7
Tiled arches

Decoration is rarely scrutinized with the same kind of attention which we devote to painting . . .
E. H. Gombrich in The Sense of Order

THE city evolved gradually. At first it was a group of low islands fringed with primitive dwellings, hugging the water that was the main source of food, and communicating mostly by boat. In the end, the islands had developed into a tight jigsaw of paved urban districts centred around *campi*. The organization of the land expressed the changes in social life which, in the course of the centuries, also evolved from a scattering of self-sufficient families to a complex interdependent economic structure organized in a precise political hierarchy.

In 1297 Doge Pietro Gradenigo 'closed' the Great Council, abolishing the free election of its members and restricting its composition to those who could prove that a paternal ancestor had sat on it. If any member married a commoner, he and all his heirs were automatically excluded.

It cannot be imagined that this was a popular step, and his nickname, *Pierazzo* or Nasty Pete, reflects the general opinion of the times. The function of the Great Council was to initiate the process of election of the Doge and to elect, also from its own members, the many councils, magistracies, and committees which governed all aspects of the city's life. It was, therefore, the hub of political power, which was henceforth available only to members of an aristocratic oligarchy whose names became inscribed in the coveted Golden Book.

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By itself such a system of government might have had little stability; and its success and its acceptance by the people was largely due to the interposition, between the patricians and the ordinary people (*popolani*), of a solid middle class of citizens (*cittadini*). The citizens were a respected, influential section of the community, and certain public offices, including the important office of Grand Chancellor, were reserved to them; which helps explain how, for five hundred years, such a body of affluent and ambitious men could remain content with their emasculation of political power.

The title of 'citizen' was a desirable one and not acquired lightly. A foreigner, for example, would normally need to be resident for twenty-five years before he could be considered. These were professional men; they had to show that they and their father and their grandfather had not been manual workers. Many of them were merchants who eventually might become richer than the nobility. Indeed, a home (the *Cassini*) for the impoverished nobility had to be established at Campo Santa Barbara, from which they were referred to as the *barnabotti*. Here the unfortunate inmates supported themselves by selling their votes on the Grand Council.

A few of the *cittadini* became wealthy enough to acquire prestigious palaces on the Canal Grande. One such was Giovanni Dario, a native of Crete who had served the Republic in diplomatic duties in Constantinople, Persia, Albania, and Egypt, and had been elected *Guardian Grande* of the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, one of the most prestigious posts in the city. This was a man whose social and commercial clout was something to be reckoned with; he had married his daughter to a patrician. In 1479 he successfully negotiated a treaty between the Republic and the Sultan Mohammed II. His diplomatic skill was appreciated and richly rewarded by both sides, the Republic giving him the plot of land on which he was to build one of the glories of Venice, the Ca' Dario.

Few *cittadini*, however, could aim so high; and, in 1526, marriage between a noble and a commoner, however rich the latter might be, was forbidden by law. While serving as *bailo* in Constantinople, years before his election to the Dogeship, the penultimate Doge, Paolo Renier, had undergone a ceremony of marriage with a Greek

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dancing girl named Margherita Dalmas and brought her back with him to Venice. She was, however, never officially recorded in the *Libro d'Oro* as his wife, nor socially recognized as such. His niece, Giustina Renier, acted as the official head of his household and filled the role of Dogaressa on ceremonial occasions.

Most of the houses of the *cittadini* faced a lesser waterway or onto a *calle* or *campo*. The front entrances on dry land could not compete with the elaborate loggias of the water front. Many are embellished in stone, but some are simple doorways over which decorative arches in brick and tile could still provide an individuality and source of domestic pride. And in our present time, for eyes less sensitive to the social implications of building material, they will not seem inferior art.

The two domestic land entrances in the preceding chapter come into this category. They were made of decorative brick. The arches to be described here are also inserted into the facades of houses. Resting securely on a stone lintel and incorporated into the wall, they make no structural contribution to the facade; and this has permitted the use of ornate tilework instead of weight-bearing brick.

Only a handful of such structures remains. Their dates range from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Two are in San Polo (Calle Larga dei Boteri and Campiello San Tomà); and two in Dorsoduro (Campo Santa Margherita and Crosera San Pantalon); while there is a fragment of one the other side of the Grand Canal in Castello (Campo Santa Maria Formosa).

Ca' Foscolo-Corner, Campo Santa Margherita

The Ca' Foscolo-Corner (Dorsoduro 2931) stands in front of the fish and vegetable stalls of the Campo Santa Margherita (7:1) under the guardian eye of the titular saint of the *campo*. She can be seen high on the north wall standing without any expression of emotion over the dyspeptic dragon from whose stomach she has just escaped. There may be some poetic justice in her having been adopted as the patron saint of childbirth. The house was redesigned in the fourteenth century, probably by the Celega family of builders who constructed the campanile of the Frari church. Its overhanging eaves are

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rare now in Venice since they were later forbidden as a fire precaution and to let in more light to the narrow streets. The sensitive preservation of the old doorway and the stylishly set-out Gothic windows suggest owners who were well-to-do but not rich enough to afford the luxury of a grand palace. The house faces the *campo* rather than the water, and the ground floor was intended to accommodate shops from the beginning. At the end of the eighteenth century, Gabriel Bella's painting *The arrival of a new parish priest at Santa Margherita* (in the Querini Stampalia Collection) shows the ladies of the house in their absurdly tall white wigs watching the arrival of the new parish priest from a balcony on the front of the house decked out with festive cloth; while a boy is clinging on to the chimney stack on the overhanging roof.

The facade of the house is not symmetrical, the doorway being placed to one side, as in the house in the Salizzada San Stae. Here also the entrance does not lead directly into the house, but into a courtyard. Thus the portico, considerably older than the present facade, could well have been originally the land entrance to a walled plot extending from the *campo* to the Rio di Santa Margherita in the way Caniggia suggests the early settlements were laid out.

The arch has an internal diameter of 190 cm and an external diameter of 240 cm. You are immediately aware of a level of complexity and sophistication far above that of the simple entrances in the Salizzada San Stae and the Calle Larga dei Proverbi. The rectangular doorway of pink Verona marble with a complex moulding is probably of the eleventh to twelfth centuries. Above it arches a semicircle of ornate tile-work, enclosing an intricately patterned tile-work lunette, the whole being attributable to the thirteenth century. The arch has outer and inner dentilled borders which enclose two further rope-twist borders, while its central band consists of a pattern of stars (7:2). The lunette is a latticework in which stylized flowers and stars or other geometric designs are embedded. In its centre, a fourteenth-century coat of arms of the Corner family in white Istrian stone has been inserted. Two hideous iron bars have been hammered in over the origins of the arch to hold the wall in place; and the damage to the arch has been replaced with a crude cement moulding

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which, to the eyes of those responsible for this crime, must have seemed indistinguishable from the original.

Ruskin found it, of course, and illustrated it in his *Examples of the architecture of Venice*. It is clear that the offensive iron bars had not yet been put into place, and we are spared the invective that surely would have followed. Here, as so often, the minuteness of Ruskin's drawing goes hand in hand with a precise analytical description. 'There are seven patterns used for the squares . . . and they are so arranged by the builder, that whichever way the courses of them are read – laterally or upwards – two similar patterns shall never be in juxtaposition; and that no regular arrangement or recurrence of pattern in any definable disposition shall be traceable. At least I can myself discover none – the reader may try – every pattern in the drawing being in its proper place.'

Calle Larga dei Boteri

This arch (San Polo 1565), attributed to the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries, is in a disgraceful state of disrepair. It forms a lunette over a doorway that is almost a semicircle, but has a slight point formed from two curves without inflection. There is an outer dentilled stone border within which is a single layer of fine bricks arranged circumferentially. Internal to this is a broad band of tiles decorated with a pattern of six-pointed stars (7:3). The inner border of the arch is formed by a narrow rounded rim of tiles.

The lunette between the arch and the lintel of the doorway is faced with grimy slabs of marble; and in its centre is a chiselled-away fourteenth-century coat of arms. It seems probable that the centre of the lunette was originally composed of decorated tile-work similar to that in the lunettes in Campo Santa Margherita and the Crosera San Pantalon.

The internal diameter of the arch is 170 cm, and the external 230 cm, dimensions similar to those at the Ca' Foscolo-Venier. In this case the doorway is placed at the centre of a symmetrical facade. The windows of the facade are of Ruskin's fourth order, which suggests that the entrance was part of an original building that was incorporated into a later structure.

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Crosera San Pantalon

Luckily, this outstanding arch and lunette (Dorsoduro 3821–2), made all in tile and attributed to the thirteenth century, are well preserved (7:4). Perhaps their position high up in the wall of the narrow *Crosera* has helped. The arch, with an external diameter of 245 cm, is essentially bicentric, but has a slight inflexion which makes it technically ogee. From without inwards, it is composed of an outer dentilled border, a row of diamond points, a delicate knotted chain pattern, a further row of diamond points, and finally a rounded inner border.

The lunette is filled with a grid of lozenges, in the spaces of which are stylized four-petalled flowers. In the centre has been inserted a fifteenth-century tablet of Istrian stone of a four-petalled shape, bearing an effaced emblem.

The arch and lunette rest on the remains of the original stone lintel; but the entrance below has been converted into two unattractive adjacent doorways. It seems, therefore, certain that the arch has always been supported by the lintel. It is placed centrally below a four-light window of Ruskin's fourth order, on each side of which are two symmetrically placed single fourth-order windows. Although, in this way, it participates in the symmetry of the facade, it may well have existed before the facade was built and could have been a centrally placed land entrance to a primitive plot that extended down to the Rio di Ca' Foscari.

Ca' Bosco, Campiello San Tomà

The front of the Ca' Bosco or Bosso (San Polo 2802) faces the Campiello San Tomà across a narrow *rio*. As you cross the *campiello* it comes progressively in view. First your eye takes in the typical outline of a marble Byzantine arch leading into a small courtyard from the water. The old arch is much damaged, but traces of an intriguing zoomorphic design remain at the top. Higher on the wall are Gothic stone windows and scattered *patere*. It is only on turning into the short *fondamenta*, leading out of the square along the water's edge, that you can see the whole facade of the Ca' Bosco; and, at that moment, the elegant tiled Gothic arch over the doorway at its

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far corner catches the eye (7:5). The doorway opens outwards onto the bridge which crosses the *rio* and which leads on into a narrow *calle* between the Ca' Bosco and the Ca' Centani where the playwright Goldoni once lived. Inside the Ca' Bosco, the doorway opens directly into the courtyard, so that the water entrance and the land entrance stand side by side in a unique arrangement. Above the arch is the horizontal line of a well-preserved Byzantine frieze.

The arch is composed of two segments meeting at a point without inflection. It has a filigree design of overlapping little Gothic arches, set between simple inner and outer borders, and is set above the lintel of a much older doorway in Verona marble. Both the lintel and the doorposts are moulded and there is a dentilled surround. The lunette between the arch and the lintel is occupied by a sinuous quadrilobar arabic pattern that has been scratched in. In its centre has been inserted a stone tablet containing the monogram of San Bernardino of Siena in a four-leaf design.

The arch and lunette are considerably later than the others of this group, and may be attributed to the fifteenth century at which time it seems likely that the palace was reconstructed, retaining elements of a considerably earlier date, including the water entrance and the rectangular marble doorway under the tiled arch, both of which could be two hundred years earlier.

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