

CUSTODIAN OF WISDOM:
THE MARCIANA READING ROOM
AND THE TRANSCENDENT
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

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I N the decades that followed the Peace of Bologna, Venice set about to refashion its international image. Still recovering from its earlier military defeat at Agnadello and from the years of war that followed and increasingly overshadowed on the European stage by the emerging national monarchies, the Republic adopted a policy of defensive conservatism. Actively, it promoted itself as the champion of peace, the custodian of ancient wisdom, and the truest successor – indeed the guardian – of the republican ideals of ancient Rome. Integral to this, the Marciana Library was built to stand as a physical monument to the political and moral wisdom of Venice itself.

Inside, seven artists were commissioned to paint the twenty-one roundels that comprise the ceiling decoration of the Reading Room which remains today a showpiece of Venice's artistic splendor. Yet it is also a reflection of Venice's mindset and agenda in the sixteenth century, a fascinating window onto the Venetian cultural and political landscape at a critical crossroads in the Republic's history. Through imagery and allegory, it reveals the way in which Venice perceived itself and, more importantly, the way in which it wished to be perceived by the greater world. But for centuries the Reading Room's message has been largely silent. The few attempts to 'read' the twenty-one roundels have been unsuccessful in convincingly identifying the connections between the symbolism of individual paintings and a comprehensive, underlying system.

Vasari makes only brief mention of the roundels by Giuseppe Salviati and Battista Franco in *Le vite*.¹ Instead, the three roundels by Paolo Veronese are described but as isolated subjects with no attempt to

¹ Cf. G. VASARI, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori* [repr. 1586 edn.], Firenze, Sansoni, 1879, VII, p. 46; *ibidem*, VI, p. 586.

interpret them within the overall context of the Library.² Furthermore, these references contain conspicuous errors. In *Venezia città nobilissima et singolare*, Francesco Sansovino mentions all twenty-one roundels.³ In some cases, simple titles are provided; in others, a visual description is given. Some of these traditional titles seem equally imprecise or inaccurate.⁴ More importantly, any possible thematic correspondences and interconnections are once again left unexplained. Over the years, alternative names have been proposed for individual roundels, but in many cases they seem arbitrary and without relevance to the Library. Certain iconographic elements are exalted; some are speciously interpreted; many are simply ignored.

Several more recent authors have suggested unified 'readings', but others have denied the existence of any underlying scheme.⁵ In truth,

² Cf. *ibidem*, VI, p. 373.

³ See F. SANSOVINO, *Venezia città nobilissima et singolare descritta in 14 libri*, Venetia, appresso Iacomo Sansovino, 1581, pp. 114-115 for all titles and descriptions.

⁴ Cf. J. SCHULTZ, *Venetian Painted Ceilings of the Renaissance*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968, p. 94.

⁵ 1) Juergen Schultz writes that the ceiling «celebrates the subjects of learning and the virtues that learning inculcates». He concludes, however, that «the program is lost and the meaning of the individual representations is not always clear»: cf. SCHULTZ, *op. cit.*, p. 94. 2) Nicola Ivanoff identifies most of the roundels. In some cases the titles are arbitrarily changed; e.g., FRANCO's *Celerity, toil, and practice and other things* becomes *Physical Exercise*. He considers the remaining «roundels of a moralizing nature that stimulates studies and celebrates the benefits of knowledge»: cf. N. IVANOFF, *La libreria marciana. Arte e iconologia*, Firenze, Olschki, 1967, p. 39 and *passim*. 3) Charles Hope denies any coherent program and suggests that each painter chose his subject. He sees the paintings as generally praising learning and demonstrating the wealth, artistic splendor, and cultural values of the Venetian Republic: cf. CH. HOPE, *The Ceiling Paintings in the Libreria Marciana*, in M. Gemin (a cura di), *Nuovi Studi su Paolo Veronese*, Venezia, Arsenale, 1990, p. 297. 4) Diana Gisolfi sees an attempt to evidence religious themes along the central axis through *Theological Virtues and God* by DE MIO, *Glory and Beatitude* by LICINIO, and *Priesthood* by SCHIAVONE. This interpretation fails to consider, however, that *Priesthood* was originally a lateral roundel and was moved to the central position sometime between 1819 and 1837: cf. SCHULTZ, *op. cit.*, p. 95. Overall, Gisolfi identifies a progression from a «general introduction to philosophy, theology, and natural science over the entrance, to issues of choosing the right path in Salviati's trio, to elements of hard work in Franco's triad, to the virtuous state and activities of the central band, moving through determined study and humility in Zelotti's *tondi* to the more abstract disciplines favored since antiquity in Veronese's *tondi* (*Music, Geometry, Arithmetic, and Honor*) to arrive at the professions appropriate to the patrician male». This view assumes that most of the original titles are correct and that the subsequent identification of Zelotti's central roundel as *Modesty* is also correct. Furthermore, it requires that SALVIATI's *Militia* and *Art alongside Mercury and Pluto* be seen as examples of «choosing the right path» and that VERONESE's *Honor* be considered a «discipline»: cf. D. GISOLFI, *On Renaissance Library Decorations and the Marciana*, «Ateneo Veneto», terza

the Reading Room has never been fully and convincingly explained. The few comprehensive interpretations advanced are in several cases self-contradicting; many arguments remain assumptions; elements of the iconography and entire roundels which do not fit into the proposed overarching systems are glossed over.

More significantly, if it is posited that the series of philosophers lining the walls was conceived not as an independent theme but as an integral part of the overall iconography, then these attempts to identify a coherent program have tended to decontextualize the ceiling and interpret it independently of the philosophically oriented environment for which it was created. This has proven particularly distortive of Veronese's roundels. *Arithmetic and Geometry* as well as *Music* have always been seen as mere allegories of their respective disciplines without considering any eventual ontological import. *Honor*, as a subject, has been uncritically accepted despite the censure of publically recognized virtue that characterized Hellenistic thought.

Yet, as it has been rightfully noted, the decorative program for Venice's Library was not a routine task. It was an all-important State commission, intended to symbolize Venetian civilization in the city's most visible public forum and overseen at the highest levels of the government.⁶ This study consequently represents a renewed effort to decipher the ceiling's message, not simply as a collection of pre-exist-

s., CXC VII, 9/XI, 2010, p. 18. 5) Marino Zorzi hypothesizes a reference to the ten 'active' disciplines in F. Badoer's *Accademia venetiana*, with the ten 'contemplative' disciplines forming instead the iconographic program of the staircase. But he 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. Yet rhetoric is also alluded to in Salviati's central roundel (*Art alongside Mercury and Pluto*) although this roundel is said to refer to both economy and poetics. Some subjects are seen in more than one roundel (militia, economy, poetics) whereas other roundels simultaneously represent more than one subject. Still other roundels are loosely interpreted, obscuring many of the iconographic elements; e.g., Licinio's surviving lateral roundel is seen as history, based on the presence of the hourglass but without reference to the loaf of bread, armor, and lantern. Also, VERONESE's *Geometry and Arithmetic* is said to be indicative of poetics, discounting the presence of the numerical tables and geometrical forms. Ultimately, the remaining roundels that do not fit the hypothesized scheme are considered to represent unspecified allegories regarding the benefits of knowledge: cf. M. ZORZI, *La Libreria di San Marco. Libri, lettori, società nella Venezia dei dogi*, Milano, Mondadori, 1987, pp. 144-152.

⁶ Cf. A. PAOLUCCI, *La sala della libreria e il ciclo pittorico*, in *Da Tiziano a El Greco. Per la storia del Manierismo a Venezia 1540-1590*, Milano, Electa, 1981, p. 288.

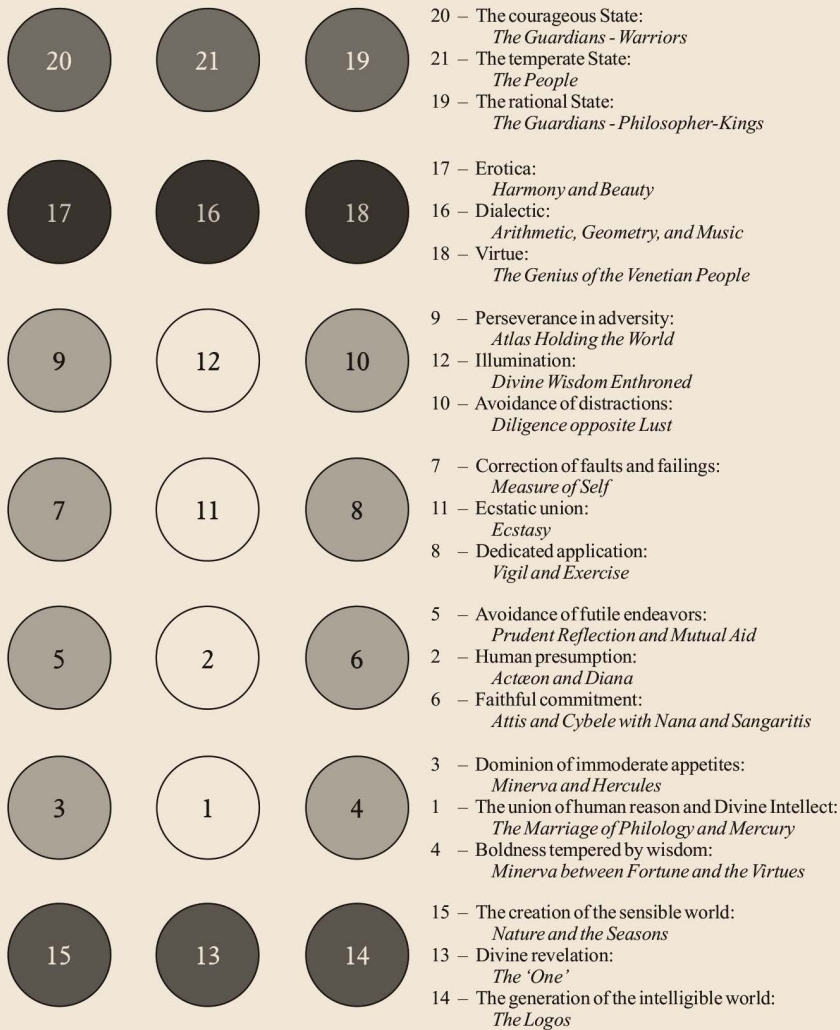


DIAGRAM. Iconographic scheme.

ing iconographic symbols and standardized allegories, appropriate to a place of learning, but as a unique expression of the academic interests, moral values, and political ideals of Venice at a precise moment in its history. Specifically, it is proposed that while the ceiling fully reflects the humanistic interest in classical studies as essential to the formation of morally upright, civically minded men, it ultimately shows Venice as the realization of Plato's Ideal State and becomes a political statement in the service of the Republic's propagandistic ends.

For the ensemble's ideation, various noteworthy Venetian humanists have been suggested, but any relative documents are untraceable. Nonetheless, these candidates share a profound academic interest in philology, linguistics, history, theology, and particularly philosophy as the highest expression of the human capacity to reason. When this same culture is applied as a lens to the ceiling of the Reading Room, the original pedagogic message becomes clear, and what emerges is a lucid iconographic ensemble wherein each roundel assumes an explicatory role and contributes to the overall narrative. The second to the fifth rows become a compact and unified whole with the central axis dominated by man's quest for a transcendent understanding of reality and the lateral images illustrating the qualities and circumstances that are required to reach the higher condition.⁷ Beginning with the union between human reason and Divine Intellect, the section concludes with illumination, thus affirming the Neoplatonic belief that all knowledge converges in the Divinity (DIAGRAM).

Building upon this core, the three roundels by de Mio form a theological prologue which privileges the 'Mosaic philosophy' of Philo of Alexandria as a means of reconciling Hellenistic thought with Christian doctrine and subsuming the philosophy that underpins the entire program into an acceptable religious framework – the Marciana was of course the expression of a Christian *civitas* in the sixteenth century, and inevitably the pervasive Catholic Reformation made the correctness of any religious-related message imperative. Hence the theological prologue not only affirms the divine origin and eternal nature of wisdom, it simultaneously identifies God as the exemplary, efficient, and immanent cause of creation.

Veronese's roundels form instead an epilogue, showing the transcendent awareness and harmony that derive from the ecstatic union with the Divinity. Based largely on Plotinian doctrine as expounded in *Enneads*, they also demonstrate the continued progression of the individual through the study of mathematical entities, the

⁷ Luisa Vertova does identify such a connection between the lateral roundels and the central roundel but limitedly to Licinio's trio: «the three roundels in the central row of the Reading Room's ceiling were meant to illustrate the efforts necessary to obtain virtue and the bliss that derives from it...» («la fila dei tre tondi centrali nel soffitto del salone doveva illustrare le fatiche necessarie al conseguimento della virtù, e la felicità che da essa deriva...»): cf. L. VERTOVA, *Giulio Licinio*, in *I Pittori Bergamaschi. Il Cinquecento*, II, Bergamo, Bolis, 1976, p. 564.

contemplation of harmony and beauty, and the practice of virtue. Finally, the trio by Schiavone invites the illuminated scholar to apply the acquired wisdom and virtue to his endeavors in the material world and within the structure of the ideal State.

The result is particularly relevant for the two roundels painted in 1635 to replace the originals, irreparably damaged by water infiltrations. It has always been assumed that the substitute paintings – *An Allegory of Sculpture* and *An Allegory of the Universe* – do not reflect the initial subject matter. This would indicate that the earlier paintings were so heavily damaged as to render them unintelligible or that fidelity to the originals was simply not seen as necessary. Admittedly, as titled, the paintings seem unrelated to the rest of the iconographic scheme. But when viewed with the same cultural lens, they too conform to the underlying program, indicating that they are, in reality, relatively faithful copies of the earlier works.

Through this interpretation, the Reading Room is revealed as the natural continuation of the Library's staircase which in its basic scheme illustrates the Plotinian ascent to the 'One', the source of all truth and knowledge. But whereas the staircase shows the beginning of the ascent with the rise of the individual from ordinary, non-spiritual life through purification and the control of the unreasoning and reasoning souls, the Reading Room shows its culmination with the awakening of the higher, intellectual soul, ecstatic union, and illumination.

In the analysis that follows the allegorical and iconographical content of each roundel is explicated within this philosophical framework. The connection between the symbolism of the individual roundels and the exposition of the overall scheme is also demonstrated in order to arrive at a clear understanding of the comprehensive system that lies at the core of the Library's decorative program.

The iconographic sources of the roundels vary. Several of the paintings are scenes illustrative of philosophical texts, predominantly by Plotinus, Plato, and Philo of Alexandria. For these, no sources exist beyond the textual references. Others show moralizing tales derived, in whole or in part, from Andrea Alciati's *Emblematum Liber* (1531), Francesco Marcolini's *Le ingeniose sorti* (1540), or Achille Bocchi's *Symbolicarum* (1555). Several of the roundels are mythological narratives, generally drawn from the writings of classical authors: Ovid's *Meta-*

morphosis and *Fasti*, Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, Nonnus' *Dionysiaka*, and Martianus Capella's *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. In some instances, these stories of the pagan divinities are interpreted as allegories through the early Christian writings of Arnobius and Eusebius. The details for the iconography of the gods and heroes portrayed and the significance of their clothing, poses, and attributes are elucidated in Vincenzo Cartari's *Images of the Gods of the Ancients* (1556). There are also personifications in the roundels that reflect the Renaissance interest in symbolic representations. The semiotics are mostly elaborated in Pierio Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica* (1556). However, Cesare Ripa's encyclopedic *Iconologia* (1593) is also an aid for interpreting the paraphernalia associated with each figure. Although posterior to the construction of the Library, it records conventional themes and concepts consolidated over time, often of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman derivation, and is amply substantiated with literary and artistic references.

While single paintings will undoubtedly continue to elicit varied iconographic arguments among art historians, and a more focused philosophical 'reading' of certain roundels remains desirable – namely of the de Mio and Veronese trios – the study that follows is proposed as a working hypothesis, the interpretation being based on the premise that a metaphysical vision is necessary to understand the ceiling of the Reading Room.

THE CENTRAL SECTION

The union of human reason and Divine Intellect: The Marriage of Philology and Mercury (1)

Upon entering the Reading Room, Giuseppe Salviati's central roundel occupies the pre-eminent position. A youthful and vigorous Mercury stands upright alongside an aged Pluto. To the left, sits a maiden to whom the younger god seemingly points out a higher reality.

In *Venezia città nobilissima et singolare*, Sansovino provides no title. Instead the roundel is simply described: «Art with an aspect that shows ingenuity, acuteness, and diligence with Mercury alongside and Pluto» («l'arte con la fisionomia che dimostra l'ingegno, l'acutezza, & la solerzia, cò Mercurio appresso & Plutone».⁸ Nicola Ivanoff

⁸ The traditional opinion that the female figure represents Art is largely based on the assumption that the objects at her side include brushes. Closer analysis reveals, however, that they are scrolls tied together.

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Stampato in Italia · Printed in Italy

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ISSN 0392-0437
ISSN ELETTRONICO 1724-1790