

A Charitable 'Façade'?

The Sculptural Decoration of the Scuola Grande di San Marco

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Summary: The meetinghouse of the Scuola Grande di San Marco possessed the most extravagant façade of any confraternity in Venice. At the same time, however, its sculptural decoration contained more references to charity than were found on any other scuola's meeting-house. This essay posits that the profusion of images relating to charity on the façade of the Scuola Grande di San Marco represented a deliberate choice aimed at tempering the impact of the façade's own material splendour.

The central religious principle that guided the activities of all the confraternities of Venice was Caritas, the highest of the theological virtues, a combination of *amor dei* (love for God) and *amor proximi* (love for one's neighbour).¹ The charitable acts which the larger Venetian confraternities (the *scuole grandi*) considered their responsibility were all part of enacting the virtue of Caritas.² These included providing housing and burial aid to sick and destitute members, distributing food to the poor, and working to speed the souls of dead brothers toward heaven — the overarching goal of all the *scuole*. The sculptural decoration on the façade of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, built in the wake of the disastrous fire of 1485, is remarkable for the extent to which its iconography communicates the charitable themes encompassed by Caritas, doing so more thoroughly and more insistently than the decorative scheme of any other scuola's exterior (Fig. 1). At the same time, however, the façade presents the viewer with a visual paradox: the vigorous promotion of the scuola's charitable deeds, of its ideals of Christian altruism and humility, is presented within the most opulent material ensemble that a Venetian scuola had ever built.

As Brian Pullan observed in his seminal study of the Venetian *scuole*, the challenge for these institutions was to honour saint, city, and confraternity through pomp and splendour without reaching a level of ostentation that could run the risk of appearing inappropriate.³ When the Venetian govern-

¹ A helpful overview of these concepts and their representation in the art of Italian confraternities is provided by Schiferl, "Caritas and the Iconography of Italian Confraternity Art." For a fundamental study on the development of the visual representation of Caritas, see Freyhan, "The Evolution of the Caritas Figure in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries."

² Schiferl, "Caritas," 208–209.

³ "They had to decide how far to praise God through splendid architecture and elaborate ceremony, and how far to minister to Christ in his own image, the poor man." Pullan, *Rich and Poor*

ment felt that scuole procession displays had become excessively conspicuous it intervened with new restrictions.⁴ Is it possible, then, to view the juxtaposition of sumptuous decoration with the iconographic emphasis on charity found on the Scuola di San Marco façade as evidence of this delicate balancing act between pious splendour and Christian modesty?

Images representing or referring to Caritas could take a number of forms and were prominent elements in the decorative schemes of the other scuole grandi with large meeting houses established by that time (Santa Maria della Carità, San Giovanni Evangelista, and Santa Maria di Valverde, known as the Misericordia). The façades of the Misericordia and of the Scuola della Carità, which provide us with an approximate idea of the appearance of the Scuola di San Marco's original pre-fire façade, featured variants of the image known as a Madonna della Misericordia (the Madonna of Mercy).⁵ In these images, a large figure of the Madonna shields a group of kneeling confraternity brothers within her cloak, thus alluding to her spiritual protection, and in a more literal sense to another of the seven acts of Mercy: the clothing of the naked.⁶ The relief sculpture of this theme by Bartolomeo Bon for the façade of the Misericordia (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum) was joined by free-standing figures personifying the three theological virtues: Faith, Hope, and — naturally — Caritas.⁷ The figure of Caritas is shown holding a cornucopia with her left hand, symbol of abundance and prosperity, while in her right hand she holds a stylized flame. At times autonomous, while at others presented in a vessel (the latter was especially prevalent in the period under discussion), the flame had been a symbol for *amor dei* since the late twelfth century.⁸ It is in this form that the virtue of Caritas appears on the monumental gateway to the courtyard of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista. Completed in 1481 and often attributed to Pietro Lombardo, this screen-like construction — effectively the façade for the scuola's building complex — features a series of six identical vases containing the flames of *amor dei*, one atop each of the six pilasters that are set into the walls of the flanking buildings (Fig. 2).⁹ The sculptural apparatus and iconographic program of the Scuola di San Marco, however, are far

in *Renaissance Venice*, 125.

⁴ Pullan, *Rich and Poor*, 127–129.

⁵ On the similar appearance of the Santa Maria della Carità, Misericordia, and original Scuola di San Marco façades, see: Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 165.

⁶ Schiferl, "Caritas," 208–213.

⁷ For recent discussions on the Misericordia Madonna see Schulz, "L'altare maggiore della chiesa veneziana della Misericordia"; and Motture and López Borges, "A Venetian Tympanum of the 'Madonna della Misericordia' by Bartolomeo Bon."

⁸ Freyhan, "The Evolution of the Caritas Figure," 74–75.

⁹ For a recent analysis of the portal with a discussion of its attribution see Spinazzi, "Un atrio all'antica per la Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista a Venezia."

more extensive and complex, and greatly surpass those of the other scuole in the expression of the charitable function of the institution.

Atop the Scuola di San Marco's main portal (in the left half of the façade, called the *tempio*) stands a sculpture of a woman who cradles a pair of children: yet another common personification of Caritas in both sculpture and painting. The sculpture, like the relief of the *Brethren before Saint Mark* in the lunette below, was part of the previous meeting house's decoration; having survived the fire of 1485, it was reused on the new façade. The pedestals at the base of this portal contain bas-reliefs depicting groups of putti engaged in a series of rituals, the precise meaning of which, though still mysterious, is probably linked to the scuola's ideals of self-sacrifice, restraint, and humility.¹⁰ One scene, with a group of putti and a lamb, suggests a reference to the Passion of Christ, and thus to his self-sacrifice for the benefit of mankind. In another panel the putti beat a satyr, a common symbol of moral incontinence and gluttony, thus indicating the defeat of such vices, and by extension the other sins of excess. And in yet another panel, the putti gather around an altar emblazoned with images of the confraternity brothers and a lion of Saint Mark. In this image-within-an-image the brothers of the scuola and the republic of Venice (represented by the lion), form a base — quite literally — for *amor dei*, present again in the by now familiar form of the flaming vase, here placed atop the altar.

Reliefs carved at the top of the pilasters flanking the *tempio* doorway depict, on the left, a Pelican piercing itself to feed its young, another well-known symbol of charity and self sacrifice, while on the right a Phoenix rises from the flames, symbolizing resurrection and faith. As several scholars have noted, such a pairing suggests a reference to the dual nature of Caritas: *amor proximi*, and *amor dei*.¹¹ Bolstering the likelihood that the phoenix is intended as a reference to *amor dei* is the presence of a vessel below the flames. The image is thus rendered highly reminiscent of the abstract depictions of *amor dei* as a flame within a bowl encountered on the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista and on the Scuola di San Marco itself, where, in addition to the aforementioned pedestal relief, a series of these stylized vessels is located above the two windows of the *tempio* as well as atop and between the lunettes on the right half of the façade, called the *albergo* (after the room of the same name on the second floor). It is also worth noting that the Pelican piercing its breast is paired with the Phoenix in another location in which the salvation of the soul and love for God are a prominent theme: the two images are both part of the relief decoration on the base of a column in the funerary chapel of the Cornaro family in the church of Santissimi Apostoli.¹²

¹⁰ For discussion on the symbolism of these reliefs see Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 181–183 and Goy, *The Building of Renaissance Venice*, 213.

¹¹ The reference in these reliefs to the dual nature of Caritas is first posited, however cautiously, by Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 171–172.

¹² For the style and decoration of these pillars see Ceriana, "La cappella Corner nella chiesa dei Santi Apostoli a Venezia," esp. 183 n. 237.

The *albergo* façade also features an *unicum* in the exterior decoration of a Venetian scuola grande: a pair of large-scale narrative reliefs (Fig. 3).¹³ Generally attributed to Tullio Lombardo (and possibly his brother Antonio as well), the reliefs that flank the *albergo* façade door depict two key scenes from Mark's ministry in Alexandria: the *Healing of the Cobbler Anianus*, on the left, and on the right, the *Baptism of Anianus*.¹⁴ As Philip Sohm has noted, the two episodes, like the pelican and phoenix beside the *tempio* door, can also be read as emblematic of the two-fold nature of Caritas: the healing of the injured cobbler recalls the scuola's duty in healing the sick and thus *amor proximi*, while baptism would refer to the scuola's aim to save the souls of its brethren, and thus *amor dei*.¹⁵ Saint Mark's act of physical healing, furthermore, shares a basic formal and gestural similarity with one of almsgiving, providing another allusion to the scuola's material generosity and distribution of alms. This similarity becomes especially evident when viewing the reliefs from afar, as one would do when crossing the square in front of the scuola. The placement of these narrative reliefs on the *albergo* half of the façade, rather than on the *tempio*, to the left, appears to have been a strategic choice. The *albergo* room, located on the second floor, was where decisions and dispensation of all forms of charity were made by the *banca*, the scuola's governing board. The *banca* of the Scuola di San Marco sat — significantly — behind the window that is directly above the scene of the *Baptism of Anianus*.¹⁶ A visual and thematic link is thus established, one that connects the *banca*'s tangible, charitable actions with the highest spiritual end of the scuola's mission, illustrated by the relief sculpture below.

Compared with the decoration of earlier scuola façades, that of the Scuola di San Marco is positively riddled with references to its altruistic ideals. What might have prompted such an exhaustive display of the scuola's dedication to Caritas and the charitable themes that it encompasses, when one or two visual manifestations of the virtue had sufficed on the earlier Scuola façades? Let us consider some of the circumstances which surrounded the construction of the Scuola di San Marco's façade, and their potential effect upon its iconographic program.

The abundance of coloured marbles, sculptures, illusionistic and decorative carving, and gilding (now worn away), not to mention its sheer size, made the San Marco façade the most sumptuously ornate of all the Venetian

¹³ Recent discussions of these reliefs and further observations on the façade's iconography are provided by Richard Schofield, "La facciata della Scuola Grande di San Marco: osservazioni preliminari," and Laura Corti, "I Lombardo."

¹⁴ The attribution of the *Healing of Anianus* relief to Antonio Lombardo was first put forth by Wendy Steadman Sheard, "The Birth of Monumental Classicizing Relief in Venice," 153.

¹⁵ Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 170.

¹⁶ On the *albergo*'s function in the distribution of charity and the location of the *banca*, see Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 54–57.

confraternity meeting house façades of its time.¹⁷ Begun by Pietro Lombardo and Giovanni Buora in 1489, and continued under Mauro Codussi, the façade was largely finished by 1494.¹⁸ Unlike the recently completed portal of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista, the San Marco façade featured no areas of painted plaster; all of its coloured fields were made of actual polychrome marble. In their contract, Lombardo and Buora were required to follow an agreed-upon *disegno*, and though much of the façade's bottom register reflects the architectural style of Lombardo, and the ones above that of Codussi, all aspects of the façade's overall design and appearance, and therefore any message conveyed by its decoration, would have been given approval by the *provveditori sopra la fabrica*, the scuola's own supervisory board.¹⁹

Funding for the rebuilding of the meeting house had arrived in several ways. The scuola appointed members with the task of soliciting donations, while also calling for the collection of outstanding debts; more noteworthy though, was the intervention of the state.²⁰ In addition to permitting the scuola several increases in the number of members it was allowed to admit (and therefore the amount of membership fees it received), the Venetian government also took the unprecedented step of pledging 2000 ducats with an additional 100 ducats a month for the following two years for the specific purpose of rebuilding the scuola.²¹ In 1488 the government even allowed the confraternity to suspend its charitable distribution of bread, wine, and soup for a period of one year, a concession it would make again in 1491, this time lengthening the suspension to five years, and extending the concession to all the scuole grandi.²²

Spending great sums on the decoration of the meetinghouse, even at the cost of disrupting fundamental institutional activities like charitable giving, would not necessarily have caused conflict among the brothers of the Scuola di San Marco, nor of any of the other scuole grandi; such projects were

¹⁷ On the recent discovery of remnants of gilding see Fumo, "Dei recenti interventi di restauro della facciata della Scuola Grande di San Marco," 501.

¹⁸ In this year, Canon Pietro Casola, who was visiting Venice en route to Jerusalem, wrote that "The façade is very beautiful and richly adorned with marbles and gold, and the decoration inside is worthy of the outside." Casola, *Canon Pietro Casola's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem*, 138.

¹⁹ On the administrative oversight of projects artistic commissions see Wurthmann, "The Scuole Grandi and Venetian Art," 190–237.

²⁰ The documents recording these provisions are compiled in Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 264–273. A number of these are also available in Paoletti, *La Scuola Grande di San Marco*.

²¹ See documents in Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 16 April, 1485 (ASVe, S. Marco, Reg. 16bis, fol. 56r) for the government's donation of funds; 20 April 1485 (ASVe, Consiglio dei Dieci, Miste, Reg. 22, fol. 124r.), and 8 June, 1487 (ASVe, Consiglio dei Dieci, Miste, Reg. 23, fol. 111) for the increase in membership.

²² See documents in Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 12 March 1488 (ASVe, S. Marco, B. 52, fasc. 3, fol. 7), and 28 January 1491 (ASVe, Consiglio dei Dieci, Miste, Reg. 24, fol. 204v).

viewed as a key element in the expression of institutional prestige, piety, and devotion.²³ The Scuola Grande di San Marco was, in fact, especially proud of its dedication to Mark, the patron saint of the Venetian Republic, and consequently felt particularly obligated to honour the apostle through adequately sumptuous pomp and display.²⁴ And yet, while the scuola itself may have had few qualms about spending great sums to honour Mark in place of giving the money directly to the poor, it would nevertheless have been keenly aware of the public's perceptions and opinions — both positive and negative — of its spending. Would the Venetian public not have been aware of the large sums being spent on the façade, as well as of the suspensions of charity granted by the state to the scuola? A half century later, the Scuola di San Rocco demonstrated this very type of concern when reprimanding itself for similar excesses, noting that "cause for gossip is given to those watching who cannot believe ... that what should be spent on the poor is being consumed in human ostentation."²⁵ Did a similar concern with public opinion manifest itself, much earlier, on the façade of the Scuola di San Marco? Viewed in this light, the numerous references to the scuola's altruistic mission on its meeting-house façade assume a secondary role: they are an iconographic counterweight to the opulence exuded by the façade's own lavish material.

The expression of *Caritas* through a panoply of symbolic forms on the Scuola Grande di San Marco appears calculated to reassure the viewer, sceptic or not, that the magnificent materials and decoration of the façade are not a misplaced tribute to vainglory, but rather are dedicated to honouring the scuola's dedicatee, Mark, and through him, God. Concern over the extravagance of the scuole of Venice would gain notoriety in the next century, most famously with Alessandro Caravia's publication of his *Sogno di Caravia* in 1541. But the imagery of the façade of the Scuola di San Marco, simultaneously a declaration of great charity as well as a demonstration of great expenditure, suggests that the acrimony over decorum occasioned by the pomp and display of the scuole of Venice, though perhaps more caustic later in the middle of the sixteenth century, was alive and well in the last quarter of the fifteenth.

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²³ Brown, "Honor and Necessity," 181–182, 189.

²⁴ In a document of 2 August 1523, reproduced and translated in Sohm, *The Scuola Grande di San Marco*, 27, the scuola describes the motives behind the façade's magnificence stating that "it should surpass all the other scuole both out of reverence for the divine cult (faith) and for the honour of this renowned republic, this scuola being dedicated in name to the protector of the state of St. Mark the Evangelist" (ASVe, S. Marco, Reg. 17, fol. 97r). See also Rosand, *Myths of Venice*, 71.

²⁵ Quoted in Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 91.

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Fig. 1 Scuola Grande di San Marco, façade (photo Dino Chinellato). Courtesy of Save Venice Inc.



Fig. 2 Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, detail (photo Lorenzo G. Buonanno)



Fig. 3 Scuola Grande di San Marco, detail on Albergo side (photo Lorenzo G. Buonanno)