

Introduction

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In many medieval and Renaissance cities, confraternities played a distinct and important role in civic political, social, and religious life. They were not simply voluntary groups occupying some no-man's land between church and state, but rather wealthy, active, and powerful bodies which fulfilled important roles as the administrators of civic charity and health care, the organizers of the civic cult, and patrons of major artistic and architectural commissions. As a result, they participated actively in all of the key social and cultural issues of the day.

Venice's confraternities, the *scuole grandi* and *scuole piccole*, exemplify this. The *scuole piccole* organized religious, charitable, and social life in neighbourhoods and trades, and among ethnic groups. The *scuole grandi* were among the wealthiest and most influential confraternities anywhere in Europe, and together with cultic and charitable functions they served as the chief organized political outlet for citizens in a political system that reserved all other formal offices for the restricted class of the nobles. The *scuole grandi* not only funded hospitals and organized processions, but also helped recruit oarsmen for the Venetian fleet and provided benefits for retired sailors. The Council of Ten kept a close supervisory eye over the six *scuole grandi* (by 1552) because they were key vehicles for realizing public policy. Ambitious citizens turned these confraternities into key vehicles for lavish artistic patronage, particularly in the sixteenth century when religious, political, and cultural movements were splitting Europe. In the process they triggered serious debates in *scuole* meeting halls and across the city generally about whether these confraternities were acting in ways that were 'truly' Christian or 'truly' Venetian.

Scandals swirled around and through the sixteenth century *scuole grandi* in ways that make them clear windows into cultural and religious debates. The four essays gathered here highlight Venetians' conflicted feelings about extravagance and ritual in religion, and how these could intersect with fierce disagreements about the indefinable quality of *venezianità*. This is a common debate within civic religions that hold firmly to 'ancient traditions' which are often, in fact, of relatively recent invention. The authors here show how Venetians laid out competing sides in these cultural debates, and then sought compromise, conciliation, or outright victory.

A *scuola's* most public face was its quarters, and members often spent lavishly in order to outdo their rivals in the size, profile, and decoration of their buildings, even though this diverted funds from their charitable work. Lorenzo Buonanno shows how members of the *Scuola Grande di San Marco* aimed quite deliberately to counter criticism of their very extravagant facade by incorporating numerous images related to charity.

The three essays which follow examine similar debates within the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, the newest of the scuole grandi (established 1478), and hence the one most obsessed with 'catching up' to its more established counterparts in the areas of architecture, processional display, and paintings. While each area under debate had its own terms and issues, there were recurring themes pointing to underlying ambiguity and even anxiety about what the scuola ought to be doing. As Gianmario Guidarelli shows, some members aimed for simple and austere quarters which would allow public funds and public attention to be turned towards its charitable work. Yet a competing party committed to magnificence succeeded in re-orienting the building project even after construction had started, lending some odd design features to what was otherwise emerging as the grandest scuola in Venice. The other very public side of confraternal magnificence was in ritual processions, and Gabriele Köster exposes the tensions that broke out within San Rocco in 1540 when a party of reformers on the executive council called the *Banca* voted overwhelmingly to simplify the scuola's contribution to the lavish annual processions that Venetians held on Corpus Domini. They reversed themselves so quickly and decisively that it's clear that their reforming action had triggered a storm of protest within the scuola.

Debates like this attracted the satiric barbs of writer Alessandro Caravia, whose 1541 poem *Il sogno dil Caravia* sharply criticized Venetian scuole grandi, and San Rocco in particular, for spending so much on boosting themselves and so little on boosting the poor. Yet sometimes religious debates were a proxy for deeper anxieties. One of the noteworthy features of artistic patronage within San Rocco's lavish new quarters is that all the paintings were done by Jacopo Tintoretto. Jessica Maratsos shows that members fought over this too. Tintoretto's bold entrepreneurial strategies ensured that cost would not be the main issue, and so it reverted to the more fundamental civic ideological fight between what Manfredo Tafuri described as *venezianità* versus *romانيتas*. The former was, of course, simple, pure, and clear while the latter was sensuous, lavish, and obscure.

The four articles demonstrate how confraternities were key battlefields for debates in Venice over religious and cultural identity. While some north Europeans at the end of the sixteenth century believed that Venice might abandon the Catholic Church and adopt either a simpler evangelical creed or even some form of Protestantism, those familiar with the direction of cultural debates within the scuole could have read a very different writing on the walls of their lavish headquarters. Venetian confraternity members upheld a civic religion that embraced and celebrated both the senses and the city, and they consistently patronized the architects and artists who could best realize that vision. Reformers notwithstanding, that was what most scuola members associated with *venezianità*, and it ensured that these confraternities would fund the kinds of new music, art, and architecture that made Venice a European cultural capital well into the eighteenth century.

These four papers were initially presented in a session sponsored by the Society for Confraternity Studies at the annual meeting of the Renaissance Society of America held in Venice in April 2010. They presented such a coherent case that we wished to share them with other members of the Society, and we thank the presenters for revising and editing their papers for publication in this special issue of *Confraternitas*.

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