

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, we think of paintings as objects quietly hanging on the walls of our homes and offices, waiting patiently for someone to throw a glance at them. Or we think of them as artworks on show in galleries and museums, inspiring learned conversations and aesthetic praise. Yet we hardly consider paintings as active participants in social events; as persons we can talk to when they come visit.

In sixteenth-century Venice, however, the situation was altogether different. In June 1586 a painted portrait of Bianca Capello, daughter of Venetian patricians and grand duchess of Tuscany, visited the doge (*pl. I*). On a Monday afternoon the owner of the portrait, a certain Francesco Bembo, took it to the Doge's Palace to show it to his head of state. All the way through the palace it went, until it reached the doge's apartments. Once the portrait of Bianca had arrived, it received lavish praise from all people present, first and foremost from the doge himself. When Venice's head of state and his guests went to table, the portrait joined them, and throughout the meal Bianca was on everyone's lips. After the meal, the old doge went to rest and took the portrait with him, deciding to install it on a little table where he usually kept nothing but a little box, his *corno* or ceremonial hat, and a crucifix. Later that day, the portrait moved to another room in the palace, where it received visits by several dignitaries, among whom the powerful *procuratore* Giacomo Emo, the bishop of Brescia Gianfrancesco Morosini, and Alfonso II d'Este, duke of Ferrara. When these men were alone with the portrait, Francesco Bembo overheard them and caught his head of state saying to Emo, his confidant: '*Io son innamorato, guardate!*'¹ The visit ended with Bembo leaving the palace without his portrait; he had to acquiesce in the doge's wish to keep it with him for the night.²

This anecdote may seem strange to us, readers from a vastly different time. It strongly suggests that, in the eyes of contemporaries, the portrait of Bianca Capello kept up a social life. The portrait circulated; it was entertained by the doge and his guests; and it spent the night in the doge's apartments. In other words, it came to life in its interactions with the people who saw and used it. Yet such a view, that paintings had a social nature, akin to human beings, is hardly compatible with our modern-day ideas about their substance. Therefore, I ask: how can we understand such an anecdote? And are our current ways of thinking about painting really adequate when applied to societies of the past like sixteenth-century Venice?

Nowadays we do not easily think of paintings as living objects, which move around and act upon human beings; we have a very different notion of what paintings are and should be. As I set out to demonstrate in this book, this has long made us indifferent to the ways paintings functioned in their original social contexts; and it has detached us from the riches of materials still to be found in the archives. The vast correspondence of Bianca Capello, which is the main source for the anecdote above, has been known to scholars for some time; yet up to now its true value was never recognized. Yet if we do take such material into account, it will affect the way we think about painting, still the principal model for how we think about art in the Western world, and have major implications for the way we practise art history.

AT THE DOGE'S PALACE: SETTING THE PARAMETERS

The visit of Bianca's portrait to the doge has brought us right into the heart of the Venetian Republic, and in connection with that, into the heart of Venetian painting. The Doge's Palace was not only the centre of the Venetian state and its administration, the residence of the doge, and the court of law; it was also the place where countless paintings, made by the best painters of the Republic, celebrated the glory of Venice. Nowhere else in Venice or on Venetian territory does one find painted decorations on such a scale; no other paintings have such a general relevance for the way the Venetians thought about themselves, or were accessible to such a large part of the Republic's elite. It comes as no surprise, then, that the paintings of the Doge's Palace figure in many medieval and early modern texts, in which they evoke many different responses.³ Over the following pages I will examine these responses, approaching them as a laboratory for the analysis of the lives of paintings, before I move on to a more in-depth discussion of the historical and theoretical challenges of this subject.

The Sala del Maggior Consiglio or Great Council Hall offered ample space for pictorial decorations (*fig. 1*). These decorations have always consisted of a mixture of genres: civic history, allegory, portraiture, and religious scenes together form a programme that celebrates the glory of the city-state. Besides the narrative scenes on the hall's northern, western



1 The Sala del Maggior Consiglio of the Doge's Palace in Venice, seen towards the east.

and southern walls, depicting episodes from the Republic's illustrious past, there is a frieze with the portraits of the first seventy-six doges, ordered chronologically all around the room. The ceiling shows virtuous deeds by virtuous men, while its three central canvases contain allegories demonstrating Venice's good government. At the eastern end of the room, where the doge and his advisors were usually sitting, is the coronation of Mary in heaven, also known as the *Paradiso*. This was the room where the so-called Great Council gathered; the largest body of the government, which consisted of all male members of the Venetian nobility – some two thousand persons in the sixteenth century, who would meet there weekly.⁴

Of the paintings with historical subject matter, certainly the most important are those representing the so-called Peace of Venice, that is, the series of events resulting in the peace treaty between the Holy Roman emperor Frederick Barbarossa and pope Alexander III on Venetian territory in the year 1177 (for examples see *figs.* 2 and 3).⁵ The story is, indeed, one of the principal components of the so-called Myth of Venice. As we know now, the lagoon city did not participate in the conflict, which was the very reason why the parties chose its grounds as the place to make peace. In the centuries following the events, however, the Republic managed to blow up its own role to legendary proportions. Gradually it came to represent itself as the saviour of the pope and Christianity at large; as the bringer of peace to Italy and the world; and thus, the story was used to legitimize Venice's power in the Eastern Mediterranean and Adriatic seas, which, especially during the sixteenth century, was anything but unchallenged. When during this period voices from elsewhere, mostly historians working for the Vatican, persistently contested the Venetian interpretation of events, Vene-



2 Leandro Bassano, *Pope Alexander III Presents the White Candle to Doge Sebastiano Ziani in San Marco*, c. 1605, oil on canvas, 280 × 345 cm, Venice, Doge's Palace.

tian historians used the paintings in the Doge's Palace in defence of the Republic, pointing to their supposed evidential value.⁶ Marin Sanudo (1466–1536), the famous chronicler, concisely summarized their principal argument: 'If it had not been true, our Venetians would never have had it painted.'⁷ As Filippo de Vivo has noted, the state even instructed its ambassadors abroad to look for painted records of the Peace of Venice in their cities of residence; in this way, they effectively deflected attention from the story of 1177, focusing instead on the story's material representations.⁸ What support for their cause did the Venetians hope to find in paintings?

We find their principal ideas summarized by Fortunato Olmo, an erudite monk who in the 1630s was one of the last to make a significant contribution to the debate. Olmo's was by far the largest compilation of material supporting the Venetian cause: he managed to fill seven manuscript volumes.⁹ The following comes from an earlier work of his, published in 1629:

Because [the paintings] have been made on command of many illustrious persons, who were entrusted with the government of the Republic, it is intolerable to hear our opponents say that they are a caprice of the painter. They are relying on the verses of Horace, "Painters and poets always had the same power to dare all things conceivable", as if in a city hall it could happen that a painter's hand would be so daring as to express fully to his own liking a falsification unjustified by fact. But the fact is that the licence of painters is not as big as that.¹⁰



3 Jacopo Palma il Giovane, *The Pope and the Doge send the Young Otto to his Father Barbarossa*, c. 1587, oil on canvas, 560 × 450 cm, Venice, Doge's Palace.

Olmo puts forward two arguments. First, he appeals to the authority of the illustrious patrons who commissioned the paintings; virtuous and exemplary men. Secondly, he downplays the licence of painters to invent: he argues that both painters and patrons are bound to what actually was in the world, to what actually happened (*il fatto*). In a public place, there is no room for images showing things that never happened, paintings without prototypes, so to say.¹¹ Paintings had to be true.

The monk and historian *fra* Girolamo Bardi (c. 1544–1594) came with similar arguments. Bardi, originally a Florentine, was one of the three members of a committee that devised a new decorative programme for the two largest rooms of the Palace after they were lost in a disastrous fire (1577).¹² Not only did he refer to existing paintings as evidence for historical events; he also mentioned paintings that had long since disappeared. For he reported that when he visited the burnt remains of the Great Council Hall, he found traces of much earlier paintings, executed in the Greek style (*in maniera greca*) allegedly from 1226 onwards, that is, we may infer, when some of the eyewitnesses of the events of 1177 were still alive.¹³ Bardi wrote: 'Many years ago [the story] was painted on the walls of the Great Council Hall, as is shown by the epitaphs and by the manner in which they were represented, with the crudeness of the art of that time.'¹⁴ In response to the opponents of the Venetian cause, Bardi reconstructed a partially fictive genealogy of the paintings and their authorship.¹⁵ In this way, the Venetian reading of the past was legitimized and authenticated, for Bardi made it look as if from their historical origins to the author's present, the story of the Peace of Venice had been directly transmitted in paint.¹⁶ Underlying his argu-

ment is the assumption we already found in a slightly different form in the work of Marin Sanudo and Fortunato Olmo, which can be traced in practically all other writings having anything to do with this debate: that these paintings have evidential value.

It will come as no surprise, however, that opponents of Venice took a different view on the matter. The papal historian Cesare Baronio (1538–1607), most prominently, refuted much of the evidence the Venetians had brought forward and instead turned toward documents contemporary to the Peace written by eyewitnesses. He laughed at the idea that paintings could serve as historical evidence. Yet, Baronio's position regarding the question was far from consistent: when earlier in his career the ancient Christian catacombs of Rome were discovered, and in them early Christian art was found, Baronio used it in a similar, 'Venetian' way.¹⁷ This suggests that a person's view on the functions and effects of paintings was not necessarily constant: it could change along with one's political, religious, or social agenda. This means that 'function' was something altogether fluid: depending on the circumstances, one painting could play various roles – just like human beings, one might say.

The next example will make this even clearer, for the very same paintings that the Venetians used as historical evidence, were at the same time seen as a memorial to illustrious fellow citizens. Many paintings in the Doge's Palace contained human figures, often bystanders, who had the facial features of prominent men in public life. Writers recorded these portraits as if the paintings and portrayed men were one and the same thing; as if the paintings in the rooms of the palace actually made the portrayed men present. This is reminiscent of the treatment received by the portrait of Bianca Capello, which travelled through the very rooms of which I am speaking here: it must have come face to face with her painted fellow countrymen. Yet unlike Bianca, these portrayed men did not come on their own: a single canvas often contained many portraits at one time, and these only formed a part of the larger historical scene (for example, *fig. 3*). This may be the reason why the phenomenon has received so little attention in art-historical literature: Venetian painting was exceptional in the amount of portraits it contained, but why and to what purpose has not been satisfactorily explained.¹⁸ Again, this seems to have to do with modern ways of looking and thinking. The paintings of the Doge's Palace do not comply with later ideas of painterly genres.¹⁹ Whether they are characterized as narrative scenes, *historie*, portraits, or cityscapes (many contain elaborate architectural backgrounds), they do not fit easily into either of these categories. And the way these paintings were received in their own time only seems to reflect the plurality of their contents.

In his guidebook to the city, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (1581), Francesco Sansovino (1521–1586) diligently described all the paintings in the Doge's Palace, with special attention for those in the largest room of the building. The fire four years earlier urged Sansovino to record them faithfully together with the inscriptions that had explained their contents. He discussed the many portraits that had embellished these paintings separately. His account starts like this: 'In all these pictures were various portraits of Senators and illustrious men, painted over time by various excellent Masters.'²⁰ Subsequently, he

co, di Gregorio Amaſco, & di Giorgio Merula. Et nel quadro piu oltre di Titiano, vi erano al naturale Pietro Bembo, che fu Cardinale, Iacomo Sannazaro, nobiliſſi. Scrittori nella lingua Latina & uolgare, & Andrea Nauaiero. Giorgio Cornaro fratello della Regina di Cipro, in veſte d'oro, Antonio Trono Procuratore, Domenico Triuiſano Cavaliero & Procuratore padre del Doge, Marco Grimani Procurator di San Marco, figliuolo di Antonio, allora Principe, Paolo Capello Procurator di San Marco, Gaſparo Contarini d'età giouane, & che poi nella matura fu fatto Cardinale, Marco Dandolo, padre di Mattheo che fu Procurator di San Marco, Fra Giocondo Architetto Veroneſe, Agotino Beauzzano, Marco Muſuro, & Lodouico Ariolto. Et piu oltre, nel quadro doue il Papa cōcedea l'indulgentia con diuerſi Cardinali dalla deſtra, & dalla ſiniſtra, ſi vedeuano eſpreſſi mirabilmente quali tutti i Cardinali Vinitiani, ch'erano ſtati fino a quei tempi, cioè Angelo Corero che fu poi Gregorio XII. Franceſco Lando, Pietro Barbo, che poi fatto Papa fu detto Paolo Secondo, Marco Barbo, Giovanni Michele, & Giouan Battiſta Zeno, figliuoli di due forelle del predetto Pontefice, Pietro Foſcari Veſcouo di Padoua, figliuolo di Marco Procuratore, che fu fratello del Doge Foſcari, & Domenico Grimani figliuolo del Doge, tutti Cardinali. Et oltre a predetti nel quadro ſeguente erano poſti, Bernardo Giuſtiniano Procurator di San Marco, che ſcriſſe la hiſtoria di Venetia. & poco diſeolto da lui Leonardo ſuo padre, anco eſſo huomo chiaro per lettere & per dottrina, con Beſſarione Cardinal Niceno, veſtito con lo habito de Monaci di San Baſilio. Nell'altro quadro contiguo al predetto, doue era vna lunga ſchiera di huomini ſegnalati di quel tempo, & poſti a due a due, che accompagnauano il Principe Ziani all'armata, ſi vedeua Giovanni Barbarigo Cavaliero & Procuratore di San Marco, Tadeo Giuſtiniano Cavaliero, Vittorio Piſani, Giovanni Hemo Cavaliero, & Franceſco Sanuto, ambedue proueditori in campo nella guerra de Ferrara, Fantino

4 Francesco Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare descritta in XIV libri* (Venice: Iacomo Sansovino, 1581), p. 131r.

needs no less than four densely printed pages to name them all (*fig. 4*).²¹ This is a truly remarkable document of who counted as important in late sixteenth-century Venice, but also a testimonial to the love a man like Sansovino felt for his exemplary ancestors.

The character of the men recited by Sansovino is diverse: he mentions procurators and senators, cardinals, painters and architects, scholars, poets, and men of arms, not all of whom had necessarily lived in the same age. Thus he encounters 'in the picture in which the Pope conferred the indulgence, with various Cardinals on the right and on the left,' 'almost all Venetian Cardinals that had existed until this time, that is Angelo Correr who was later Gregory XII; Francesco Lando, Pietro Barbo, who when made Pope was called Paul II,' and so the list continues; there are Pietro Bembo and Fra Giocondo, 'architect from Verona,' Gentile Bellini, Emmanuel Chrysoloras, Ermolao Barbaro, Lodovico Ariosto, and Agostino Barbarigo 'who died in the battle of '71' (the Battle of Lepanto), to name just a few.²² It is clear that in these paintings men from different periods had been placed next to each other anachronically. Sansovino arranged the names according to the paintings in which the men were portrayed; he mentions their positions and achievements, and their

relations to family members who had also been honoured with a portrait on these walls. He finds it worth noting when portraits are done from life, like the one by Tintoretto of Stefano Tiepolo *procuratore di San Marco*. Or when the portraits are otherwise painted very lively: ‘And there, over a balcony, were portrayed Andrea Gradenigo, father of Luigi, with Senatorial clothes on, and Giovanni Battista Ramusio, Secretary of the Council of Ten, who was the father of Paolo, the two of whom seemed to be talking to each other.’²³ And therefore, Sansovino concludes, the destruction of the portraits means a great loss: ‘That all these things were consumed by the fire of 1577 gave the whole universe great sorrow, because of the loss of the features (*fatture*) of so many valuable men, and of the memory of so many excellent persons, which the world only rarely possesses in abundance.’²⁴ Most of the men in his survey had died long before Sansovino was writing; but what he is suggesting is that their real, or at least second death took place with the fire: it was only then that their faces disappeared and the memory of their great deeds was wiped out. His lengthy enumeration could therefore be understood as an attempt to undo this second death and to revive the memory of Venice’s *huomini virtuosi*. As if it were a *messa dei defunti*, his recital of these names is almost a religious ritual.²⁵

So although we are still concerned with the same paintings in the Doge’s Palace, Sansovino confronts us with a completely different view. Writing about the portraits, he is not interested in historical proof, or whether paintings tell the truth or not: he points to the ability of paintings to make people present, while they are in fact absent. Are these two very different approaches in any way compatible? And how do they relate to our modern notion of genre – if at all?

Sansovino’s account raises more questions. What about the viewers of these portraits? Much is expected of them. The enumeration of portraits hints at the existence of an audience that shared Sansovino’s veneration of the sitters. There must have been viewers and users of the paintings in the Doge’s Palace who knew who these men were and what status they had. In other words, Sansovino’s account presupposes a social network of which the viewers, the portraits, and their sitters were a part. But what do we know of this network?

A social network was also at the basis of the following description of a painting, a battle scene once again located in the Sala del Maggior Consiglio (*fig. 5*):

And on the other side of this same Sala [Titian] did a battle scene, in which there appear soldiers and horses in a variety of forms, and other extremely notable features. The latter include a young woman who has fallen into a ditch and is climbing out: she uses the bank for support with a stretch of the leg which is highly natural, and the leg gives the impression not of painting, but of actual flesh.²⁶

The author of this passage is Lodovico Dolce (1508–1568), a professional writer or *poli-grafo* who was friends with Titian and is well-known for his *Dialogue on Painting* (1557). Dolce’s words on Titian’s battle contain a number of striking features. He does not say any-

5 Titian, *Battle of Spoleto*, 1537, black chalk, brown and grey-brown wash, heightened with white on blue paper, 38 × 44 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.



thing about the painting's subject matter but that it is a battle. He does not mention the history to which this painting referred, nor does he mention the supposedly evidential value of this painting. His interest clearly lies with other things. For him, this painting of a battle scene is first and foremost an index of the painterly genius of its maker, Titian. The artist has succeeded in making a painting that no longer looks like a painting: the young woman's leg seems to be made of flesh, not paint.

The same painting was also described by Francesco Sansovino. He, too, knew Titian personally; his father Jacopo Sansovino, the sculptor-architect, was a close friend of the painter.

In the fifth [painting], made by Titian with incredible industry and artistry, was represented the battle of Spoleto in Umbria. There, in addition to the other noble things that appeared, a captain showed himself to the eyes of the viewers, and, in order to be ready for the fight, had himself armed by a boy, on the breast of whose armour gleamed with incredible mastery the brilliancy, the lights, and the reflections of the weapons and the robes in which the boy was dressed.²⁷

Like Dolce, Sansovino had noticed the young woman at the bottom of the painting (*fig. 6*): 'Likewise there was a horse of extreme beauty, and a young woman who, climbing out of a ditch, showed great fear on her face.'²⁸ In his ekphrastic prose, the author is not so much concerned with giving a faithful and complete description of the painting; rather, he is trying to approach the effects the painting has on its viewers. He is applying *enargeia*, making it visible even for those who could not see it.²⁹

Both Dolce and Sansovino praise Titian's battle painting, which was lost in the fire of 1577, as a virtuous imitation of nature by an ingenious Venetian artist. This may be the type



6 After Titian, *Head of a Girl*, detail of *Battle of Spoleto*, 1590–1599, oil on paper, 38 × 30 cm, Bergamo, Accademia Carrara.

of response to early modern Italian painting most familiar to us: praise for an artist's skills in lifelike imitation. However, in art-historical writing, the conventional character of such responses all too often becomes an excuse for dismissing them as meaningless *topoi*; at other times, they are treated as if occurring in an autonomous art world, apparently cut loose from the troubles of daily life.³⁰ Yet no such autonomous art world existed in sixteenth-century Venice.³¹

The question is justified, then, whether the topos of lifelike representation, as practised by Dolce and Sansovino, did not actually function in a network of exchanges in which paintings, painters, prototypes, viewers, and their responses interacted with each other; in other words, whether the responses of Dolce and Sansovino were not in fact grounded in social reality. Not only was the upcoming genre of art criticism, to which, one might say, their texts belong, a thoroughly social genre, constituting an interaction with the artwork, fellow viewers, and readers; I also take seriously the possibility that their remarks on the lifelikeness of Venetian paintings, conventional as they may be, are actually meant to convey some kind of truth.³²

The preceding pages have shown a variety of approaches to the paintings of the Doge's Palace, all in contemporary texts. This body of responses reflecting on the most important painted decorations of the Venetian republic communicates, first of all, that these paintings had a variety of functions and effects, and thereby defy our modern-day notion of fixed

genres. We therefore need new concepts that may help us understand how paintings in Venice actually worked. Secondly, these paintings seem to have functioned in social networks, but what did these networks look like; and how did paintings and people embedded in such networks interact? Thirdly, many sources stress the remarkable degree of lifelikeness accomplished by the artists. How are we to understand the claim made by these sources that these paintings are somehow ‘alive’? And, finally, how does their having artistic lifelikeness relate to the paintings’ social lives?

THE LIVES OF PAINTINGS

The objective of this book is to map the lives of selected paintings in sixteenth-century Venice, by means of a detailed reconstruction of the networks in which paintings were embedded and of how these developed over time. My final aim is to arrive at a new understanding of what paintings were in sixteenth-century Venice, and how they functioned as ‘living objects’. Thus, I seek to understand the ‘lives’ of works of art in a very different direction than, to name an example, Fredrika Jacobs’ *The Living Image in Renaissance Italy* (2005), which discusses the ‘lifelikeness’ and ‘aliveness’ of art mainly from the point of view of the contemporary natural sciences.³³ Nor is this a study of sixteenth-century art criticism and theory per se; thinking and writing about art are relevant to the extent that they are *social* activities. For I believe that the lives of artworks can only be fully understood taking the social dimension into account.

The idea that paintings are parts of social networks in which they interact with human beings has a double foundation: it is inspired by recent anthropological theory as well as grounded in historical thought. To start with anthropology, over the last decades art and artefacts have become an increasingly important topic of analysis in the field. Perhaps the single most influential voice has been the British anthropologist Alfred Gell, who in his posthumously published book *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (1998) proposed that artefacts are ‘social agents’, just like human beings; and that these ‘social agents’ are embedded in networks – the ‘art nexus’ – which basically consist of four players: the prototype or thing or person represented; the index, which is Gell’s name for the art object; the artist; and the recipient (who may be the patron).³⁴ According to Gell, art objects confer agency upon the other players in the art nexus. As it is agency that characterizes personhood, according to Gell, his anthropological theory of art approaches art objects as person-like.³⁵ What it comes down to is that the concept of the art nexus may serve as a means to reconstruct a painting’s social life.

An additional advantage of an anthropological approach to European art of the past – as opposed to, say, an aesthetic or semiotic approach – is that it asks for a fully contextual, synchronic analysis, independent of modern Western conceptions of art, which indeed only crystallized during the nineteenth century. Designed as a framework with global



7 Paolo Veronese, *Illusionary Door*, c. 1560, fresco, Maser, Villa Barbaro.

scope, Gell's theory is particularly apt to be applied to art of the premodern West, in which modern notions of what art is, did not yet count; and it removes the emphasis from the work of art itself to the producing culture as a whole.³⁶

In the case of sixteenth-century Venice, this culture had itself a truly social understanding of personhood; which is another reason why anthropology can so fruitfully be put to the task. As Peter Burke explains, the Italy of the large cities was a 'theatre society', in which everyone had a social role that needed to be played with style (*fare bella figura*).³⁷ Peoples' concerns were not with sincerity – which other cultures tend to value more – but with the inherently social factors of appearance and honour. It was all about giving a convincing performance of one's role to one's public. In this theatrical society, art objects became instruments with which one could enhance one's public appearance. This may sound like a familiar idea in the study of art and culture known as conspicuous consumption; yet what I would like to propose is a much more far-reaching thought: that in this culture of role-playing and conventions, with this truly social understanding of personhood, art objects could under certain circumstances play the role of human beings; they could become *personae*.³⁸ We only need to think back to the example of Bianca Capello's portrait, visiting the doge and his friends, to grasp what all this role-playing could lead to: the adoration of a portrait as if it were the sitter herself.

The idea that Italian society was theatrical in character was not only expressed in texts, the best known example of textual sources surely being Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del*

cortegiano (1528). Paintings also reflected on their own abilities to take up person-like qualities. Certain figures from Paolo Veronese's famous fresco decorations of the Villa Barbaro in Maser, for example, seem to suggest that the most important spectacle is not the painting, but the viewer standing in the room, for all to see: the painting itself has turned into the audience (*fig. 7*).³⁹ In art-historical literature, the so-called theatricality of Venetian sixteenth-century painting has received ample attention, but scholars have analyzed it mostly as a formal phenomenon: many similarities have been pointed out between architectural backgrounds, clothing, and composition in paintings on the one hand; and stage designs on the other.⁴⁰ Yet that paintings, just like any human being, were members of society, a society that was theatrical, has not often been noticed.

VENICE AS A CASE STUDY

In art history and other fields in the humanities, it is becoming more and more apparent that objects throughout history and in all parts of the globe can be said to be somehow 'alive'.⁴¹ However, this 'living presence' seems to be at odds with an understanding of painting as a modern 'art', which for an important part developed in Renaissance Italy. Why, then, did people precisely in Renaissance Italy use paintings as if they were alive? My book argues that, instead of being marginal, the attribution of life was central to what painting was, and it does so based on the particularly fertile case study of sixteenth-century Venice.

Its economy resting on international trade, Venice was engaged in all kinds of exchanges with other parts of Italy and the world, but at the same time Venetians typically liked to present themselves as literally and figuratively isolated. To achieve such an image, an important means were the arts, which during the *Cinquecento* were practiced on a heretofore unknown level. Especially with regard to the art of painting this period was considered a milestone, not in the last place by the Venetians themselves. It was also during this period that Venice developed from a maritime power or *stato da mar* to a mainland state or *stato da tera*. For the Venetian nobility this meant a need to adapt, which potentially included a different kind of artistic patronage.

In the field of social history, sixteenth-century Venice has lately received considerable attention. With their valuable studies of Venetian civic ritual and urban space, Edward Muir, Élisabeth Crouzet-Pavan and Iain Fenlon have done work without which this book would not have been possible.⁴² The study of Venetian art, too, in particular Venetian painting, has expanded enormously over the past decades; and its popularity is still growing, judging from the surprising number of blockbuster exhibitions dedicated to sixteenth-century Venetian painting over the last years. This book has benefited greatly from all this scholarship; yet at the same time it goes beyond it in the sense that it aims to make a real connection between Venetian painting and Venetian life, with a study like Manfredo Tafuri's *Venezia e il rinascimento* (1985) as an important source of inspiration because of the way it

synthesizes archival materials, analyses of form and cultural and intellectual contexts into a nuanced and vivacious image of a period.⁴³

To study sixteenth-century Venetian paintings in the context of the culture that produced them, and to reconstruct the social networks in which they were embedded, historical sources are needed. In general, the value of historical sources depends on the questions historians pose to them. While one would perhaps expect every period source regarding Titian and his fellow Venetian artists to have become familiar by now, this turns out not to be the case. New questions lead to a new appreciation of the available sources; new questions lead to discoveries. This book uses a wide range of contemporary sources; from letters, diaries, and poems to chronicles, treatises, diplomatic messages, miracle books, and legal documents. These are sources that would be of interest to social historians, historians of literature, of ideas, of politics, religion, and of law, which makes this study, although it has a strong basis in art history, truly interdisciplinary in character. What is more, much of the material under discussion has not earlier been used to answer the kind of questions that are posed here; and a substantial amount has remained unpublished up to this day.

Some sentences should also be devoted to my choice to focus this book primarily on paintings rather than on the three-dimensional medium of sculpture. While paintings and their lives will indeed be the central object of my inquiry, my discussion will often include such works of art as drawings, woodcuts, engravings, picture frames, relics and reliquaries, early printed books, jewellery, graffiti, buildings and, occasionally, sculptures. These are the objects that together made up the visual culture of the Venetian elites. Nevertheless, the emphasis is deliberately on two-dimensional images and in particular on those that were painted in oils. While this decision has a practical dimension – from the beginnings of art theory and criticism in Venice, painting has been much better documented than sculpture – it is mostly motivated by a more fundamental reason.⁴⁴ Because of their three-dimensionality, sculptures are already bodies in space, and inherently achieve a sense of presence that makes them prone to being treated as the person they represent.⁴⁵ Paintings (and other two-dimensional images), conversely, have to work much harder and first overcome the un-likeness to their prototypes that is their flatness. For this reason, I believe that the life-like agency of paintings is more urgently in need of examination.

The main body of this book consists of four well documented and elaborately analyzed case studies of paintings that have elicited a large amount of responses and maintained a variety of social lives. The benefit of this approach, which could even be called a type of microhistory, is that it offers the possibility to study the interactions of paintings and people to the greatest degree of detail; and it is in small details that we will find the answers to large questions.⁴⁶ This is an advantage of my book over existing studies in the field. In his pioneering *The Power of Images* (1989), David Freedberg gathered an enormous amount of examples of images from across history that were treated as somehow living beings, and in so doing was the first to argue that such responses should be central to art-historical research.⁴⁷ Horst Bredekamp's *Theorie des Bildakts* (2010), equally wide-reaching, puts for-

ward a theoretical interpretation of these responses, the source of which he ultimately locates in the image itself. Still much needed are case studies that, by being firmly grounded in theory as well as in historical analysis, offer a more detailed and focused account of the way the lives of artworks come into being and develop.⁴⁸ With its concentration on sixteenth-century Venice, this is what this book intends to do.

While I do not attempt to be exhaustive, I more or less cover the period of a human life, as befits a study with an anthropological basis. It begins in a time of crisis, the second decade of the sixteenth century, when Venice was slowly recovering from its almost fatal defeat in the battle of Agnadello (1509), when the plague hit the city, and when, in Europe, the Reformation took off. Thus, my narrative begins where Hans Belting's *Bild und Kult* (1990) comes to an end.⁴⁹ Belting's work on medieval images and the divine powers attributed to them argued that in the time before the Reformation, God was perceived to be present in religious images, while the period I am concerned with here saw the dawn of the so-called 'era of art'. In what follows, however, I will show that in sixteenth-century Venice there was no such thing as an era of art; the changes that took place in the ways images interacted with their surroundings were gradual rather than in kind.

My story ends some seventy years later, when Venice was again in crisis. In the early 1580s, thanks to the faction of the so-called *giovani*, the ever increasing power of the Council of Ten, one of the most powerful bodies of the Venetian state, came under attack and as a result was seriously restrained. The opposing faction of the *vecchi* would lose political dominance for time to come. As Tafuri has demonstrated, the divide between the *giovani* and *vecchi* was not only political, but also religious and cultural. As I will show as well, the *vecchi*, those families with the strongest ties to the Holy See, were particularly interested in the visual arts. Thus the end of my narrative in the 1580s marks a turning point for an especially art-loving group and throws light on the role played by paintings in its struggle for power.

SET-UP OF THE BOOK

In what follows, each of the four chapters of this book tells the story of a single painting (or in the case of chapter three, two intimately connected paintings) that had a particularly pregnant social life. Each chapter unravels an art nexus, to speak with Gell, and focuses on another element of that nexus; but as it will turn out, all nexuses are also connected, as some artists, patrons, and prototypes turn up again and again. The book is more or less structured chronologically, but now and then I will look forward or backward; for in the course of the century, the lives of paintings were subject to change, change that needs to be accounted for.

Chapters one and two have paintings as their subjects that would normally be characterized as religious; yet as will become clear, non-religious motives and effects were at least as important for the ways people interacted with these paintings. The first chapter is about



8 Titian, *Venus of Urbino*, before 1538, oil on canvas, 119 × 165 cm, Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi.

the so-called *Christ Carrying the Cross*, owned by one of the largest lay confraternities or *Scuole* of the city, which from about 1520 onwards was believed to be capable of miraculously healing people. Nowadays alternatively attributed to Giorgione or to Titian, this miraculous painting was originally venerated for whom it depicted and for the beneficent effects it had on peoples' health. As this chapter will show, it was only in the second half of the century that the role of the artist became fully acknowledged and that the painting started its second life as the 'miraculous' product of Titian's hand. Chapter two tells the troubled early history of Titian's *Annunciation* altarpiece in the Cathedral of Treviso. Shortly after the installation, the donor portrait in this altarpiece was violently attacked with pitch by an anonymous assailant. This part of the book not only sheds light on the way inhabitants of the Venetian provinces dealt with art, but also analyzes the downside of the power of images: they may invoke negative responses and even destruction. Believed to offer immediate access to their prototypes, paintings in Venice and the Veneto were sometimes attacked to harm the people depicted in them. Could this practice be similar to voodoo or volt sorcery?

In chapters three and four I will instead focus on paintings that do not have religious subject matter; nevertheless, people found inspiration in religious habits and rites for the ways they interacted with these paintings. Chapter three recounts the younger years of Irene and Emilia di Spilimbergo and their painted portraits. The two sisters, noblewomen from Friuli, lived in Venice when one of them, Irene, suddenly died. I will investigate how their family tried to cope with this loss and the role played in this process by the painted portraits of the two young women. This part of the book will also deal with the contemporary poetic response to painting; for Irene's premature end led to a remarkable production

of lyrical poetry reflecting on the power of painting to overcome death. The fourth and last chapter returns to the portrait of Bianca Capello. Inside the *studiolo* of Francesco Bembo, this painting entered into a romantic relationship with its owner; but as a stand-in for the grand duchess herself, it also became involved in Venetian and Italian politics. With an analysis of this remarkable double life, I will pull everything together: the role of the artist and his design; the relation between a painting and its prototype; and the interaction between the painting and its patron and other viewers.

This book aims to restore to these paintings the life that in our age may seem so distant, so dim. Or does it? Sometimes, even contemporary art historians show themselves susceptible to the life power inherent in Venetian paintings. In an essay on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (fig. 8), renowned art historian David Rosand responds very critically to a colleague who in his view had reduced Titian's masterpiece to a mere prostitute: "To call these images "mere pin-ups" can only strike us as a rather perverse form of Venus envy. [...] To deny a Renaissance picture of a nude woman her mythological garb is to turn her out into the streets."⁵⁰ Even nowadays, so much is clear, the *Venus of Urbino* is still very much alive.⁵¹ I will argue over the following pages that in fact, Venetian paintings always were.