



Pompeo Girolamo Batoni, *The Triumph of Venice*, 1737, oil on canvas, 68 5/8 × 112 5/8 in., Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation

As we sailed further on, we came upon the famous, great, wealthy, and noble city of Venice, the mistress of the Mediterranean, standing in wondrous fashion in the midst of the waters, with lofty towers, great churches, splendid houses and palaces. We were astonished to see such tall structures with their foundations in the water.

—Felix Fabri (circa 1441–1502), a German Dominican priest passing through the city in 1480

I have, many and many a time, thought since, of this strange Dream upon the water: half-wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE.

—Charles Dickens in *Pictures from Italy*, 1846

Batoni's *Triumph of Venice* was commissioned in Rome by Marco Foscarini (1696–1763), a member of one of Venice's most powerful families and a learned historian, poet, and collector of contemporary art, while serving as Venetian ambassador to the papal court. Its purpose was to commemorate one of the great moments in the history of Venetian culture, the first two decades of the 16th century, when the fine arts flourished during a time of peace under the leadership of Doge Leonardo Loredan (1436–1531; r. 1501–1531), the city's chief magistrate and politician. The patron himself, Foscarini, went on to become doge in the 1760s, three decades before the republic of Venice and remainder of the Italian peninsula fell to Napoleon Bonaparte's army as part of the wave of conquests that resulted in the geopolitical

restructuring of the European continent and mass dispersal of artistic treasures across borders and seas.

Doge Loredan appears at the center of the composition wearing traditional Venetian ducal attire, including fur cape and horned cap, standing next to a woman driving a triumphal carriage pulled by two winged lions—a personification of Venice. The doge gestures toward putti presenting bunches of wheat, grapes, and other fruits to a woman reclining in the lower right corner, who represents Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture.

To Venice's right is Minerva, goddess of wisdom and patroness of arts and trades, who points to putti bearing attributes of architecture, music and drama, painting, sculpture, and poetry. Neptune, god of the sea and adoptive mythological patron of the Venetian Republic, shows the city to Mars, the patron of Rome. Above Venice are the figures of Fame, with trumpet and laurel branch, and double-faced History, the older face looking back toward Venice's glorious past while the younger contemplates the city's equally admirable present.

To the right of Fame, Mercury, messenger of the gods, presents a history of the Republic's achievements to a group of ancient sages and historians, among them the famed Greek poet Homer (writer of the epic poems the *Illiad* and the *Odysey*), who emerges from the entrance to Hades, mythological kingdom of the dead, as indicated by the presence of the menacing three-headed dog Cerberus, guardian of the underworld.

In the background is a view of Venice's celebrated "Molo," the waterfront area at the entrance to the Grand Canal near Piazza San Marco and the Doge's Palace, two of the most recognizable urban architectural monuments in Europe.

To celebrate a cultural moment that occurred some two hundred years in the past might seem a peculiar choice for an artistic commission of any era. However clear parallels existed between the circumstances in which the republic found itself in the 1730s and Venice's earlier geopolitical situation during Loredan's rule. Chief among these was freedom from war or hostilities, a condition that can lead to artistic flowerings. These parallels would have been apparent to Foscarini and 18th-century visitors to the Palazzo Venezia in central Rome where the painting hung after its completion in 1737, then the Venetian embassy and now a major art museum.

—Lyle Humphrey, *Associate Curator of European Art and Collections History*