04

# Architecture and the Venetian Waterscapes
## The Fresco Decorations of the Veneto Villas and the Anthropocene

Meital Shai
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Notes

This lesson is dedicated to the residential architecture of the Venetian mainland and its fresco decorations, with the aim of offering insights into Anthropocene Venice through the artistic heritage of the Veneto Region in the sixteenth century.

The Venetians became real landowners starting from the fourteenth century, when they acquired by auction estates on the *terraferma*, that is, the mainland territories conquered by the Republic of Venice on the Italian peninsula. However, the abundance of natural watercourses in the area created many swampy wetlands and frequent flooding, making many of these lands unhealthy and infertile. For this reason, one of the most long-lasting Venetian magistracies was established, the Savi Esecutori alle Acque, or the Venetian Water Authority: founded in the early sixteenth century, it was responsible for major issues related to water management, such as controlling and limiting human abuse and modification of river and lagoon currents, performing operations to prevent damage caused by natural phenomena, and keeping canals navigable.

This was a challenging period for Venice. The doubling of the Cape of Good Hope by the Portuguese at the turn of the century and their opening of new trade routes with the East forced the Republic to accept the loss of its commercial monopoly over the European silk and spice trade routes; wars only exacerbated the economic crisis, especially the War of the League of Cambrai, between 1508 and 1516, whose main combatants were the Venetian Republic, the Papal States, and the French, with nearly every major power in Western Europe taking part in the battles at some point. The population growth after the recovery from the war increased the demand for a large and independent production of cereals, especially corn. Thus, the need to reclaim and cultivate as much swampy and inhabited land as possible became particularly urgent.

In 1556, in order to supervise the reclamation and irrigation of land, the Senate established the office of the Provveditori sopra i Beni Inculti, or Commissioners of Uncultivated Properties. Its tasks included the creation of land reclamation consortiums, the overseeing of agricultural development, and the compilation of a register of owners of water sources, with civil and criminal jurisdiction over usurpers.

With the Beni Inculti, the Republic finally made a real transition from a commerce-based economy to one dependent on land investments. The office was founded much thanks to the vision of Alvise Cornaro, a distinguished man of letters and celebrated patron of humanists, who also owned and managed many cultivated lands. His writings on the subject are still preserved in the Venice State Archives. Cornaro envisioned a new agricultural philosophy, which he termed *Santa agricoltura*, meaning *Holy Agriculture*, and introduced in his treatise *De la vita sobria*, or *Discourses on the Sober Life,* published in 1558. He regarded nature as a valuable source of riches and health that should be managed by knowledgeable people in harmony with nature, thus stimulating patrician interest in agricultural investment. He emphasized its economic advantages and drew inspiration from the classical tradition and his own erudite Renaissance circle, including Giangiorgio Trissino, Jacopo Sansovino, Sebastiano Serlio, and Andrea Palladio, who were the forerunners of the new way of living and building on the Venetian mainland.

In the same years, the Renaissance architect Palladio worked with some of the

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most prominent noblemen to develop a model for a rural villa that would meet the vision and objectives of Cornaro's *Holy Agriculture*. Combining the principles of the new agricultural philosophy with the practical needs of the environment, he created a prototype of a dignified noble residence that would also be a successful management hub for the surrounding properties, with components such as pigeonholes, *barchesse* or service units, wine cellars, and water fountains. The control over the nearby waterways was an indispensable task for villa owners, crucial to ensure safe and profitable land management and animal breeding. The relationship between man and nature was therefore a major concern of villa life, and while the hydraulic engineers of the Beni Inculti were called upon to provide technical solutions to natural threats, the humanist view shared by the noblemen regarded humans as an inseparable part of nature, working alongside it and adopting clever technical solutions to achieve an ideal balance between the two.

It is not surprising, then, that man and his natural environment were a favourite topic for fresco decoration in the Veneto villas. Generally speaking, the subjects depicted adhere to the humanist concept of 'the villa as a microcosm'. This idea was derived from the ancient notion of 'microcosm and macrocosm' explained in Plato's Timaeus, according to which the same patterns of structure, creation and reproduction could be seen at all the levels of the universe, from the largest scale of the macrocosm to the smallest scale of all the elements that it contains. Architects and patrons thus viewed a villa's components and function as symbolic manifestations of the structure of the universe and of the workings of nature within it. Consequently, it was quite common to find in a villa's decoration subjects related to its environment, such as local plants, animals, and landscapes, as well as subjects more explicitly alluding to the villa-cosmos parallel, such as the four seasons, the four elements, and the seven planets.

Landscapes, commonly depicted within illusionistic architectural window frames, provide the most evident emphasis on the relationship between the villa and its surroundings; they are also a celebration of the villa's role as a true belvedere, evoking the ideal settings of the ancient Roman villas according to Vitruvius and Pliny the Elder. Landscapes had already played a prominent role in the earlier Veneto villas. At Villa Barbaro in Maser, in the 1560s, Paolo Veronese embedded images of ancient Roman ruins from the classical tradition in the lush greenery and waterways that accurately represented the surrounding area.

Landscape frescoes were first introduced in the Veneto with Alvise Cornaro's Odeon in Padua, painted by Lambert Sustris in the early 1540s, where they served the specific function of promoting his agenda of Holy Agriculture. Unlike their Venetian successors, these landscapes do not contain classical ruins or generic imaginary views of nature. Rather, they depict agricultural lands properly and peacefully cultivated by farmers, and natural water resources reorganized in such a way as to flourish. A water mill is depicted in a landscape in the Landscapes Room, in Italian, Stanza dei Paesaggi. The water mill was an instrument commonly used by Venetian engineers to raise and transport water, as documented in the illustrations in Daniele Barbaro's commentary on Vitruvius's *Ten Books of Architecture*, first published in 1556. Cornaro is thus glorified as an exemplary landowner, who promoted the agricultural efforts for the good of Venetian society.

Another common decorative theme is the four seasons, alluding to the cyclical nature of annual agricultural production. The seasons are often given iconographic attributes drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (II, 27-30) and *Remedia amoris* or *The Cure of Love* (XI, 187-8). Spring and summer are thus depicted as female personifications, spring crowned with flowers, summer accompanied by wheat. Autumn and winter are male figures: autumn is accompanied by grapes or an apple, while winter is old, bearded, white and frozen. This is how they appear in the dining room of Villa Grimani Molin in Fratta Polesine.

The seasons are sometimes arranged according to the directions of the cardinal

winds. The idea refers to the parallel between the annual and the daily cycles of nature, beginning with spring on the east wall, where the sun rises, through daytime, when the sun is in the south (summer), followed by sunset (autumn, west), and ending with night, when the sun is below the horizon (winter, north).

Other subjects allude to the villa's rural context. Corn and vines are frequently depicted as the most common fruits of the land, as in the loggia of the Villa dei Vescovi in Luvigliano and on the ceiling of the vestibule of Villa Emo in Fanzolo. In the latter villa, a personification of agriculture welcomes the visitors above the entrance portal; in Villa Grimani Molin, the same position is occupied by personifications of Ceres as agricultural abundance and Juno as the symbol of wealth. In Villa Barbaro, in the Stanza di Bacco, Bacchus dominates the ceiling with his vines, and Ceres appears with her crops.

However, it was the grotesque that became the predominant and ideal visual instrument for depicting iconographic concepts related to nature. This ancient Roman decorative art, creative and fantastic, with a highly symbolic potential, was recovered from the grottoes of Nero's Domus Aurea at the end of the fifteenth century and developed into an elaborate classicising, or *all'antica*, form of decoration by Raphael's school in Rome. The grotesques in the Veneto villas are seldom purely ornamental, but go beyond the simple selection of eye-pleasing plants and animals. In Villa Emo, grotesque combinations in two small rooms represent the four elements, with further allusions to the fertility and abundance of nature. In Villa Foscari 'La Malcontenta' in Mira, a grotesque emblem of time refers to the dynamic and active forces of nature, while an emblem of poetry with Apollo's divine music suggests that universal harmony participates in the natural process of creation.

In Villa Grimani Molin, on the ground floor, there are grotesques with mother birds and their offspring. The allusion to fertility and reproduction, and the choice of birds, which are commonly associated with the soul, emphasize the concept of the generation of man in a spiritual sense. The acanthus flower appears as a decorative leitmotif in the grotesques throughout the main floor. Inspired by its significance in Greek and Roman funerary art, it represents the continuity of life and its cyclical nature.

One of the most intriguing manifestations of the cultural and agricultural relationship of the villa and its inhabitants with the environment can be found in the main entrance hall of Palladio's Villa Badoer at Fratta Polesine, painted by Giallo Fiorentino around 1560. On the *piano nobile*, the main floor, above the rear window overlooking the garden, a river god immersed in a swampy landscape is an allegorical representation of the nearby Scortico River. In the same hall, two scenes with Diana and her hounds against a local landscape represent the hunting activity documented in the area, especially the hunting of birds, which appear in the frescoes. Diana, shepherds, nymphs, and satyrs are all protagonists of the poetic and theatrical genre known as pastoralia or bucolica. Pastoral fables would be discussed and recited in the refined atmosphere of Villa Badoer, which hosted meetings of the Renaissance Accademia dei Pastori Fratteggiani, or 'Academy of the Fratta Shepherds'. On the opposite wall, two nymphs playing music and a water nymph in a pastoral landscape allude once more to the bucolic ideal, and recall the concept of musical, natural, and cosmological harmony.

The iconographic representation of the adjacent scene is quite exceptional. Two bearded male figures are again immersed in lush greenery. The one on the right is a river god, leaning on the traditional attribute of rivers, a common classical Greek vessel called a hydria, from which water flows, and he has a typical long beard. The other figure is younger, his hair and beard are cut short, and he lacks a hydria: instead, he is immersed in a small puddle that seems to come from the stream of water pouring straight out of the older figure's hydria.

The two villas in the locality of Fratta, Villa Badoer and Villa Grimani Molin, were built as part of a project that depended on the recent formation of a nearby *gorgo*,

a natural freshwater spring that appeared sometime around the 1550s and was shared by the two households. Together with the area's natural and man-made waterways, this *gorgo* is marked on a map drawn in 1564 by two surveyors from the Beni Inculti, who were summoned to Fratta to design an important drainage canal and a 'canal bridge', a technical invention that would allow the water of this canal to physically pass under the Scortico River.

From the map we can conclude that the older river god in the fresco represents the branch of the Scortico flowing between the two villas, while the younger figure is a unique personification of the *gorgo* formed by the same watercourse a few years before the villa's construction.

This true iconographic invention is undoubtedly the greatest iconographic testimony to the efforts of a Venetian family from the lagoon to revive and dominate the mainland territories with resourcefulness, determination, and technical innovation.

The examples of villa fresco decoration discussed in this lesson fully reflect the challenges that Venetian patricians faced in their daily struggles with the local waterscape. From allegories referring to nature's cyclical rhythms to symbolic representations of local waterways, Venetians have always found ways to portray their connection with the environment.

### Mandatory Reading

Shai, M. (2019). "The Local Microcosm of Villa Badoer and Villa Grimani Molin". *The Cosmos at Home: The Fresco Cycle of Villa Grimani Molin at Fratta Polesine*. Torino: Zamorani, 158-64.

### Further Optional Reading

Ackerman, J.S. (1967). *Palladio's Villas*. New York: Institute of Fine Arts J.J. Augustin.
Fiocco, G. (1965). *Alvise Cornaro: il suo tempo e le sue opere*. Vicenza: Neri Pozza.
Pavanello, G.; Mancini, V. (a cura di) (2008). *Gli affreschi nelle ville venete: Il Cinquecento*. Venezia: Marsilio.