

# A Digital Archive of the Architecture of Charity: Venice, c.1100–1797

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*Summary: The Architectural Visual Resources Library of the Department of Architecture, College of Environmental Design, University of California Berkeley, offers to scholars and students of Venetian social and architectural history a digital database of approximately a thousand images of 139 buildings and building sites once dedicated to acts of charity and public assistance and established by the confraternities (the Scuole), the Venetian Republic, churches and synagogues, and private donors. The images are catalogued and may be accessed at <[www.mip.berkeley.edu/spiro/](http://www.mip.berkeley.edu/spiro/)>, “Lifchez Gift” (location) “Venice.” The images of buildings mentioned here may be viewed using the “Look up Tables” with the image accession number given beside the building name. The authors’ research and field work leading to the establishment of the database began in 2002 and are ongoing.*

Ubi charitas et amor ibi deus est  
(Inscription, Scuola Grande di San Marco)

From the twelfth century until the occupation of the Venetian Republic by the French in 1797, and subsequently by the Austrians until 1866, charity and public assistance were offered to those in need by the state; synagogues and Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and other churches; private patrons; and confraternities. The confraternities were associations of laypeople, Venetian citizens, and resident foreign populations in trades or crafts, formed for secular and spiritual purposes. By the sixteenth century, many confraternities were found in the six *sestieri* of Venice (Cannaregio, Castello, Santa Croce, Dorsoduro, San Marco, and San Polo) and on the island of Giudecca. Tragically, in the decades that followed the suppression by the French of all but a special group of confraternities in 1806, the social role of the confraternities in the life of the Republic, and especially their personalized charitable endeavours, could not be duplicated by the new institutional forms of centralized social welfare.

In the Republic, depending upon the benefactor and the needs of the petitioner, charity took different forms: providing a poor family with a maiden’s dowry or with a burial and the Masses said and candles burned for the deceased’s salvation; giving a license to an individual to beg at the doorway of a certain premise; or providing an individual or a family with a place to live. The population perhaps best cared for were deserving members of a confraternity, those who inspired the largesse of a patron, and those who had served the state, such as retired sailors and their families. But a large population of the unemployable, the poor, the elderly, the chronically ill, female children and women at risk, prostitutes, orphans, youths, widows and widows with children, travelers, and pilgrims en route to the Holy Land were also in need of shelter, food, and protection from abuse. Some of these unfortunates

were served by confraternities or private patrons, but it was essentially the state that attempted to meet their needs, partly out of Christian charity but also to maintain social order.

Christian *scuole* placed themselves under the patronage of religious figures, such as Christ, the Virgin, or a saint, and the doctrine of charity was basic to their function. The incentive to undertake good works came from an awareness of the need for practical help and from theoretical ideas concerning the salvation of donor and recipient. As noted, good works and *elemosina* could mean physical and monetary assistance, but also prayer, frequent confession and communion, and spiritual help. The commitment of a *scuola* to charity was summed up in two phrases: *amor proximi* and *amor dei*. That is, to do good work that will benefit others in their daily lives and, through prayer, to serve God. Both *amor proximi* and *amor dei* had a singular objective: that through charity and love the *scuola* and its individual members would invoke God's blessings in this life and their salvation in the hereafter. Thus, each *scuola* had a formal relationship with its patron church, for it was there that the observances and rituals, the offices of the Mass and sacraments, gave a *scuola* its *raison-d'être* and bonded its members as *confratelli* or *consorelle*. If a *scuola* did not possess its own building, it rented space before the altar of its patron saint in an accommodating church. When a *scuola* occupied a separate building, this building was the architectural centrepiece of the *scuola's* properties. Wealthy *scuole* often erected lavish buildings that embellished with paintings and other works of art meant to inspire members with their teachings, charity being paramount.

The largest number of images in the database is of those buildings established by the major and minor confraternities known as *scuole grandi* and *scuole piccole*. These images are of each confraternity's principal building, or *sede*, known as the *scuola*, and their ancillary properties. Wherever a *scuola* and its patron church are adjacent, such as the Scuola Grande di SanRocco and the Church of San Rocco (fig. 1) and the Scuola dei Tiraoro e Battioro and the Church of San Stae (fig. 2), this relationship is also shown. The six *scuole grandi*, as named by Francesco Sansovino and established between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, became the wealthiest of all *scuole* and officially, as the major confraternities of the Republic, contributed to its social and political structure. The *sede* of the *scuole grandi* are major, world-class architectural monuments that, fortunately, have come down to us unscathed. Similarly, their multi-storey housing blocks built in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are magnificent works. Still inhabited, they are now public social housing, their interiors having been reconfigured for contemporary living.

Three *scuole grandi* have been given contemporary uses: Sants Maria della Carità, now the Gallerie dell'Accademia, is a national art museum; San Marco is the city's principal hospital; and the interior of Santa Maria della Misericordia is under reconstruction as a community social centre. Santa Maria dei Carmini, San Rocco, San Teodoro (designated as a *scuola grande* in the seventeenth century), and San Giovanni Evangelista have retained their fraternal orders, who maintain their buildings by opening them to visitors and renting them for uses such as concerts,



Fig. 1. San Polo, Scuola Grande di San Rocco

lectures, and plays. Another *scuola*, San Fantin, given the title of *scuola grande* because of its distinguished architecture and setting, is now a civic association of the arts; originally, its members were devoted to accompanying the condemned to the gallows. Brian Pullan's *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (1971), which concentrates on the *scuole grandi*, remains the classic work among the vast literature devoted to the subject.

The many *scuole piccole*, about which there is also a vast literature, are characterized by Pullan as “lesser confraternities.” Many of their well-preserved buildings were at some point in time converted to new uses. The *scuole piccole*, known as *scuole d'arti e mestieri*, were essentially guilds of craftsmen, merchants, artists, doctors, women, and even the physically disabled for their social, spiritual, and political welfare. Foreign residents established *scuole nazionali*, which served its members as guilds and consulates, and as hospices for those from the community who were in need.

Other *scuole piccole*, known as *scuole di devozione*, were principally devoted to a cult, that of the Virgin, the Holy Sacraments, the Eucharist, or a particular saint. *Scuole di devozione* took an important role in the maintenance and rituals of their parish churches and were in a sense the ceremonial institution of their parish churches, a role parallel to that of the *scuole grandi* and their ceremonial functions as institutions of the Republic.

The urban presence and social role of all *scuole* were emphasized on the occasion of certain feasts, when the *scuole* paraded, individually or collectively, through the city's pedestrian ways in ceremonies that led to venerated shrines,



Fig. 2. Santa Croce, Scuola dei Tiraoro e Battioro

which might be at a distance. Their processions enlivened the city, often with music and, if at night, with candlelight. For the feast of Corpus Christi, all of the *scuole* ceremoniously joined the city's other civic and religious institutions in the Piazza San Marco, marking their importance as a constituent part of the city's social and political order.

Several *scuole piccole* and especially the *scuole grandi* owned other properties that were acquired through legacies and gifts. Since the mid-thirteenth century, it became a common practice among the rich to bequeath *lasciti perpetui vincolati* of money or properties that aimed to assure to the dead benefactors prayers and masses from the people who received such benefits. Usually the donor delegated an institution such as the Procurators of San Marco (public), parishes (ecclesiastic) and *scuole* (lay confraternities) to oversee his bequest (called *commissaria*).<sup>61</sup> These

61 See Pullan, "Abitazioni al servizio dei poveri nella Repubblica di Venezia."



Fig. 3. San Polo, Castelforte, house of the Scuola di San Rocco for rents

institutions either invested the money in properties for rental income or provided the people in need with accommodations in hospices or small apartments; such accommodations could be for free (*amore Dei*) or required a low rent.<sup>62</sup> Between the end of the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century several hundred houses are estimated to have been donated *amore Dei*.<sup>63</sup>

The present research has documented blocks of apartments owned by the *scuole* for rentals, whose outstanding example is *Castelforte di San Rocco* (fig. 3),<sup>64</sup> and

62 For the wealth and the investments of the *scuole grandi* see Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 157–87.

63 The Procurators of San Marco ran 300–400 houses *amore Dei*; Trincanato, “Le forme dell’edilizia veneziana,” p. 18. In 1582 the number of houses *amore Dei* were: 179 in Cannaregio, 173 in Castello, 194 in Dorsoduro, 72 in San Marco, 1 in San Polo and 36 in Santa Croce; Concina, *Venezia nell’età moderna*, 85–86.

64 See Gianighian/Pavanini, *Dietro i palazzi*, 80–83; Posocco, *La vicenda urbanistica e lo*



Fig. 4. Cannaregio, Ospedale dei Crociferi

apartments for populations in need, that is, hospices and public housing, the *edilizia minima*.<sup>65</sup>

Franca Semi's *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia* (1983) catalogues 115 *ospizi* and *ospedali* built before 1797. The greater number of these were established by the Republic, religious organizations, and private patrons to whom the burden of the massive population of the unfortunates fell. Outstanding architectural examples are the Ospizio of the Scuola dei Sartori, Ca' di Dio (Roman Catholic), Ospitale dei Greci presso la Scuola di San Nicolò (Greek Orthodox), Ospedale di Santa Maria dei Derelitti (private donor), Ospedale di San Giacomo degli Incurabili (Republic and private donor), and Ospizio di Prete Zuane (Republic). Of the many *ospedali*, the Ospedale dei Crociferi is a handsome example of a twelfth-century building (fig. 4).

In the sixteenth century, when the state began to assume a greater role in the city's civic welfare, bigger *ospedali* were built in order to house categories of population considered outcasts, such as beggars, the chronically ill, or incurables.<sup>66</sup> The Ospedale di San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti and the Ospedale degli Incurabili are the most impressive examples (fig. 5).<sup>67</sup>

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*spazio scenico*, pp. 53–57.

65 Trincanato, *Venezia minore*, p. 65.

66 Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 197–236.

67 See Aikema/Meijers, *Nel regno dei poveri*, 131–48; 249–71; Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 131–34; 273–74.



Fig. 5. Castello, Ospedale di San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti

Some *scuole* had their own hospices, like the Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Misericordia<sup>68</sup> and the Scuola dei Sartori (fig. 6)<sup>69</sup>; others used their *sede* as hospice, like the Scuola di San Nicolò dei Greci (fig. 7) or the Scuola dei Lucchesi.<sup>70</sup> The Ospizio dei Trevisani<sup>71</sup> was a shelter founded probably by the city of Treviso for its citizens that happened to be in Venice; likewise, a private donor helped build a hospice for the Armenian pilgrims.<sup>72</sup> Public housing, documented from the sixteenth century, consisted of a sequence of small living units in one or two blocks

68 Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 205–06.

69 Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 206–07.

70 Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 199–201.

71 Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 187.

72 Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 158.



Fig. 6. Cannaregio, Hospice, Scuola dei Sartori

or around a courtyard.<sup>73</sup> Interesting examples are the case della Marinarezza74 (apartments for sailors donated by the state) and the houses in Corte San Marco, a legacy to the Scuola Grande di San Marco (fig. 8).<sup>75</sup>

Scholarly, annotated, and sometimes illustrated catalogues of the *scuole* and their buildings and those buildings of other benefactors were our guides in finding the buildings and building sites photographed for the database. Franca Semi's catalogue *Gli "Ospizi" di Venezia* was one of the eight most useful publications. The other seven are: Cesare Augusto Levi, *Notizie storiche di alcune antiche scuole d'Arti e mestieri scomparse o esistenti ancora in Venezia* (1895); Silvia Gramigna, *Scuole di arti, mestieri e devozione a Venezia* (1981); Terisio Pignatti (ed.), *Le Scuole di Venezia* (1981); Richard Mackenney, *Tradesmen and Traders: The World of the Guilds in Venice and Europe, c. 1250 – c. 1650* (1987); Franco Posocco, *Scuola Grande di San Rocco: La vicenda urbanistica e lo spazio scenico* (1997); Francesca Ortalli, *"Per salute delle anime e delli corpi": Scuole piccole a Venezia nel tardo Medioevo* (2001); and Gastone Vio, *Le Scuole Piccole nella Venezia dei Dogi: note d'archivio per la storia delle confraternite veneziane* (2004). We have also consulted numerous journal articles and architectural monographs.

73 Trincanato, *Venezia minore*, 65–68.

74 See Gallo, "Corte Colonna a Castello e case per la marinarezza veneziana,," Trincanato, *Venezia minore*, 158–69; Semi, *Gli 'Ospizi' di Venezia*, 135–36.

75 Trincanato, *Venezia minore*, 65; 306–09; Gianighian/Pavanini, *Dietro i palazzi*, 110–13.



Fig. 7. Castello, Scuola di San Nicolo dei Greci, Castello

The catalogues vary in the numbers of *scuole* active between c.1100 and 1787. Vio, using only documents, shows that 925 *scuole* existed in Venice during the Republic. Pullan mentions that there were 357 active in the eighteenth century, and Mackenney lists 377 between 1247 and c.1763. Scarabello lists eighty extant *scuole*, which we have found and photographed along with *ospizi*, *ospedali*, and low-income housing established by all benefactors, catalogued by Semi. Our images include the emblems and/or inscriptions of what may remain of a pre-existing building. We are careful to show each building or building site within its context to convey its presence as part of the rich architectural fabric of the city.

## Conclusion

The authors are in the process of augmenting the Digital Archive *Of The Architecture Of Charity* with new findings, especially with images of the interiors



Fig. 8. Dorsoduro, housing of the Scuola di San Marco, Corte San Marco

of the buildings already documented. This short article serves as an invitation to others to contribute material to the archive. Contributions will be recognized as part of the catalogue entry.

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