



VENICE

REVEALED

A VIEWER'S GUIDE

Athenä:



EPISODE 1 THE CITY AS ARCHITECTURE

Highlights

- Venice features many styles of architecture: Byzantine (7th-13th c.), Gothic (13th-14th c.), Renaissance (14th-15th c.), Baroque (16th-17th c.), and Rococo (18th c.).
- Time, climate change, and regular floods constantly pose a threat to Venetian buildings.
- Many buildings embody the Venetian concern for artifice and outward appearance. Often, beautiful façades do not reflect the structures behind them, which may be cold, cramped, or even crumbling.
- Many observers have associated Venice with death, decay, and dissolution; the buildings evince the splendor and “sweet melancholy” of transience.

Questions to Consider

1. In your opinion, what makes Venetian architecture unique?
2. How do you feel about the tremendous effort and expense required to preserve Venice’s architecture?
3. Why do you think Venice’s beauty carries such strong associations with death?

EPISODE 2 THE CITY AS ART

Highlights

- With soft light reflecting off the water and sightlines resembling those in theatrical sets, Venice has always attracted artists.
- Venetian artists developed a fast, seemingly improvisational style of painting known as *prestezza*.

EPISODE 4 THE CITY AS THEATRE

- The Venetian conception of art as a communal enterprise, rather than an individual one, naturally springs from the city's political, religious, and commercial life.

Questions to Consider

1. Which of the artists or paintings shown in this episode affect you most powerfully? Why?
2. As Ackroyd explains, after a fire destroyed the frescoes in the Doges' Palace, late-16th-century artists resurrected lost symbols and invented a history of the city. How does art contribute to mythmaking in American culture? In other cultures?

EPISODE 3 THE CITY AS MUSIC

Highlights

- Venice has a long, rich association with music; it's the birthplace of the madrigal, a center for religious composition, and a capital of opera.
- For four decades in the early 18th century, Antonio Vivaldi served as director, composer, and administrator of the choir at the Ospedale della Pietà, a Venetian orphanage for girls. The exuberance, spontaneity, and spirituality of his music perfectly express the Venetian temperament.

Questions to Consider

1. As you listen to the women of the Schola Pietatis Antonio Vivaldi, what particular characteristics of the music move you?
2. Do you think Vivaldi ever felt a conflict between the spirituality of his priestly life and the artifice of opera and secular performances? If so, how do you imagine he reconciled the two?

Highlights

- Through the centuries, Venice's religious rituals and political governance have absorbed the theatricality of its operas, street performances, and stage plays.
- Historians trace the roots of opera to commedia dell'arte—a kind of street theatre with stock characters and improvised dialogue.
- During Carnival, everyday life becomes theatre. Historically, Carnival has allowed Venetians to temporarily adopt new identities, easing tensions among social classes and releasing social pressures.

Questions to Consider

1. In what sense do the political and religious rituals of other cultures exhibit theatricality?
2. How does Venetian Carnival differ from similar celebrations in New Orleans and elsewhere?
3. How has this series changed or deepened your appreciation of Venice? What is your lasting impression of the city?

AVENUES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Companion Book for the Series

Ackroyd, Peter. *Venice: Pure City*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2009.

General Resources

Barbaro, Paolo. *Venice Revealed: An Intimate Portrait*. Trans. Tami Calliope. South Royalton, Vt.: Steerforth Italia/Steerforth Press, 2001.

Garrett, Martin. *Venice: A Cultural and Literary Companion*. New York: Interlink Books, 2001.

Goy, Richard. *Venice: The City and Its Architecture*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997.

Hibbert, Christopher. *Venice: The Biography of a City*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989.

Quill, Sarah. *Ruskin's Venice: The Stones Revisited*. London: Lund Humphries, 2003.

VENICE REMEMBERED

A conversation with Peter Ackroyd

In late winter 2010, Peter Ackroyd talked about filming the documentary series and his favorite memories of the city.

Q: *What first drew you to Venice as a subject?*

Ackroyd: I had been going there for many years, and I've always been interested in the culture and life of the city. I had just finished *London: The Biography*, and I wanted to turn my attention to a completely different city. In many respects, of course, there are vague similarities between London and Venice. They were both built upon trade and money and power. But on the whole they represent two different cultural traditions.



Q: *Your book on which this series is based is titled Venice: Pure City. In what sense is Venice “pure”?*

Ackroyd: It's a city and only a city. Unlike most other cities in the world, Venice didn't grow from rural, agricultural, or feudal roots. It was always planned as a city, and it has always remained a city. So it became a kind of case study, something that you can peer at under a microscope and trace all of its lineaments.

Q: *What were the biggest challenges in adapting the book to a script?*

Ackroyd: The challenges weren't as great as you might imagine. Alastair [Layzell, the producer and director] picked the aspects of the book that most appealed to him in terms of visual power. And, curiously, the material divided itself into four sections without a great deal of effort. I teased out all the various relevant passages and put them together as a coherent whole.

Q: *Were there any places that you wanted to film, but couldn't?*

Ackroyd: I don't think that there were. I went to Venice three or four times with Alastair and the film crew. But they returned on many other occasions to film other bits. For example, they filmed some of the Carnival. I myself have never attended a Venetian Carnival.

Q: *Is that a regret of yours?*

Ackroyd: No, not really. I don't care for the modern manifestations of Carnival, from what I've heard about them. I was much more interested in the traditional forms that flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Q: *What were your most memorable experiences while filming?*

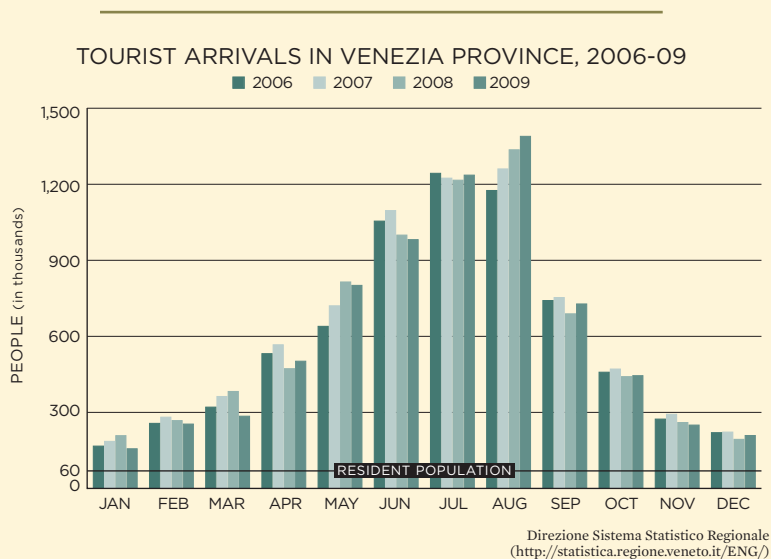
Ackroyd: I was particularly pleased to go to La Fenice, the Venetian theatre, because when I was researching the book, I was unable to get in there. The funny thing about filming in Venice was that I actually got to meet Venetians for the first time. In my research, I had relied upon personal travel and on a variety of literary sources. But until I made the series, I hadn't actually conversed with Venetians to any great extent. In a sense, this was an opportunity for me to explore the human face of Venice. I was taken by their fervor. Guerrino Lovato [the mask maker],

Micky White [the Vivaldi scholar], and others are great enthusiasts for the idea of Venice.

Q: *What are your most memorable experiences of Venice from other visits?*

Ackroyd: My most memorable experience, I suppose, was of the high water, the *acqua alta*, which took place on one visit about three years ago. The ground floor of my hotel was submerged. I have memories of Venice in the snow, when a raging blizzard fell upon the city. I have memories of Venice in the fog, when the mist drives in from the sea and obscures the streets of the city. My abiding memories of Venice are associated with the weather—the atmosphere and the sea.

Q: *Apart from fighting crowds, how has the number of tourists changed the experience of Venice for you?*



Ackroyd: I suppose that tourism is the city's ultimate destiny, isn't it? Venice is in decline, from a purely demographic point of view. It may actually become the first dead living city in the world, a sort of museum, a city populated entirely by tourists and those who service them. I don't think that's a matter for regret or nostalgia. Venice has always sold something. You know, once it sold spice and gilt. Now it's selling itself as a historical experience.

Q: *What advice would you give viewers who plan to visit the city?*

Ackroyd: One of the great lesser-known areas is the Dorsoduro, which is a southwestern district bordering the Canale della Giudecca. It's an area not as heavily frequented by tourists as others, and it contains some delightful courtyards and churches. And bring a good pair of shoes.

THE GREAT FLOOD OF 1966

The environmental disaster that spurred Venice to action

Venice has flooded regularly for centuries, but the great flood of 1966 changed the way residents think about *acqua alta*. On Friday, November 4, it started like any other flood, with water gurgling up drain holes and between pavement stones. Before the morning tide had receded into the lagoon, however, the afternoon tide came in, pouring over the *fondamenta* (paved streets along the water) and covering the Piazza San Marco. The city's oil storage tanks ruptured, and a minor seabed tremor triggered a mini-tsunami. By the end of the day, Venice lay under more than six feet of water, stinking muck, and black sludge. The worst flood in the city's history marred thousands of art treasures, inflicted \$6 billion in damages, and left 5,000 Venetians homeless.

Many people see the 1966 flood as a harbinger of even worse disasters. Since 1900, Venice has sunk at least nine inches due to rising sea levels

and the depletion of the aquifer under the lagoon by mainland industries early in the century. Furthermore, the lagoon's high salinity has corroded the foundations of many buildings. Historically, a string of barrier islands protected the 200 mi.² lagoon from the sea, and surrounding streams replenished the fresh water. But human modifications—especially a deep channel dug for oil tankers in the 1960s—have altered tidal patterns and increased the salt content. Nowadays, the *acqua alta* comes almost daily during winter. And if climate change pushes sea levels higher, the city may be uninhabitable by the end of the century.

Venetians have responded to the crisis in ways large and small. They've raised many walkways and streets in the city, while sirens warn of seriously rising water. But by far the most ambitious—and controversial—project is a system of 78 inflatable gates to control tidal flooding. Nicknamed MOSE (for *modulo sperimentale elettromeccanico*), it includes a new breakwater, ship locks, and even an artificial island. But the real key is the gates. In theory, they will lie flat on the seabed at inlets and inflate on command to dam water flowing into the lagoon. Plans call for inflation when tides rise 3.6 feet above average, which now happens about five times a year.

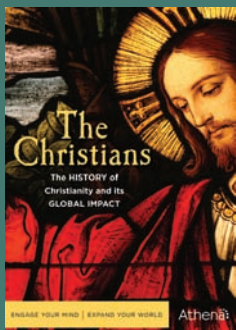
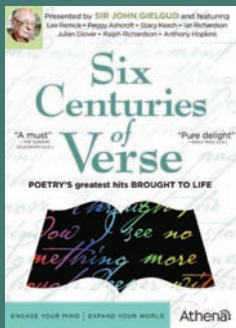
Skeptics have questioned MOSE's cost (approx. \$6 billion), environmental consequences, and overall effectiveness. After years of political wrangling, construction began in 2003 and is now slated to be completed in 2012. Until then, Venetians pray that MOSE will hold back the waters as well as its Biblical namesake.

10 FUN FACTS ABOUT GONDOLAS

- The name “gondola” probably comes from *gundula*—the Venetian dialect's equivalent of the Latin *cymbula* or the Greek *kuntelas*, meaning “small boat.”
- The earliest recorded use of gondolas in Venice dates to 1094.
- Today, all gondolas are black, following a 16th-century decree to stop nobles from trying to outdo each other with ostentatious colors and ornamentation.
- To Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Mann, and other writers, the shape and funereal color of gondolas suggested coffins—one among Venice's many associations with death.
- Historians credit 19th-century boat maker Domenico Tramontin with the design of the modern gondola. His descendants still operate a Venetian boatyard.
- All gondolas bow out farther on the port (left) side to compensate for the rowing motion of the gondolier, who stands in the stern and rows only on the starboard (right) side.
- Each gondola is made of eight different types of wood (elm, oak, lime, walnut, larch, fir, cherry, and mahogany), plus beech for the oar.
- A gondola's hull comprises 280 separate pieces of wood.
- The gondola's ornamental prow (*ferro*) has six teeth, possibly representing Venice's six administrative districts (*sestieri*).
- Today, 425 licensed gondoliers (and 175 substitutes) ply Venice's canals—down from a peak of more than 10,000 at the end of the 16th century.



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