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SECRET VENICE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

HEAD OF AN OLD WOMAN

Corte del Teatro
San Luca

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**The good,
the poor
and the miserly**

Halfway up a house in Corte del Teatro, there is a curious marble sculpture of an old woman's head, which originally seems to have been the shop sign of the Farmacia "La Vecchia" in Campo San Polo. There is an amusing story about it.

A miserly old woman (*vecchia*) of the parish of San Paternian (see p. 33) used to hide her money in the lining of an old cloak that she kept in the attic. One winter's day, her son, Vincenzo Quardio, knowing nothing about the hiding-place, took pity on a local pauper and gave him the cloak.

A week later, the woman went to add to her savings but could not find the garment. To convince her son to go and get it back, she told him that it contained all the money that she had intended to leave to him. The son then set out in search of the pauper, even disguising himself as a beggar on the steps of Rialto Bridge. Finally, he found him and, voicing charitable concern about the bitter cold, suggested a swop – his own thick cloak for the threadbare one he had given him before. With the money he got back, the son was then able to open a flourishing apothecary's business, the rear of which was decorated by a sculpture showing his mother seated and himself standing.

Today, all you can see of the high-relief is the woman's head, flanked by an image of a cedar tree (the shop sign of another nearby apothecary that has since disappeared), the arms of the Bembo and Moro families, and the crest of the Confraternity of San Rocco. In the 16th century, this house had passed from the Bembo to the Moro and then to the confraternity.

SIGHTS NEARBY

THE EMBLEMS ON THE FLAG POLE IN CAMPO SAN LUCA

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On the base of the flag pole in Campo San Luca are the emblems of the two confraternities that played a part in defeating the conspiracy led by Bajamonte Tiepolo (see p. 61): the Scuola della Carità (Confraternity of Charity) and the Scuola dei Pittori (Guild of Painters).

THE FAÇADE OF THE CHURCH OF SAN GIULIANO

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Church of San Giuliano (*San Zulian* in Venetian) • Campo San Giulian



A specific application of hermetic theories

The curious façade of the church of San Giuliano in the eponymous square contains Alessandro Vittoria's statue of Tommaso Rangone, an extraordinary Renaissance figure who made his fortune from a natural "remedy" for syphilis brought from

South America (see double page overleaf). Part of his wealth went to finance the 1553 restoration of this church, which was by then in a parlous state.

Rangone, shown seated on a sarcophagus and wearing a professorial gown, seems to be in the act of proffering part of his vast knowledge – an attitude befitting a far from modest man who was convinced of his own special destiny. The hemispherical space within which he is depicted is a symbol of the Heavens above the Earth. Hence, there is a conscious reference to the hermetic theories that enjoyed such a vogue in the Renaissance. Arguing that "all that which is above is just as that which is below", these ideas aimed to describe the action of cosmic and sidereal energies upon the sublunary world (see p. 186).

The globe to the right of Rangone is shown inclined at $44^{\circ} 30'$ (the latitude of Venice) and is engraved with the constellations as they were on the date of his birth (18 August 1493; his zodiac sign – Leo – is shown at the centre of the heavenly sphere). In combination with the cube on which it rests, this celestial globe symbolises motion and stability, Heaven and Earth, and the finite and the infinite. To the left, a terrestrial globe is shown on a table, together with some books. Inclined in the opposite direction to the celestial globe, it shows at its centre the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and South America (where Rangone's "remedy" had been discovered). Between these two globes, Tommaso is shown seated and holding a book in his left hand within which the word DEUS and the abbreviation HIQ (*Hinc Illincque*) can be read, which might be translated as meaning "on one side and the other" or "on each side". The message is that God can be contemplated in both the microcosm and microcosm, on Earth as in Heaven.

In his right hand, Rangone holds the plant discovered in South America, to which he would give the name of "Indian wood" or "holy wood". The divine presence thus manifests itself on both sides of the Atlantic, just as it does in both the celestial and terrestrial spheres.

There are three inscriptions on the façade. The one in Latin gives biographical and juridical information, that in Greek praises Rangone's cultural achievements, and that in Hebrew recalls the possibility of achieving on Earth the divine project of living to the age of 120 (see p. 60).



THE PINK COLUMNS OF THE DOGE'S PALACE 42



Why are two of the columns in the Doge's Palace pink?

In the upper gallery of the Doge's Palace, two pink columns stand amongst all the other white ones. Legend has it that the doge used to stand between these two during official ceremonies. It was also from here that death sentences were announced to the crowd below (the pink thus recalling the colour of blood).

The most common place for the gallows was between the two columns overlooking the waterfront in the Piazzetta. Across the far side of St. Mark's Square was the clock tower, and so the condemned man could see the exact time of his demise.

St. Mark's bell-tower itself was sometimes used for punishments, when a cage (*cheba*) containing convicted criminals was hung from a point half-way up the structure.

SIGHTS NEARBY

THE LAMPS OF THE DOGE'S PALACE 43

On the southwest side of the Doge's Palace are two small lamps that are always kept lit. They commemorate one of the rare occasions when the Republic admitted to a miscarriage of justice.

One morning, as he was going to his bakery, baker Piero Tasca tripped over an object lying on the gleaming flagstones. Bending down to pick it up, he saw it was the sheath of a dagger. A few feet away lay the body of a man. Tasca was arrested for his murder, ultimately "confessing" under torture and consequently executed on 22 March 1507, opposite the south side of the basilica. The real murderer was discovered shortly after his execution.

TRACES OF AN OLD WELL IN ST. MARK'S SQUARE 44

A dozen or so metres in front of Café Florian (slightly to the right), a discreet inscription marks the site of the last public well to exist in St. Mark's Square.

THE AXIS OF THE BASILICA 45

St. Mark's Basilica is not exactly aligned with St. Mark's Square. Under the arcades in the square, opposite Sotoportego de l'Arco Celeste, is a small metal medallion which indicates the exact line of the basilica's axis.

THE GARDEN OF THE CASINO DEGLI SPIRITI 17

- Piccola Casa della Provvidenza Cottolengo, Fondamenta Contarini 3539
 • Ring at the Porter's Lodge to ask the nuns if you can visit the garden, or contact Ms Mariagrazia Dammico at the Wigwam Club Giardini Storici, Venice: Tel/Fax 041 610791
 • giardinistorici.ve@wigwam.it • www.giardini-venezia.it



**Spirits
of a chosen few
or a gang
of forgers?**

Built for the cardinal and man-of-letters Gasparo Contarini in the first half of the 16th century, Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo contains one of the finest Renaissance gardens. Nowadays, the property is shared and run by two religious institutions: the Piccola Casa della Provvidenza Cottolengo and the Casa Cardinal Piazza. The garden of the Istituto Cottolengo extends over a fairly vast area and overlooks the north of the lagoon, near the water-basin of the Sacca della Misericórdia. It also contains a small building known as the *Casino degli Spiriti* (Summerhouse of the Spirits). And what a charming summerhouse it is! In its day, it was a place where men-of-letters, scholars and artists such as Titian, Sansovino and Aretino used to gather. The interior was even decorated by Guarana, Tiepolo and Fossati, but no trace of their work remains today. However, it is still an ideal space for creative reflection, to feel the inspiration of “the spirits of the chosen few” engaged in conversation and discussion. From the 16th to the 18th centuries, the *palazzo* and its wonderful garden were admired by numerous visitors, enchanted by the views over the lagoon and the *stanze di verzura* (literally “rooms of greenery”) which used to exist here. In effect, the rich collection of statues, columns and fountains must have made this place both magnificent and theatrical – well suited to the numerous parties and other entertainments held here. In the 19th century, the layout of the garden was changed entirely to make room for a wood store. Once abandoned, the Casino degli Spiriti soon acquired a certain air of mystery thanks to its isolated position within the lagoon. The sound of the wind and the lapping water caused lugubrious legends to spread, with people imagining ghosts bemoaning their fate within the walls of the garden or wandering forever over the still waters of the lagoon. More prosaically, a group of forgers took advantage of the legends that kept people away from the place and chose this as the site for their clandestine “mint”. After a remarkable project of restoration, the garden has to a large extent returned to its original layout, with its refinement being praised by such writers as D’Annunzio and Brodsky. Today, the silence and beauty of this legendary place once more evokes thoughts of the charming old summerhouse where the select few used to meet, inviting us to indulge in the pleasures of contemplation.

The chapel in the Istituto Cottolengo occupies what was once one of the main salons of the *palazzo*; there is still evidence of where the fireplace used to be. On the ceiling are frescoes (by Tiepolo's studio) celebrating the glories of the Contarini family.

OSPEDALETTO SALA DELLA MUSICA

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Barbaria de le Tole

Castello 6691

Vaporetto stop: Ospedale

Visits only on request • Admission: €60

Reservations by email at info@scalabovolo.org or by calling 041 271 9012



**A
little-known
beauty**

The church of Santa Maria dei Derelitti was built in 1575 on the site of a hospital that had existed since 1528. The complex was used to house the sick, the needy, the elderly, orphans and children whose families could not look after them.

Nicknamed the “Ospedaletto” (little hospital) because of its small size, the institution is said to have been based on a project by Andrea Palladio. Thanks to the generosity of the hospital’s benefactors during the 17th and



18th centuries, the church was endowed with valuable works by Giambattista Tiepolo, Johann Carl Loth (known as Carlo Lotti in Italy) and Pietro Liberi, as well as the spectacular façade by Baldassare Longhena.

The Ospedaletto was also renowned for its tradition of choirs of orphaned girls, who received their musical education from distinguished teachers. This is clear from the presence of the 1751 pipe organ by Pietro Nacchini, above the high altar, and from the fact that the hospital had a Hall of Music.

Venetian aristocrat Girolamo Miani (later St. Jerome Emiliani) had instigated this literary and artistic training of orphans, as well as teaching them singing, a method that was later imitated throughout the city.

Since the foundation of the hospital, the girls who found a home there had sung in the church during Mass. Their reputation quickly won over the city. The donations collected during performances provided the girls with a dowry so that they could eventually leave the Ospedaletto and marry.

The girls were also taught to play an instrument, and in this way a proper orchestra (up to 40 members) was formed. This lies at the origins of the Venetian tradition of female youth choirs.

The 16th century saw the development of the Ospedaletto School of Music, a socio-educational phenomenon that other hospitals soon adopted by welcoming orphans, to the point where a fierce competition developed between the various choirs.

To encourage these musical performances, a new space was added in 1776 – in place of the Ospedaletto’s kitchens, a Hall of Music with excellent acoustics was built. In 1777, this little-known hall was decorated with frescoes by Jacopo Guarana (a student of Tiepolo), in collaboration with Agostino Mengozzi-Colonna. They were the last representatives of a pictorial tradition that had reached its high point in the 18th century with the works of Tiepolo.

Note the splendid oval staircase and the equally magnificent Longhena courtyard, with the original well coping and a loggia with statues of the Four Seasons.



CURIOUS DEATHS AT CA' DARIO

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• Vaporetto stop: Salute



A deadly palazzo

With its fine polychrome marble façade, Ca' Dario is one of the most charming *palazzi* in Venice. It is also one of the most mysterious. It seems that purchasing the building can very quickly lead to the ruin or violent death of the owner.

The earliest of such stories associated with the building date back to the very first owner, Giovanni Dario, the Venetian ambassador to Constantinople, who had the place built in the 15th century by architect Pietro Lombardo. Even if he himself did not live there – it served as the home of his daughter, who was married to nobleman Vincenzo Barbaro – Giovanni Dario soon lost his political influence, whilst his son-in-law went bankrupt and his daughter died of a broken heart.

In the 17th century, the palazzo was occupied for a time by a descendant of the Barbaro family, Giacomo Barbaro, who was murdered in Candia (Crete) when he was governor there.

The very next owner, the rich Armenian diamond-merchant Arbit Abdol, lost his entire fortune and died a ruined man.

The story continues in the 19th century. Rawdon Brown, an English scientist who lived in the palazzo from 1832 to 1842, would – like his lover – commit suicide, a ruined man.

And in the 20th century, the American Charles Briggs had to flee the country as the result of a homosexual scandal; his lover committed suicide in Mexico shortly afterwards.

In the 1970s, the palazzo was home to Filippo Giordano delle Lanze, whose lover beat him to death there with a statuette.

The next owner, Fabrizio Ferrari, may not have died, but he did lose a large part of his fortune; his sister Nicoletta, however, was found dead in a field. And again, the famous Italian industrialist Raul Gardini committed suicide soon after buying the palazzo.

There was one last incident. After a serious car accident, tenor Mario del Monaco gave up his plans of buying the palazzo – as did Woody Allen when he learnt of the curse that seems to hang over the place.

Now the building has been bought by a developer who intends to turn it into apartments.

Henri de Régnier, author of *Altana or Venetian Life*, spent a lot of time writing on the *altana* (roof terrace) of Ca' Dario.

THE CASA DEL PROFESSORE

Via Terranova, 79
Burano



**A house
without colour
on the most
colourful island
in the lagoon**

Located in a less-frequented part of the island, the house at number 79 Via Terranova strikes a note of sober contrast on an island famous for its colour.

The building was home to artist Remigio Barbaro, known as *Il Professore*, who lived here until his death in 2005. A sculptor of some renown, he was also known as “the hermit of the island”, his reserve leading him to shun mondaine social occasions. Another nickname earned by his simple and frugal lifestyle was “the Franciscan sculptor”. Indeed, he had a famous line from St. Francis’ *Canticle of All Creatures* engraved on his house: LAUDATO SIE MI SIGNORE CUM TUCTE LE TUE CREATURE (“Praised be thee, O Lord, with all thy creatures”).

It is no accident that the emblematic statue of *Il Poverello di Assisi* stands in the centre of the small garden before Barbaro’s house, along with a plaster copy of the bust of composer Baldassare Galuppi and a powerful work of sculpture in terracotta depicting a man hung upside down. The latter is a replica of the Monument to the Dead in the town of Santa Lucia di Piave.

The house, which unfortunately is not open to visitors at the moment, also contains other works by the artist. *Il Professore*, in fact, loved to surround himself with *objets d’art* and precious collections of works, forming a random assembly of drawings, sketches and sculpture in terracotta or bronze. In a career spanning more than 70 years, he created a sort of home-studio, a veritable museum of his work in various media, each one of which is imbued with a powerful sense of spirituality and discernable experience.

When Barbaro died in 2005, the contents of the house were catalogued, the first stage in the creation of a home-museum – a project that was very dear to the artist’s heart.

In Burano, the main works by *Il Professore* can be seen in Campo Baldassare Galuppi (where the original bust of the famous 18th-century composer stands) and on the boat-stop quayside (a statue of a young woman entitled *Waiting for Peace*). Other sculptures can be found locally at the Procuratie of St. Mark’s, Santa Fosca church, the Torcello Basilica, the monastery of San Francesco del Deserto, Cavallino, the entrance to the Mazzorbo cemetery, Mestre, the Venice Lido and the island of San Michele. Pieces can also be found in numerous private collections in Italy and abroad – in London, for example.

