ASCENT TO WISDOM: THE MARCIANA STAIRCASE AND THE PATRICIAN IDEAL

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Renaissance pedagogues fully embraced the Greco-Roman ideal of the perfection of man as citizen. A liberal education, grounded in classical studies, prepared a youth for public life and enabled him to achieve distinction as a statesman. These same educators were also universally convinced of a government's direct interest in the intellectual and ethical formation of its future members which redounded to the benefit of the State no less than to the advantage of the individual.[1]

In Venice, the construction of the Marciana Library and the location therein of the School of St. Mark[2] coincided with a renewed call for government involvement in communal education. As in other major population centers, the city had by tradition relied predominately upon independent masters, attracted by the employment opportunities as private tutors to the sons of the wealthy urban elite, along with the intellectual environment that surrounded the flourishing local printing industry and the academic life of the nearby University of Padua.[3] But with the decline of maritime trade, the aristocracy began

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[1] Cf. W. H. Woodward, *Vittorino da Feltre and other Humanist Educators*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1897, pp. 182-192.

[2] The School of St. Mark began in 1446 as a school for the future civil servants of the Ducal Chancery. The initial *curriculum*, focusing on grammar and rhetoric, was expanded in 1460 with the creation of a second lectureship for poetry, oratory, and history. Over time, it evolved into a humanist school principally for the sons of the nobles and citizens. Marino Sanudo recorded in 1515 that the seat of the School was in the Fontego della Farina: cf. M. Sanuto, *I diarii*, xix, Venezia, Fratelli Visentini, 1887, col. 424, February 7, 1514 *m.v.* Presumably, the School had been relocated there due to work on the bell tower of St. Mark's (1511-1513) since the School had previously been situated «near the bell tower» («a presso il campaniel»).

[3] Cf. Chr. Carlsmith, *A Renaissance Education: Schooling in Bergamo and the Venetian Republic 1500-1650*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010, p. 253.

to fracture. Not all of the noble youth enjoyed the same economic possibilities, and the less fortunate were a breeding ground for unrest. This inevitably raised concerns for the true rulers of the Republic, an increasingly restricted oligarchy of the more conservative and wealthy noble families. It consequently became both a political and social expedient to reach out to the disadvantaged nobles.[4]

The concern transpires in the preamble to the law of 23 March 1551 which called for the establishment of district schools:

> In every well-founded city, which by the grace of God and the prudence of our forefathers our city is, every effort must be made to train the young people in a praiseworthy manner in order that they do not rot through idleness, but growing up well-trained they can be useful and an ornament to the Republic, to themselves, and to their families. Hence, there being in this city a very thriving and numerous youth, it must be arranged that they be given the opportunity to undertake the study of good letters so that, in this way, they can reach the desired end.[5]

The 1551 law essentially amounted to an expansion of the School of St. Mark with the hiring of four new humanists in addition to the two already employed and six «maestri di grammatica» so as to guarantee a grammarian and humanist in each of the city's six districts.[6] These proposed district schools were to be theoretically open to all classes, but they were intended for the sons of the nobles and citizens. This would ensure a certain degree of control over the political and cultural formation of the future rulers of the Republic, imparting the specific skills needed to manage public affairs while at the same time inculcating a sound Christian morality and ensuring a correct vision of society – a vision that included a belief in the innate superiority of the Republic and its constitutional structure and in the inherent right of the aristocracy to rule.[7]

[4] For a discussion of similar latent concerns and the response in higher education, see M. Sangalli, *«Venetia non è tera de studii»? Educazione e politica nel secondo Cinquecento. I gesuiti e i procuratori di San Marco de supra*, «Studi Veneziani», xxxiv, 1997, pp. 97-163.

[5] Cf. P. F. Grendler, *Schooling in Renaissance Italy: Literacy and Learning 1300-1600*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 63.

[6] Inadequate funding resulted in a revised law in 1567 which established only four schools, two on each side of the Grand Canal. In 1587, an estimated 188 students, roughly 4 percent of all students in the city, attended these communal schools. The remainder attended lessons by independent instructors (36% Latin and 53% vernacular) or Church schools (7%): cf. Grendler, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-70.

[7] Cf. M. King, *Venetian Humanism in an Age of Patrician Dominance*, Princeton (nj), Princeton University Press, 1986, pp. 3-49.

Equally important, the establishment of district schools would also aid in transmitting a collective cultural identity, a self-defining patrician ideal characterized by devotion to intellectual pursuits – philology, linguistics, history, theology, and particularly philosophy as the characteristic element of Venetian Humanism. Indeed, the knowledge of philosophy, the culmination of a liberal education, was seen as essential to patrician youths so that they could advise and act in a manner most beneficial to the Republic in the Senate and to the citizens in the marketplace.[8]

In its iconographic program, the Marciana Library articulates this cultural vision. But art historians have largely focused on the twenty-one painted roundels that comprise the ceiling decoration of the Reading Room, relegating the staircase to relative obscurity.[9] In truth,

[8] The specific assessment is paraphrased from Marcantonio Sebellico's oration *De usu philosophiæ*, but it reflects broad trends in Venetian Humanism: cf. King, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[9] In *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581), Francesco Sansovino describes the ceiling of the Reading Room, but he makes no mention of the staircase iconography, nor does any other contemporary Author. Nicola Ivanoff (1967) sees the entire decorative program of the Marciana Library as a systematic organization and glorification of human knowledge in the tradition of medieval encyclopedic arrangements. In his interpretation, the staircase itself is said to generally affirm the superiority of the moral sciences and the Platonic tradition – the second flight with the virtues – to the natural sciences and the Aristotelian tradition – the first flight with the central figure of «Astrology» (Dia. 2.15) surrounded by allegories of the zodiac signs of «Taurus» (Dia. 2.12) and «Virgo» (Dia. 2.11) and the planets of «Jupiter» (Dia. 2.3), «Venus» (Dia. 2.8), «Saturn» (Dia. 2.14), and «Mercury» (Dia. 2.9). He also sees the first flight as portraying human life in coordination with the cosmos by means of images of the four temperaments: choleric (Dia. 2.4), sanguine (Dia. 2.6), melancholic (Dia. 2.14), and phlegmatic (Dia. 2.18). This is considered to show the liberation of the moral world from the fatalism of the divinities and the astrological influences that determine the animal instincts of man. Ivanoff's 'reading' seems inaccurate: 1. it ignores many of the attributes associated with the figures; *e.g.*, the figure of «Astrology» holds a heart upon which a bird of prey is perched, a reference to divine providence (see Causation: *Divine Providence* - 2.15), the allegory identified as «Venus» carries a money pouch indicating that she is actually Parsimony (see Cultivation of frugality: *Parsimony* - 2.8), and Mercury, when associated with the rooster, specifically symbolizes vigilant rest (see Physical exercise and vigilant rest: *Mercury* - 2.9); 2. it relies on several features that are not actually present; *e.g.*, the presumed allegory of the phlegmatic temperament is said to be sitting atop a sunken ship whereas the figure, accompanied by a dog and a basket of turnips, is in reality seated on a small mound and holds her hand to her ear (see Intellectual reminiscence: *Memory* - 2.18); 3. it is based on the misunderstanding that Aristotelianism in the Renaissance was still largely a derivative of medieval scholasticism and ignores the humanist interest in reanimating Aristotelianism and reconciling it with Neoplatonism by emphasizing the 'spiritual' traits of Averroës as opposed to the 'naturalistic' approach of Alexander of Aphrodisias: cf. N. Ivanoff, *La libreria Marciana. Arte e iconologia*, Firenze, Olschki, 1967, pp. 27-29. For the position of Aristotelian thought in sixteenth-century philosophical studies, see E. Kessler, *Introduc-*

however, the Reading Room and the staircase form a single iconographic program, albeit with differing emphases. The Reading Room ultimately portrays Venice as the ideal Platonic State founded upon a transcendent understanding of a higher reality. The Republic is presented as the very paradigm of wisdom, order, and harmony. The staircase defines for the young patrician students of the Library the purpose of their studies – to intellectually and morally prepare themselves to govern and to serve this Republic.[10]

Overall, the decorative program reflects the growing interest in Platonic philosophy as one of the central currents in Renaissance thought; it is conceptually organized on the basis of the Neoplatonic ascent of the soul. But rather than a coherent exposition of rational thought or of a single philosophical system, the ensemble exemplifies the attempt, typical of Renaissance Humanism, to syncretize various classical schools into a single, universal philosophy that was compatible with Christian theology and morality. It also records the tendency – particularly in Venice – to deconstruct philosophical texts and then accommodate the separate ideas to provide a classical legitimation for the established political and social order and to support traditional values. In the case of the stairway, the objective is to reinforce the ethical and intellectual ideal of Venice's ruling class. So while the first flight is in part inspired by Seneca's *Epistulæ morales*, it is neither a consistent nor a comprehensive presentation. Instead, it propagates those austere Stoic principles extrapolated from the text that favor

ing Aristotle to the sixteenth century: the Lefèvre enterprise, in *Philosophy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: conversations with Aristotle*, ed. by C. Blackwell, S. Kusukawa, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999, pp. 1-21. Marino Zorzi (1987) considers the iconography of the staircase as an introduction to that of the Reading Room. Specifically, he hypothesizes a reference in the staircase to the ten 'contemplative' disciplines in F. Badoer's Accademia venetiana with the ten 'active' disciplines forming the iconographic program of the Reading Room. Generally, he sees the first dome of the staircase as referencing physics, the first flight as referring to astrology and medicine, and the second flight as an expression of metaphysics. This interpretation requires the acceptance of most of Ivanoff's earlier identifications. But Zorzi correctly notes the limits of the underlying theory. Canon law and theology, which should be located on the staircase, are instead identified in the roundels of «Priesthood» and «Theology» in the Reading Room. Grammar and rhetoric, rather than in the Reading Room, are found in the stairway: cf. M. Zorzi, *La libreria di san Marco: libri, lettori, società nella Venezia dei dogi*, Milano, Mondadori, 1987, pp. 144-152.

[10] Beyond the actual students of the School of St. Mark, it is reasonable to assume that the youth attending the other communal schools and the School of Rialto also congregated in the Library to consult texts.

social cohesion and help forge temperate and stalwart rulers. In this respect, the staircase offers a remarkable view of sixteenth-century Venice in that it reveals the concerns and goals of the aristocracy in forming the character of the model young patrician and addressing those contemporary issues that threatened the integrity of the dominant class. Similarly, the terminus of the staircase insists increasingly on devotion and dedication to family, dynasty, and – above all – *patria*, confirming the government's educational expectations in terms of social responsibility and State obligations.

The iconographic program naturally begins with the cupola in correspondence to the entryway of the Library. This is the Dome of Ethics and is largely an exposition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It immediately invites the students of the Library to undertake a life of moderation, continence, respect, and dedication (DIAGRAM).

The staircase itself consists of two flights, the vaults of which are each decorated with twenty-one images of alternating quadrilinear stuccoes by Alessandro Vittoria and octagonal frescoes by Battista Franco (first flight) and Battista del Moro (second flight). The first flight largely represents the life of the embodied soul in the early stages of the Neoplatonic ascent – the quieting of the soul and the initial study and contemplation of the material world by means of sense perception, discursive reasoning, and intellectual reminiscence.

Of the two cupolas that surmount the landing, the first, the Dome of Rhetoric, is dedicated to formal studies – grammar, rhetoric, philosophy, and theology – whereas the second, the Dome of Dialectic, shows the mediate means – logic and the mathematical entities – to transcend mere opinions formulated through sense perception and to obtain knowledge of first principles.

The second flight continues the Neoplatonic ascent with catharsis and interiorization. This brings the soul to the threshold of the realm of Intellect which corresponds to the Reading Room with the awakening of the intellective soul (Salviati's central roundel of *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*), ecstatic union (Licinio's *Ecstasy*), and illumination (Zelotti's *Divine Wisdom Enthroned*).[11] The whole program consequently affirms the Neoplatonic tenet that all knowledge converges in the Divinity and demonstrates that the quest for knowl-

[11] For a detailed description of the roundels, see J. M. BRODERICK, *Custodian of wisdom: the Marciana Reading Room and the transcendent knowledge of God*, «Studi Veneziani», LXXIII, 2016, pp. 21-25 and pp. 52-59.

edge is dependent upon – and directed towards – the attainment of divine wisdom.

Appropriately, Martianus Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiæ et Mercurii* provides many of the references for the allegorical figures in the second portion of the staircase in preparation for the entry into the Reading Room. But ultimately the escape from the world invoked in the Platonic tradition was incompatible with active civic life, the formative goal of Renaissance Humanism.[12] The final cupola of the staircase, the Dome of Poietics, consequently invites the student of the Library to apply the acquired wisdom and virtue to his endeavors in the material world. This foreshadows Schiavone's trio within the Reading Room which is the culmination of the entire iconographic program with the realization of the ideal State.

Through this interpretation, the iconographic ensemble of the Marciana Library is revealed as a unique manifestation of the Venetian aristocracy's educational vision and socio-political agenda at a critical moment in the Republic's history. Moreover, since the decorative program was conceived under the authority of the Procurators of St. Mark, it forms an important record of the academic and cultural interests of the aristocracy.

To begin with, the layout and complexity of the overall scheme confirm a fluency with the specific philosophical positions of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Macrobius. But the individual images also presume the ability to 'read' Renaissance hieroglyphics and readily decipher the iconographic meanings of specific plants and animals. Unintelligible to the 'non-initiated', the obscure associations and their enigmatic quality fully reflect the renewed interest in the esotericism of the Hermetic writings and of the Chaldean Oracles that impassioned the Renaissance following the publication in 1505 of Horapollo's *Ἱερογλυφικά* (*Hieroglyphica*), the purported 'key' to unlock the mysteries of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics.[13] Pierio Valeriano's dictionary of symbols, *Hieroglyphica* (1556) elaborates the semiotics as does Cesare Ripa's encyclopedic *Iconologia* (1593). The

[12] In *Theætetus* Plato writes: «Therefore we ought to try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can». Plato, *Thæetetus*, 176a-176c, transl. by H. N. Fowler, Cambridge (ma), Harvard University Press, 1921.

[13] For a study of the development of Renaissance hieroglyphs, see R. Wittkower, *Allegoria e migrazione dei simboli*, transl. by G. Romano, Torino, Einaudi, 1987, pp. 223-249.

popularity of emblem books during the sixteenth century is seen in several images in the staircase which derive from Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum Liber* (1531), Francesco Marcolini's *Le ingeniose sorti* (1540), and Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicarum* (1555). Some of the mythological and allegorical representations also depend on narrative descriptions in Vincenzo Cartari's *Le imagini de i dei de gli antichi* (*Images of the Gods of the Ancients*, 1556) and Martianus Capella's fifth-century work *De nuptiis Philologiæ et Mercurii* (*The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*).

The study of the staircase that follows uses this cultural lens to interpret the individual representations and determine the thematic correspondences and interconnections that explain the underlying system. In some instances, the identification of specific allegories is conjectural due to the damaged state of the images.

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