and have since been accepted by almost all European scholars. In fact, after having had one's eye opened, one can hardly understand how these sculptures could ever have been taken for genuine 6th century stuff. But we need not rely on stylistic and iconographical evidence alone: one of the monuments in question is the sarcophagus of the Doge Marino Morosini in the



Atrium of St. Marks! It bears an inscription by which it can be dated to about the year 1253, but it clearly imitates an early Christian Sarcophagus, showing, as it does, single frontal figures or orants in high relief against a flat ground. The whole is, however, framed by vegetal motifs which have no parallel before the 13th century. The finest of them would be early Christian sculptures is a relief in the Capella dell Reliquie. This was made expressly for St. Mark's, but it copies a 5th century sarcophagus with the figures of the Apostles clad in solemn draperies, crowding towards the central figure of Christ; and the most famous are the reliefs on the four alabaster columns which support the Ciborium of the main altar. The numerous scenes of these reliefs, arranged on top of each other in circular bands, represent the Childhood and the Passion of Christ in classically draped little figures which stand out from the deeply undercut, dark background. Two of these columns had been suspect for a long time; now, we have to write them all off as early Christian works - an attribution which never fitted them - and made them appear enigmatic and odd, though they were reproduced many times and had their place in almost every handbook of Early Christian art.

In place of the "early Christian" sculptures we have lost we are left with about a dozen 13th century works - I was able to augment the number of pieces detected by Dr. Lucchesi-Palli - works made in Venice by artists, who, apparently, set out to copy and to recreate the style and, partly also, the iconography of the early Christian and Early Byzantine Periods. They succeeded only too well since they have taken in all scholars up to a short time ago. But what can have been the motive of these Venetian mosaicists and sculptors, imitating the language of an age long past? I was, at first, inclined to think that it lay simply in the general archaic tendency that can be seen at work in Venice, in more than one respect and throughout the entire life-time of the republic.



Venice had appeared late in the history of the Mediterranean world. It had no ancient past; it was found, at least the Rialto, the centre of the Republic, in the late 8th century. But to be without a past in the high Middle ages was being rather like Chamisso's Peter Schlemihl - a man without a shadow. The remedy was then the same as now. Those who had no past could always fake one. Though the Middle Ages were in that respect better off than we are - they weren't as handicapped by facts and existing documents or tradition as we; they could fake all these to measure.

This is what the Venetians did, at least from the 11th century onwards. A national history and even pre-history was evolved by which the foundation of the city state was dated back to the early 5th century; legends were invented in order to show that the Evangelist Mark had himself the most ardent desire to be laid at rest in his Church that was to be founded 800 years later, and to become the true master of the rapacious republic: state historiographers endeavoured to obscure the fact that Venice had started life as a Byzantine province and had remained a Byzantine dependency until the 11th century, and, generally, everything was done to surround Venice and its state church with an aura of venerable antiquity.

In the arts, this tendency manifested itself in the collecting of ancient spoils, in conservatism and in archaism - right down to the second half of the 15th century.

This indubitable desire to create a fictitious national past, a specifically Venetian pre-history, may suffice to explain the falsifications, and legends, and even some of the archaistic trends in Venetian art; but it will not explain fully and satisfactorily two facts.

First, that only a certain style of prototype was selected for copying and imitating, and

Second, that most of the fakes, copies and stylistic



approximations, most of the archaizing legends and fabrications, appeared roughly between the years of 1230 and 1270, so that one feels almost justified in speaking of a "movement".

These two facts, I think, contain in themselves the answer to my question. The movement which sprang up in Venice during those 40 years has all the characteristics of a "Proto-renaissance" such as we know it, for instance, from Southern Italy in the time of Frederick II. In both, the art of a certain period of the past was copied or at least served as a basis for new creations - without however leading to a Renaissance in the proper sense of the word. That is, without leading the artists to the study of reality, of nature, a study that was engendered, in the 14th and 15th century, not by mere imitation of antiques, but by scholarly and methodical enquiry into the fundamentals of classical art. The artists of the Venetian and South Italian "Protorenaissances" remained, so to speak, only on the surface.

Between these two almost contemporary movements, there are, however, differences. The outstanding one is that the Apulian artists of Frederick's Protorenaissance selected Roman Imperial monuments as their models whereas the Venetians turned, for their inspirations, to the art of the Early Christian Orient. We know, from many literary sources that what Frederic intended was a *Renovatio Imperii Romani*; we also know that the "auctores" of the Mediaeval Renovations surrounded themselves with copies of the art of the period they wanted to resuscitate. This is why the artists of the Apulian Proto-Renaissance imitated the triumphal art of the Roman Empire.

But we are, I think, justified in assuming that the Venetian movement too had political motives; that it, too, was a *Renovatio*, though not "*Imperii Romani*", but "*Imperii Christiani*"; that its aim was the resurrection of the Christian Empire of the Levant, whose territories Venice had almost entirely taken over



after 1204, after the taking of Constantinople in the Venetian-led fourth Crusade. This conquest of Byzantium had made the Doge the ruler of three-eighths of the Byzantine Empire. This new dominion, which was further enlarged by the principalities which Venetian nobles carved out for themselves in the Aegean, needed, as did all new political creations of the Middle Ages, bolstering up by spiritual claims and programmes. The means of achieving this was, as we have seen, to give to the new creation the shape of a *Renovatio*, of a return to an ancient and sacred institution. In the case of Venice, this institution could not be the Byzantine Empire of the Middle Ages which the Venetians had after all done everything to destroy. It had to be a fictitious Apostolic Empire, an empire of the Holy Mark, built round the relics of the Evangelist which were kept in the Venetian State Church as the "*pignora imperii*", just as the empire of Constantine the Great had been erected round the relics of the Apostles assembled in Constantinople. The genuine spoils as well as the copies and fakes of early Christian works from the Eastern Mediterranean became the trappings of this resuscitated empire. They were there to prove the Venetians' claim to be the first born sons of the Evangelist of Alexandria and the northern Adriatic. This, I think, is the political and spiritual background of the Venetian Protorenaissance of the 13th century.

There is, however, a certain time-lag between the foundation date of the Venetian empire - 1204, and the appearance of the Protorenaissance in Venice - in about 1230. This time-lag can be explained - in fact it even seems to corroborate my hypothesis. Soon after 1204, Venice was, naturally, swamped by Artists and works of art imported or looted from Byzantium. For some time Venetian art became an off-shoot of contemporary Byzantine art. By about 1230, however, the fascination of the looted treasures had waned, the Greek artists had dispersed or died out leaving a vacuum



into which the newly formed ideas of the Renovatio could penetrate. The Protorenaissance movement which was then born lasted as long as the eclipse of Byzantium, and even a bit longer. For, when the Latin empire of Constantinople finally collapsed and the city was retaken by the Greeks in 1261, it took time before diplomatic and trade relations were re-established between the two former enemies, Venice and Byzantium. This happened in the 70's of the 13th century, and from then onwards, a new wave of Byzantine influence reached Venice, blotting out the precarious growth of the Venetian Protorenaissance. Thus, this movement was a shortlived attempt on the part of the Venetian republic to establish artificially, a politically inspired, archaizing, pseudo-national art. It came to life in an artistic vacuum and died when the sources of Byzantine art began to well up once more. However, although the Venetian Protorenaissance was a more or less ephemeral affair, its mainly technical influence can be felt even in later Venetian art, especially in the development of Venetian sculpture, in its preference for small scale forms, for the high relief, for precious materials, like alabaster, a preference ingrained in Venetian artists by the imitation of early Christian works which had these characteristics. Even the fact that Venice never produced anything very great in the way of monumental sculpture, seems to me to be connected with it. It proved to have been a false start for Venetian sculpture, to have begun, in the 13th century, with imitations of the minor arts of a long forgotten era. The small scale of the early Christian models, the purely decorative use of the products of the school, in a building that, following, as it did, the prototype of a 6th century mosaic Church without plastic articulations, did not really admit of a sculptural decoration, these were, I think, among the factors responsible for the stunted growth of Venetian sculpture. Another was the pointedly Christian character of



this protorenaissance which excluded the study of genuinely antique models. Venice did not, like Pisa, produce a Nicole Pisano, who could find his inspiration in the classical reliefs and statues preserved in his home-town.

On the other hand, the drying up of Venetian sculpture, for its part, may have contributed to the strengthening of Venetian painting. In fact the exceptionally close study of early Christian illuminated manuscripts and the translation of these illusionist models into the monumental art of mosaic must have been a unique training for the Venetian painters; it must have helped to develop their innate feeling for painterly treatment. Thus, the triumphal development of Venetian painting may have owed something to the Protorenaissance of the 13th century, to the abortive attempt to resurrect the art of the early Christian era.