

The Ancient *Scuole* of Venice

Identities that Condense Values, Traditions, Creative Knowledge, Care

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1 Preface

A survey aimed at catching trends and issues open on Venice cultural heritage in 2017 is bound to coming across a very distinctive feature given to the city's tangible and intangible cultural landscape by the surviving *Scuole* (brotherhoods). At least five of them command attention, while one or two deserve inclusion in the picture, in spite of their peculiarities.

2 Identities

2.1 Institutional Connotation

Now-a-days the few ancient *Scuole* surviving in Venice embody a variety of institutional profiles. Once private institutions vested with significant roles of public interest, they are to-day private corporations under either Italian civil law – this being the case for the *Scuole grandi* of San Rocco and San Giovanni Evangelista – or Canon Italian Church and Church law. The latter is the case for both the *Scuole Grandi* of Carmini and San Teodoro, and the *Scuola* of Santi Giorgio e Trifone: a 'national' *Scuola* gathering Dalmatians, or people of Dalmatian or Istrian origin, resident in Venice. Also the Arciconfraternita della Misericordia set up in 1824 in Venice is a corporation under Canon and Church law (and in such a capacity a member, since 1899, of the *Misericordie d'Italia*).

The access of this sixth member to the *Scuole* coordination network inspite of its being *younger* than the others, and the only one that can-

not trace its roots back to the legal system of the Republic of Venice, is basically due to the roles it performs in town: namely, free health care for disadvantaged people and care for the memory of the dead brothers and their families in the light of the Catholic religious tradition.

The fact remains that, in recent times, two other entities exist in town under names that still echo of ancient *Scuole*: Misericordia S.p.a. and the *Scuola* of San Marco. Misericordia S.p.a. is a recently set-up limited liability corporation under Italian civil law that, since 2009 and until 2048, will be the lessee of the former *Scuola Grande della Misericordia* premises still dominating the Sestier de Canaregio. Between the 13th and the 18th centuries those premises had been the identity card of the ancient *Scuola* bearing that very name. As a magnificent gothic building, now-a-days they perform a two-fold task: namely, to ensure profit to the investor (currently in office as the Mayor of Venice) and to allow the memory of past glories to survive through beauty for the joy of both visiting and resident passers-by. To these ends Misericordia S.p.a. carries out not only cultural but also commercial activities, provided the latter are consistent with the monumental character and the historic value of those premises.

The last and, in a sense, more intriguing institution to be mentioned among, or in connection with, the ancient *Scuole* of Venice is the already-quoted *Scuola Grande di San Marco*. This entity was brought back to life at the start of the New Millennium as the monumental, cultural dimension of the historical Hospital of Venice. It thus fills a unique place among the institutions surveyed so far, in that it belongs to a public entity, namely the City Health Authority (also various island and mainland boroughs falling within the latter's reach). In combination with contiguous buildings such as the hospital of St. Lazar of the Beggars and the cloisters of the former Dominican convent dating back to the 16th century, the *Scuola* premises continue to host through the centuries, in their pure renaissance style, crucial collective services. So much so once, by the end of the 19th century, they became Venice main public hospital.

As the heart of the Venetian health system, at a closer look the *Scuola* shows the signs of different historical periods and political and legal systems, namely: the independent Republic of Venice until its fall in 1797, Austrian rule until the take-over of the city by that French Kingdom, set up in 1806 soon to be replaced (1815) by the Austro-Hungarian Empire; nominal French rule again in 1866, but only in view of the immediate handing over of Venice and the Venetian region to the newly-born Kingdom of Italy.

This survival, whatever the political and institutional earthquakes Venice went through, proves well how, around and within the premises of the *Scuola di San Marco*, through new equipment and inventive organisational patterns health authorities tried to meet, as they still do, the health needs of Venetian generations and their environment, herds of visitors included. The fact remains that only in 2000, with the opening of both its Health

Museum and its Library, the *Scuola di San Marco* has been officially set up again, in its ancient glorious location, giving its name and brand to what is now an autonomous and very active cultural branch of the Health Authority.

Some of the other *Scuole* object to these developments, labelling the financial safety-net thus insured to the revived sister institution as unfair competition. Yet, against a background in which the institutional profile of to-day *Scuole* in Venice comes out as (to say the least!) extremely diverse, the *Scuola* of San Marco simply adds a further typology – that of an Italian public entity – to this diversity. In turn, by so doing, it ensures the revival of a segment of Venetian history and cultural heritage too precious to be lost. Eventually, it is most telling that the Italian National Health System – far from objecting to the care and money absorbed by the Venice Unit for the maintenance, enhancement and cultural revitalization of the archives and of the unique collection of medical instruments and documents inherited from the past – rather encourages this trend. It actually provides, by so doing, powerful means of intellectual inspiration to Venetian citizens and visitors that become acquainted with such treasures.

More generally, the town's human and social environment has undergone in recent years a dramatic change. The heterogeneous institutional profiles sketched above are thus but a reflection of the multidimensional economic, social and legal environment brought about, in Venice even more markedly than elsewhere, by globalization and the European integration process.

2.2 Structure

Apart from the peculiarities seen above as to their legal status, the six traditional *Scuole* in Venice share a basically similar institutional structure. All of them are non-profit organizations run by elective bodies. They basically share an ancient tradition of self-government, the *Scuola* of San Rocco being a good example of it. Under the rule of its *Mariegola* (Statute), this *Scuola* dates back to 1478 BC. The *Guardian Grando* enjoys a wide range of powers, including powers of initiative and agency, and presides over the *Convocato* (namely, the plenary body consisting of an average 350 between Chapter brothers and sisters). The Chancery is its executive organ, both bodies being chaired by the *Guardian Grando*.

The Chancery is structured in two concentric circles: a *Bank* of four members, and a Board (*Zonta*) of further 11 members. All activities and projects, in the first place those pertaining to the protection and promotion of the cultural heritage, are thus shared at these various levels. The same pattern of allocation applies to co-optation powers that are usually exercised with a view to ensuring to the *Scuola* as members not only the

bearers of that kind of know-how, craftsmanship and professional knowledge that can benefit the *Scuola* and society at large, but also young people ready to share them. This strategy meets the very role the *Scuole grandi* have been called upon to perform for centuries: namely, to offer a high-profile promotional environment where the city middle-class, primarily merchants and craftsmen but also artists, could express their genius and moral strength by supporting the less privileged. The first, but not the only ones, entitled to such a support have been and are less privileged Brothers, special attention having been paid - in the past - to the daughters of deceased Brothers in need of means allowing them to get married or to enter a religious order (basically, through the granting of money as dowery).

2.3 Artistic and Social Identity

Over the centuries, collective self-representation has been crucial for the *Scuole*, bound as they were, on behalf of the social class expressing them, to compete by near with the city's aristocracy that monopolised political power. This confrontation partly explains the amazing display of art treasures and economic power pursued by the *Scuole* at the height of Venice splendour.¹ Those treasures and that power were for the most part seized by new political rulers after the fall, in 1797, of the Venetian Republic. With exceptions, however: the paintings by Carpaccio at the *Scuola* of SS. Giorgio e Trifone went and go on pouring grace and serenity on their viewers, while the airy frescoes by Giovan Battista Tiepolo are still in place at the *Scuola* of Carmini. In turn 64, most of them extra-size, Tintoretto paintings gloriously survive - at the service of the *Scuola* of San Rocco mission - at the very place they were originally thought and made for. From that place they go on spelling herds of visitors with their incomparable mixture of majesty and true, even intimate, life: a heritage that has deserved to the *Scuola* of San Rocco the title of Venice *Cappella Sistina* and has ensured through centuries a powerful tool to heal unhappiness through beauty.

The social priority, for the *Scuole*, had been to ensure a minimum welfare to the less privileged, namely: poor and ill people, girls in need of dowry as a condition for possibly getting married, detainees and their families. It is also true that these priorities were dramatically affected by the confiscation of the *Scuole* immovable properties under French rule in 1806. The fact remains that, by entrusting through the centuries collective

¹ This competition was made possible by the economic strength ensured to every involved layer of society under the umbrella of a political system put completely at the service of trade. It could thus happen that, at the dawn of the third millennium BC, *Time* magazine spotted Venice at the beginning of the 16th century as the peak - in terms of economic, artistic, social and cultural achievements - of the previous one.

self-representation to art and beauty, the *Scuole* have been helped in somehow meeting solidarity as their basic mission in different forms. Actually, the need for beauty was even then perceived as inseparable from the quest for health, safety, social and physical promotion. The very houses of the *Scuole* were thus *per se* a first answer to basic needs. In turn no restraint was felt in expressly envisaging in the Articles of the *Scuole* a fee to be exacted from visitors for access to their premises. Even to-day its amount has to allow for both the appropriate maintenance of the *Scuole* treasures and the pursuance of solidarity as their basic mission.

In conclusion, for the *Scuole*, the outstanding quality of their premises was evidence of their collective commitment to both gather and celebrate, but also share wealth with the less privileged. It is not by mere chance that the entrance hall at the ground floor of the *Scuole*, namely the place where bread and first-need commodities were distributed daily, are as beautiful as the Chapter halls at the first floor. In turn, in the Chancery Room, for example, at the main floor of the San Rocco's *Scuola*, Tintoretto put his most telling representations of Christ's mercy and self-sacrifice in front of the desk where the Chancery still now sits and where it used to hear persons asking for support (the latter being expected to stand at the monumental Renaissance door of the *Sala dell'Albergo* without trespassing it). Those representations were actually meant to be a permanent lesson the decision-makers had to keep in mind so as to faithfully serve the very people whose needs the *Scuola* was called upon to meet.

3 Values and Traditions

This background explains the special contribution the *Scuole* give to the cultural heritage of Venice today: especially, if we choose to pursue the less familiar perspective of the intangible rather than the tangible heritage. Worth mentioning is the fact that these institutions have actually kept and still keep alive – through care, tradition and faith – social customs and feasts and rites, that helped and help their members and surrounding communities in identifying themselves and their *raison d'être* in to-day's life. The *Scuole* continue to do so by reinterpreting themselves and their own role in a changed social and political environment. A very emotional experience is thus, for example, to share access to the ancient Venetian language recorded in the *Mariegole* and in the *Scuole*'s archives as a means to experience it in its continuity with the language still spoken in Venice as an alternative to Italian.

Above all, the challenge for the *Scuole* is to live both their religious inspiration and local traditions in light of underlying universal values: namely, solidarity and fairness to one another, hospitality, care for individual and collective reputation, and, more generally, responsibility towards

the Venetian community, and society at large. In this connection, they find themselves also bound to pursuing and exploring nature, treasuring to this end the potential set offered by the lagoon environment to art display and festive celebrations, religious ones among them.

At the core of the *Scuole's* feasts are, for instance: the Procession of the Cross at San Giovanni Evangelista on 14 September, the Carmini July Feast, the San Rocco Feast on 16 August, with its installation for twenty days of the monumental *Tendon del Dose* leading from the main premises of the *Scuola* to the *Scoletta* and to the entrance door of the San Rocco Church. By the way, it is on its marble steps that the blessing of pets has been renewed in the last decades of the last century. This is actually a tradition that some Venetians look forward to seeing revived, inspired as it was by a painting placed at the left of the Church altar where the young Tintoretto vividly displayed a procession of animals, faithful and ill people, children, but also a lion and an unicorn included. They are all sill queuing there to reach San Rocco in the wood where he is believed to have been confined while attacked by the plague.

What is more important, the *Scuole* are very faithful to their statutory commitment of ensuring appropriate funerals to dead brothers and sisters and to remember them on special occasions and on request of their relatives. Combined with free medical assistance offered, through a small medical centre at Rialto, to anybody in need, irregular immigrants included, this is, as seen above, the main task of the *Confraternita della Misericordia*: a commitment that, as already seen, well qualifies it among the *Scuole*, in spite of its not having anything to do to-day, except denomination, with those monumental premises of the ancient *Scuola della Misericordia* that are now at the service of more self-oriented interests.

Very present in the current activities of all the *Scuole* (the last mentioned brotherhood included) is music: especially at San Rocco, with its outstanding musical tradition, dating back to the lesson given from its premises by Monteverdi and Gabrieli but renewed for instance - in recent times - by Stockhausen and Britten, within the framework of the Biennale International Festival of contemporary music in the sixties of the last century. As the peak of musical events in recent times at the *Scuola* L. Pancino - on her role see text below - remembers that performance for the very first time of *Threni id est lamentationes Jeremiae Prophet* by Strawinsky conducted by the author in the Chapter Hall on September 23, 1958 within the framework of the XXVI Festival of Contemporary Music (an event of possibly parallel quality having been offered, in the twenty-first century, by the *Passion according to Mathew* performed on the Choir stalls of the *Scuola* Church on March 23, 2016 by the Teatro Armonico choir and orchestra conducted by Isolde Kittel-Zerer).

Since then, precisely in 2013, the ancient Rococo's choir stalls meant to serve as an *ad hoc* installation for the San Rocco's Feast were restored

and placed again – for the moment, not on a temporary basis – inside the Church against its counter-façade. It hosts at its various levels from the ground, and especially at Sunday’s Mass, groups of up to 40 singers often from abroad. Initiatives in this field find a most competent support in a Sister of the *Scuola* and member of the Chancery: Ms. Livia Pancino. As free gift to the *Scuola* in recent years she has provided transcripts of ancient musical texts present in its Archives and helped its Members and the public at large to become acquainted with the heritage left to it by its Chapel Masters. From Gabrieli through Schütz this tradition brought beyond the Alps to the achievements of Handel and Bach and comes back to-day by the recurring presence of English, Austrian and German musical groups on the restored choir stalls.

Curiously enough, as seen, these stalls had been erected in 1794 as a mobile wooden structure – a sort of gigantic musical instrument – to be installed to solemnly underline San Rocco’s Feast. Today this is instead the date on which the *Scuola* offers a concert to the city – its inhabitants and visitors – not inside the Church but in the small square where the *Tendon del Dose* is displayed to connect *Schola*, *Scoletta* and Church: actually, in a space unit recurrently celebrated in Venetian art (as, for all, in Canaletto’s large painting owned by the London National Gallery).

4 The Recipe: Collective Knowledge Supported by Constant Care

The fact remains that the *Scuole* concentrate the largest part of their financial resources on the maintenance not only of their buildings, but of their riches in the paintings, marbles and stones, iron works, textiles. Silver and jewels among them. This tangible heritage could not survive without the network of free, or almost free, support they get from artisans and experts: namely, from the persons whose continuous care and rare knowledge the *Scuole* try to ensure also through co-optation, the granting of prizes or by designating them as honorary brothers and sisters. Only in rare cases the State steps in (less rarely the Regione Veneto), as occurred in conjunction with the rediscovery and restoration of the already mentioned choir stalls of the San Rocco’s Church that, for four years at the beginning of this century, offered to the wood ancient-style furniture district of Cerea (Verona) means of survival and to the Verona Academy of Fine Arts a rare opportunity to put to test its third-year students (Erasmus students included).

The fact remains that, at the core of the *Scuole*’s commitment, what actually survives is the personal dedication of their members to common objectives, whether falling or not within the scope of public policies. This dedication is rather the tribute to common feelings and to an enriching

sense of belonging, where gratuity is pursued so as to overcome the juxtaposition between us (residents, for instance) and the others (possibly tourists and visitors, or even incoming students) for the sake of a common culture and of the art of living together.

The network coordinating common activities among the *Scuole* in Venice has thus envisaged two multi-year projects: 1) *San Rocco's Itineraries as ante literam European transnational networks*; 2) *The protection of Venice intangible cultural heritage*. The first topic naturally develops from contacts the San Rocco's *Scuola* entertains with San Rocco associations spread all over the world but, more deeply, with the other *Scuole* present in Venice. The project in question thus aims at detecting how the quest for health – be it physical, spiritual or moral – emerges in to-day world, and how deeply it affects those pilgrims of our time that are called tourists. Under this angle a connection with the *Scuola di San Marco* would seem overdue.

As for the second topic, this has developed into new acquaintances and the establishment of solidarity links between the *Scuole* and academic circles, distinctive craftsmanship and professional environments (El Felze, Perla storica veneziana, Bevilacqua, Rubelli), institutions and entities like the Venice Port Authority, with its Open Port Programme, as well as international intergovernmental organizations present in Venice, like the European Union (through the clever channel of communication offered by Eurosportello Veneto) and the Council of Europe (see its launch from Forte Marghera of the *Venice Charter on the Value of Cultural Heritage* on 7-10 May 2014). This involvement in the field of the intangible cultural heritage has raised an attention for performative arts like vertical dance and the *commedia dell'arte*. In this connection it has been mainly for the *Scuola* of San Rocco to try and intercept young people, by applying to the EU with a project – *Climb the Past* – centred around the link between vertical dance and architecture, and by sharing a project, *Cultainer*, meant on one side to measure in four stages, through different European Countries, the cultural cross-fertilization ensured even to-day by trade relations following the Baltic-Adriatic route and addressed, on the other side, to involve young people present in Venice: be they residents, students, tourists, workers.

Last but not least, the *Scuole* have been working since 2013 on the promotion of both regional legislation for the protection and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage in the Venetian Region, and a draft national statute on the subject that is expected to be laid, it is hoped soon, before the Italian Parliament.

5 Risks and Challenges

As the present purview shows, the *Scuole* condense values and traditions, knowledge and passions in a commitment to care at the various levels. What they risk, however, is fossilization: they risk, for instance, to transform feasts, rites and traditions into formalities where no memory survives of the values that had originally inspired them. At this point traditions risk to betray the community needs, individual and collective commitments, the city at large.

For the *Scuole* a first challenge against such a risk is the style and attitude with which visitors are hosted in their premises. The utmost care should actually be devoted to trying and having them understand the meaning of the heritage they are confronted with, most frequently for the first time. Here lies the true, sound competition with museums and other outstanding art hubs in town, rather than in the entity of the fees suggested for admission or in the number of daily visitors. And the meaning of that heritage will emerge all the more clearly and persuasively if the presentation is technically correct but above all inspired by care and love not only for the objects but also for the objectives they have been destined to over the centuries.

A second challenge to be met by the rulers of the various *Scuole* is the tenacious research of that expertise, still available in town and in the surrounding area, that is needed to ensure that the riches of their houses are appropriately looked after. Actually, the bearers of such expertise are to be put in the position to share it with young people. Something of this kind may possibly be achieved at transnational level by resorting to workshops, apprenticeship periods for guides and artisans, teaching at university and post-university level, etc.: ways among others to show actual attention to the social problems of the city and of the weaker levels of society present therein.

The unselfish *raison-d'être* of the *Scuole* in Venice, as brotherhoods of believers that in the Catholic Church pursue their role of lay people responsible to the city and the world, is to try and reduce inequality and destitution, and most especially to do so by widening access to beauty. To this end, the only condition they put on the necessary cooperation with public and Church bodies, as well as with international and supranational institutions and private entities, is – in compliance with both the subsidiarity principle and a distinctly Venetian approach to religion – respect for their self-government.

