















NORBERT WOLF

THE
RENAISSANCE
CITIES

Art in Florence,
Rome and Venice

PRESTEL

Munich · London · New York

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I

An Era
Invents Itself





II

The Trecento –
A Prelude



DELBICA

ESPAÑA

LOBI

ERTHRAEA

DEIN
IOATHA
ENAY

ETEC



IV

ROME

Roma Aeterna,
the Eternal City





The High Renaissance

With 54,000 inhabitants, Rome's order of magnitude around 1500 was that of a mid-sized city.²⁹ Rome lacked the flourishing export trade of Florence or Venice. Most of the locals were craftsmen or offered services for tourists or pilgrims, manufactured souvenirs and devotional items, sold massive quantities of wine or catered in other ways to the physical well-being of the foreign envoys and petitioners at the papal court. The art now reaching its classical height was found in the Vatican, which in the early fifteenth century had supplanted the Lateran as the residence of the Pontifex Maximus. In the city itself there were initially only a few sensations, such as the giant palace of Cardinal Raffaele Riario (Palazzo della Cancelleria), begun in 1489 and converted into the state chancery in 1517.

With his sure sense for brilliant artists, it was Julius II who set in motion the full unfolding of the High Renaissance, and who conferred upon Bramante, Michelangelo and the young Raphael the greatest tasks to be awarded at the time. In one likeness, a masterpiece of European portrait painting, Raphael shows this pope as a wise, humble holder of the office, and also as one who refused to cut his beard until he had driven the French invaders from Italy (fig. 101). The public saw this likeness of a pope mellowed with age in Santa Maria del Popolo; later copies were presented as posthumous memorials in other Roman churches.³⁰ But most contemporaries emphasised Julius' opposing traits, those of the power-seeker, who ruthlessly deployed his spiritual weapons – excommunication and interdict – in the balance of international politics, in the conflicts between Frenchmen, Germans, Spaniards and Venetians fought out on Italian soil. Correspondingly the media, above all in Protestant Germany and adversarial France, demonised him as the “war pope”, who, sword in hand, led his marauding army into battle. Even if that was propaganda, Julius' Caesaropapal

conception of the office cannot be denied. It manifested itself already when he emerged from the conclave as victor in 1503 and chose not to take the papal name of Sixtus in remembrance of his uncle, but rather a name invoking the early Christian pope Julius I and even more Gaius Julius Caesar. After the reconquest of Bologna in 1506/07 for the Patrimony of Saint Peter (Patrimonium Petri), the inscription on the commemorative medallion named him, tellingly, “IULIUS CAESAR PONT. II.”. Under his pontificate, went the message, the ‘golden age’ of Rome inaugurated by the Julian imperial house of Caesar and Augustus would dawn again.

He also attached this symbolism to the antique sculptures he collected in the Vatican from the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the Cortile delle Statue, laid out for him by Bramante.³¹ Found in a vineyard not far from the Colosseum in 1506, the *Laocoon* group formed the focus and elicited storms of enthusiasm from the artists, especially the young Michelangelo. The following year, Julius purchased *Hercules with the Infant Telephos*, who at the time was thought to be Aeneas. Added to this were a *Venus Felix*, an *Apollo* (*Apollo Belvedere*) and a reclining female figure that contemporaries saw not as *Ariadne* but Cleopatra. The ensemble thus encompassed the Trojan epic cycle described in Virgil's *Aeneid*: Laocoon, whose death initiated the destruction of Troy; Aeneas, whose flight from Troy enabled the founding of Rome; Venus, the mother of Aeneas and ancestress of the Julian-Claudian imperial house; Apollo, who played the divine helper both in the Trojan War as well as at Actium in 31 BCE, when Augustus won the naval battle against Cleopatra and her lover Anthony and seized sole control in the empire. Julius II thus inserted himself into the epic cycle of Roman history, declaring himself the patron of a paradisaical age!

Fig. 101
RAPHAEL
Portrait of Julius II, 1512/13
Oil on wood, 108 × 80.7 cm
London, The National Gallery

The New Saint Peter's Basilica and the Tomb of Julius II

On 18 April, 1506 the foundation stone was laid for the new Church of Saint Peter, which, over the course of almost two centuries, stimulated European architectural fantasy to new soaring flights of fancy. The realisation of the gigantic project did not follow any unified objective, but rather emerged from the “fevered leaps of diverging ideas” that Horst Bredekamp attributes to a “principle of productive destruction”.³² For the new cathedral was epoch-making not only artistically, but equally in terms of ecclesiastical and world history. Because of it, one of the most venerable cultic sites of Western Christendom had to yield, the old Saint Peter's Church, the burial place of the Prince of the Apostles, dating back to the time of Constantine; and, secondly, the new building devoured such sums of money that the pope had letters begging for money circulating even as far as Henry VIII's England and installed a system of indulgences whose revenues flowed into the ravenous construction site. As is well known, Martin Luther's argument for the necessity of Church reform was based not least on the unscrupulous commercialisation of the indulgence – and the nascent Protestant confessions would see Saint Peter's as a disgraceful symbol of the ‘papistic den of iniquity’ of Rome.

To understand the history of this “first temple of the world”, in the words of Raphael, and the “largest construction site ever seen”³³ it is necessary to go back to the first two decades of the fifteenth century and consider the architectural intention together with the plan for a hypertrophic, multi-storey, free-standing tomb, conceived to be set with monumental sculptures by Michelangelo. The niches of the lower storey were intended to house fourteen goddesses of victory triumphing over their enemies, slain upon the ground – embodiments of a dream of worldly sovereignty that could be justified religiously only with difficulty. Standing on the pilasters framing the niches, twenty “prisoners” (*prigioni*) were planned – symbols of the virtues and the arts. The upper storey would have formed a stepped superstructure between four statues, with bronze reliefs depicting Julius' historical successes; at the very top would have lain or been enthroned the sculpture of the pope, over three metres high and supported by figures of heaven and earth. Since the Tomb of Julius was never realised either in this form or in accordance with one of the subsequent

alternative suggestions,³⁴ two of Michelangelo's finished statues can at least give a hint of the sculptural power with which the monument would have filled the space around it:

The *Dying Slave* (fig. 102) acquired its straining forces through an artistic process that took the planar surfaces of the marble block as its starting point. From the bonds of the matter, as Michelangelo always emphasised, the final figure was to be ‘freed’ by the chisel penetrating from the foremost level layer by layer into the depths. Many of his figures rebel against the constraints of the stone in Titanic bodily rotations and torsions. But unlike the *Rebellious Slave*,³⁵ which also ended up in the Louvre, the *Dying Slave*, intended for a central pillar of the tomb, seems to have given up the fight. Behind him can be seen a (largely unfinished) monkey with a round object, possibly a mirror. The almost unreal beauty, the erotic allure of the marble-white, naked body may be inspired by images of the martyr Sebastian, but the dying son in the *Laocoon* group surely also had an effect on the body position and the expression of suffering. But who is this ‘prisoner’? Someone tired to death, a sleeper, someone awakening – or is he an allusion, with his ape and mirror possibly signifying artistic mimesis, to the paralysis into which the *artes* sink upon the death of their great patron, the pope?

Measured against the *Dying Slave*, *Moses*, created presumably around the same time, is bursting with vitality, brought forth from a furore of dialectically conveyed motifs of tension, out of the “irrepressible will to act” (Frank Zöllner) (fig. 105).³⁶ The muscular upper arm and the hands' overstrained grip in the snaky, downward flowing strands of beard, the adversarial legs – one propped like a column as if the bundle of clothing demanded such enormous weight-bearing capacity, the other set back as if preparing to leap – all is animated matter. In this *Moses*, in this man of will and action, Michelangelo gives sensate form to the Caesarean pope.

For the tomb's location, Michelangelo originally had in mind a massive choir space, which would be added on to the still extant Old Saint Peter's Church. But then came Bramante and transformed the context, which had developed for the benefit of a gigantic sculptural work, into an even more gigantic architectural one.

At the end of 1499 Donato Bramante left Milan for Rome. One of his first works there, finished in 1502, was the Tempietto in the monastery courtyard of San Pietro in Montorio (fig. 103), one of the most beautiful central-plan buildings of the Renaissance, commissioned by the Spanish royal couple Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The round chapel rises above a subterranean cultic site, where Peter was supposedly crucified under Nero. Its hollow, narrow cella is surrounded by a peristyle, whose width corresponds to its height (without the dome). The ambulatory uses columns with a Tuscan order (the early Roman version of the Doric order).³⁷ Both the Doric and the Tuscan had been considered since antiquity to be ‘masculine’ orders and thus, according to Christian exegesis, were ideally suited to a martyrdom of the apostle-prince. Its ‘archaism’ was intended additionally to affirm the authenticity of the cult site.³⁸ Beyond the semantic references, this early building shows that it was Bramante who was the first to once again fully master the Vitruvian architectural vocabulary and translate it into High Renaissance forms.

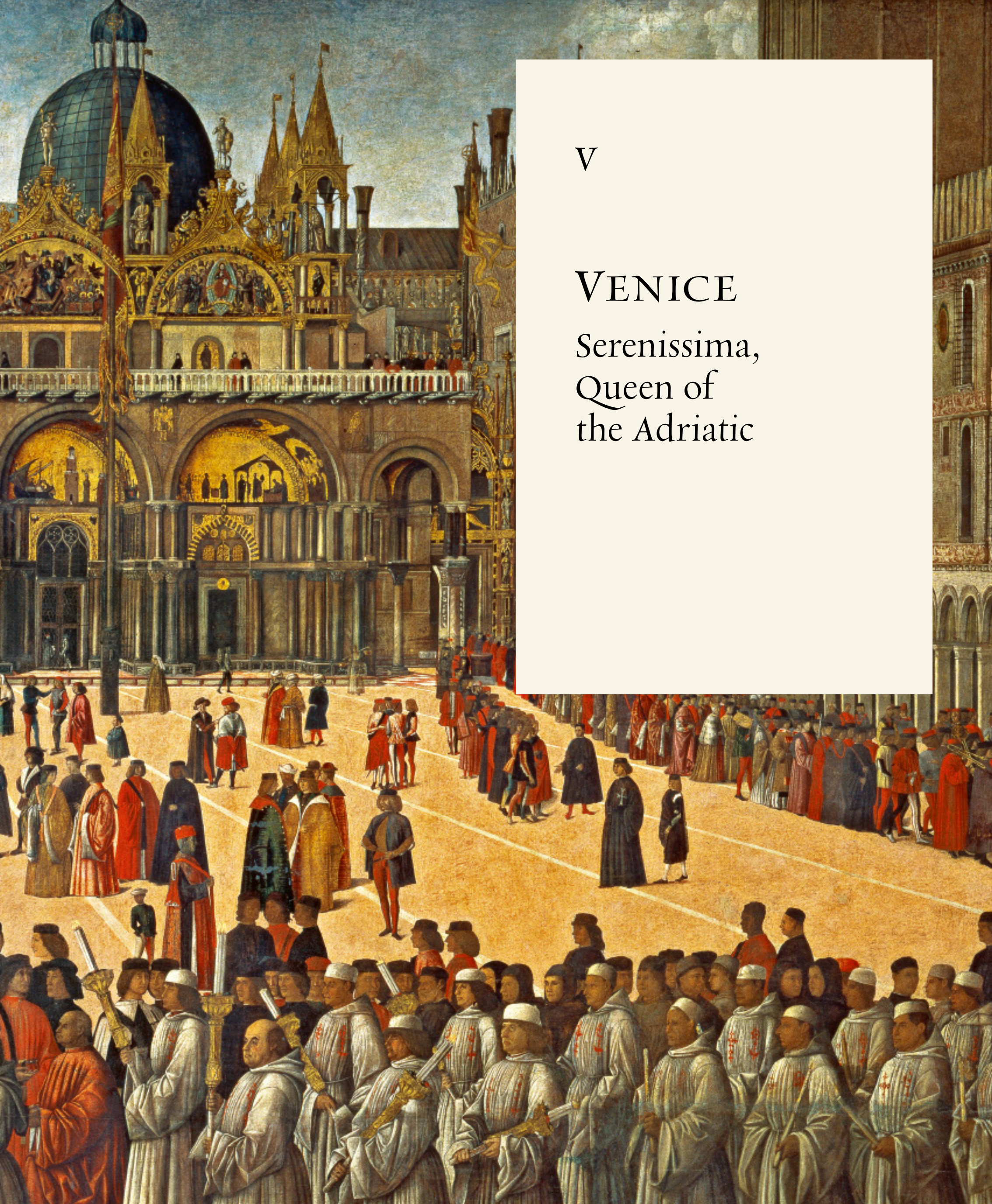
It was this very same Bramante, who in 1505 sought to convince Julius II to give up the Constantinian Church of Saint Peter – and also its choir with the location for the tomb as envisioned by Michelangelo – and to replace it with a new complex, probably a combination between a domed central-plan and a longitudinal building: for, Bramante’s famous parchment plan does not necessarily have to be completed into a central plan by means of its mirror image; it has been trimmed below, and it is possible that a nave was planned there (fig. 107).

Other architects, such as Giuliano da Sangallo, attempted to intervene in the planning process. An overall system was lacking when the foundation stone was laid in 1506,³⁹ but it was clear that the existing church would at least be largely demolished in favour of a grandiose successor. A massive dome was to form the “counter-image to the Pantheon and the Capitoline Hill” that would have “magnetically drawn the lines of vision and the pathways towards itself and silenced the intellectuals’ traditional laments about Rome’s lost splendour”.⁴⁰ But Julius quickly realised that it would not be possible financially to manage both the new Saint Peter’s Basilica and the tomb at the same time.



Fig.102
MICHELANGELO
Dying Slave, 1513–16
 Marble, height: 215 cm
 Paris, Musée du Louvre





V

VENICE

Serenissima,
Queen of
the Adriatic



Fig. 141
JACOPO DE' BARBARI (?)
Bird's-Eye View of Venice,
 1498-1500
 Woodcut, printed from 6 blocks,
 overall height: 137 × 284 cm
 Nuremberg, Germanisches
 Nationalmuseum, Graphische
 Sammlung

In October 1500 the Nuremberg-based businessman Anton Kolb secured a marketing privilege from the Venetian government for a singular project: a giant woodcut with a bird's-eye view of the city of Venice (fig. 141). The design of this extremely high-quality topographical panorama has been attributed to Jacopo de' Barbari, an Italian painter, who, according to the sources, carved out his career primarily in Germany and Burgundy.¹ In minute detail, the map illustrates the location of the churches, monasteries, palaces and closely packed houses; the squares, streets, bridges and dockyards, as well as the only large open spaces, the Piazza San Marco and the Arsenal. It illuminates this city's symbiosis with the sea, the significance of the roughly thirty-seven kilometres of canals, which until the end of the sixteenth century would be spanned by over four hundred bridges.

Venice was not founded in antiquity, nor – in contrast to how one myth about the city would have it – was it the creation of Saint Mark. Rather, in the second half of the sixth century, inhabitants of the mainland had sought refuge on the islands of the lagoon from Germanic invaders. Their settlement was initially under the control of the Byzantine Empire, whose exarch (governor) resided in Ravenna. From around 700, Venice's government was headed by a *dux* (from which the title “doge” is derived), who ultimately relocated his official seat from the Lido to a small group of islands named *rivus altus* (“high bank” – “Rialto”). In the middle of

the ninth century, Venice largely emancipated itself from the Eastern Roman Empire; a hundred years later the city had grown into an international commercial and maritime power and had become the predominant port on the Adriatic.

The maritime power's imperial hunger continuously increased. In 1202 crusaders wanted to set off for Islamic Egypt from the Venetian Lagoon and on Venetian ships. Venice, which had proudly borne the two-hundred-year-old title of “beloved daughter of Byzantium”; Venice, which with the consecration of Saint Mark's Basilica in 1094 had quoted the models of the Church of the Holy Apostles and Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, took advantage of the Christian adventurers' financial difficulties and prompted them first to occupy the Istrian and Dalmatian coasts and to conquer Constantinople from there. In April 1204 the immeasurably rich imperial city on the Bosphorus was taken and opened up to plundering. The Venetians dragged away what was precious to decorate their squares, houses of God and palaces at home, including the façade of Saint Mark's with the wonderful four antique bronze horses (fig. 159). But more important than this loot were the far-reaching trade privileges that Venice secured from the Latin Empire, founded on Byzantine territory, as well as the acquisition of entire coastal stretches and islands, including Crete. In addition to the Mediterranean, in the quattrocento another region for expansion emerged. The ‘Queen of the Adriatic’ strode

into the neighbouring mainland, the terra firma with cities like Vicenza, Padua, Verona, Brescia and Bergamo, and from the fifteenth century also into Friuli. It is revealing that from 1440, La Serenissima – as the Republic of Saint Mark referred to itself after the “most serene princes” (*serenissimus princeps*), the doges – issued two typed of decrees, those of the *senato mar* and those of the *senato terra*. The ruling elite fought personally at sea, the wars on land were conducted by mercenary armies.

After the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the maritime power Venice entered into a conflict with the Ottoman Empire that threatened its existence. Important Aegean bases were lost in a protracted war. “But worse would come. Year by year ‘raiders’, a Turkish special unit of irregular light calvary, would break into the bordering lands and lay waste to them. Sometimes the glow of fires in the villages of Friuli could be seen at night from the tower of Saint Mark’s.” The peace of 1479 was purchased at the cost of massive tribute payments. Despite this, “at the end of the quattrocento the Republic of Saint Mark’s was outwardly resplendent once more. A decade after the war’s end the annual state revenue again amounted to almost a million ducats. This was roughly a third higher than that of Milan, three times as high as Florence, almost five times as high as the Papal States, and about ten times as high as their bitter competitor Genoa.”²

A census from the year 1540 registered 129,971 inhabitants. In 1576, shortly before a bad surge of the plague, it was as high as 170,000, at the end down to 120,000; among them around 4.5 per cent were aristocrats and roughly the same number were priests, monks and nuns. There were 1,500 Jews living in the ghetto.³ In addition there was talk of 11,000 prostitutes and courtesans. The latter is surely terribly exaggerated and may be based on misunderstandings. For in 1494 the Milanese canon Pietro Casola got extremely worked up about the toupees of thoroughly honourable Venetian women, about their garish make-up and the large amount of bare skin they displayed while walking around.⁴ A painting by Vittore Carpaccio long bore the title *The Cour-*

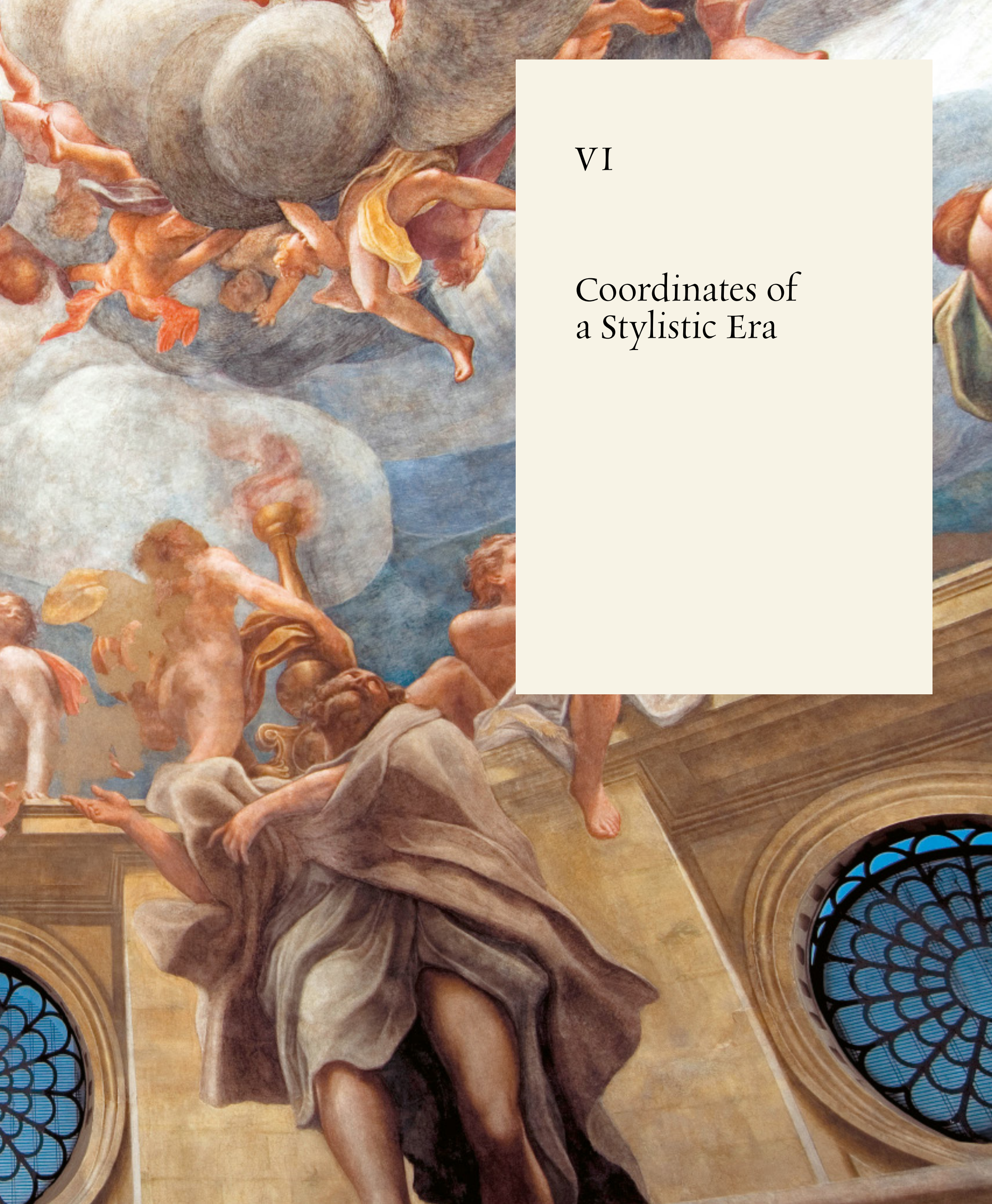
tesans, today it is called *Two Venetian Ladies* (fig. 142). It thus is not an image of love for sale. To the contrary, details symbolise the two ladies’ chastity (the handkerchief, pearl necklace), marital fidelity (myrtle, orange, dove, peacock, slippers), alertness (greyhound) and companionableness (small lapdog). The tension of their posture is a response to the fowler shown in a pendant painting (in a private collection), whose return they anticipate.⁵

The proud city created for itself an equally proud myth: *Venezia, sempre virgine!* The city claimed to have been founded on the day of the Annunciation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, on 25 March of the year 421, and was thus from its very origins a Christian and not an antique-pagan foundation. The later theft of Saint Mark’s relics from Muslim Alexandria made the sacred aura glow even more brightly. Stereotypically, in sixteenth-century writings the fact that the ‘Ruler of the Seas’ had never been vanquished was compared with Mary’s virginity. In sermons and political propaganda Venice is encountered as a “Marian body”, whose lap was on the Rialto; indeed, the Rialto was compared to Mary’s womb, which carried the Redeemer within it. And just as King Solomon’s palace stood directly beside the temple, so, too, was the Palazzo Ducale directly attached to the doge’s chapel of San Marco – Venice was the visible continuation of the salvation-historical task of the city of God, of Biblical Jerusalem.⁶



Fig.142
VITTORE CARPACCIO
Two Venetian Ladies, c.1495
Oil and tempera on wood,
94×63 cm
Venice, Museo Correr





VI

Coordinates of
a Stylistic Era





The thought and imagery of Roman antiquity, the harking back to antique ideals, was undoubtedly an essential aspect in the phenomenology of Renaissance culture. But the exemplary function of ‘classical’ antiquity should not be understood in the sense of an immutable, normative canon set down once and for all. As we have seen, opposing such an explanation are the many voices beginning already in the trecento that pointed out the possibility of drawing from the exemplary reservoir of antiquity but ‘modernising’ it and elevating it to a new level that looked towards and opened up the future.

The Italian Renaissance must be comprehended as a cultural fabric into which socio-economic relations and the history of mentalities enter as much as the western European inheritance of antiquity and Christianity. The subcategories – such as the reception of antiquity – acquire their proper explanatory value only by means of concretising connections, not when they are absolutized after the fact. This is equally true of formal-structural features, of art’s innovative self-understanding and of a series of characteristic semantic fields.

Fig. 205

LEONARDO DA VINCI
Last Supper, c. 1495–97
Detail from fig. 207