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RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

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Volume 12, Number 2, 1985

Proceedings of the Symposium on The Roman Tradition in Wall Decoration, Palazzo Cardelli, Rome, 7-9 June 1984
Comptes Rendus du Symposium sur La tradition romaine dans la décoration murale, Palazzo Cardelli, Rome, 7-9 juin 1984

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1073667ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1073667ar

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

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Cite this article

Knox, G. (1985). Roman and Less Roman Elements in Venetian History Painting, 1650-1750. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *12*(2), 175–178. https://doi.org/10.7202/1073667ar

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Roman and Less Roman Elements in Venetian History Painting, 1650-1750

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The degree to which Venetian history painting dominated Europe in the third quarter of the 16th century is a commonplace. It is far less generally recognised that its domination was no less during the first quarter of the 18th century. Tiepolo, of course, is well-known, but the rôle and accomplishments of Molinari and Bellucci, of Pagani and Pellegrini, of Sebastiano Ricci and Amigoni, remain very little understood, and their importance very little appreciated.

One of the difficulties is that these artists painted mostly on canvas, and that consequently very little of their secular work remains in place. It is even possible that Tiepolo might share some of their obscurity if his frescoes in Würzburg and Madrid, in Ca' Labia and the Villa Valmarana, had been painted on canvas and scattered to the winds a hundred years ago or more. This fate has certainly overtaken all his important secular cycles of canvases: for example those of Ca' Zenobio, Ca' Dolfin, Ca' Manin and St. Petersburg.

Another problem is that the key works with which we are concerned are not small easel paintings, but vast canvases of didactic purpose, often representing scenes of Roman republican history, of a kind which largely went out of fashion across Europe from about 1720 onwards. This created a serious crisis for the history painters who were engaged on this type of work, and we find that Piazzetta turned to book illustration, Amigoni to portraiture, while Tiepolo found work in Milan, and in two or three villas of the *Terra firma*. Only in the 1740s did he manage to develop in Venice the new international court style by which he is mostly remembered. Didactic history painting, albeit on a much smaller scale, was re-established in Rome in the 1760s, and this has been much studied as an aspect of neo-classicism, but the earlier Venetian achievement is still generally forgotten.

The subject is large and complex, and for the present purpose I propose to consider, essentially, only one theme, which nevertheless may be held to be central to the whole phenomenon. This is the *Story of Scipio*. In Venice there were no great buildings, and few sculptures to remind people of the glory of ancient Rome, and modern Rome was often seen as a somewhat alien, and at times even hostile city. The idea of antiquity was introduced into the city largely through literature, printing and the book-trade. At an early date Venice adopted Francesco Petrarca as its great writer of the early Renaissance. Unlike Dante in Florence, Petrarch was dedicated to the preservation of the tradition of Roman literature: in biography, in his *De Viris Illustribus*, of which the hero occupying one half of the whole text is Scipio Africanus, and in epic poetry, in the *Africa*, which again is devoted to the story of Scipio. So along with Petrarch, Venice adopted Scipio Africanus, in part perhaps because the most powerful family in Venice, the Corner, encouraged the notion that they were descended from the Roman *gens Cornelia*, and therefore that Publius Cornelius Scipio was their most distinguished ancestor, and in part because the Venetians could see a parallel between Scipio's epic struggle against the Carthaginian power in North Africa and their own perpetual struggle against the infidel power which now dominated the same area and represented a similar threat to Italy.

Thus in the first decade of the 16th century, Francesco Corner, son of the great Zorzi, and brother of Caterina, the celebrated Queen of Cyprus, commissioned Andrea Mantegna to paint a frieze depicting scenes from the story of Scipio. Just before he died in 1506, Mantegna completed one panel, the *Scipio acting as host to the Idean Deity Cybele*, now in the National Gallery in London. The picture celebrates four members of the *gens Cornelia*. Scipio Africanus, with his fellow consul on the right, welcome Scipio Nasica on the left, who leads the procession which introduces the cult of Cybele into Rome, while in the background on the left stand the tombs of their respective fathers, Publius Cornelius Scipio, the elder, and Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio. It seems that the pro-

ject was then continued after Mantegna's death by Giovanni Bellini, who painted at least one canvas which survives, depicting *Scipio and the Iberian Hostages*, which is now in the National Gallery in Washington.

These canvases were evidently designed to decorate the upper walls of an apartment, which we may designate as 'The Camerino of Francesco Corner.' This was presumably located in the old Ca' Corner on the Grand Canal in Venice, and if so, it could not have lasted long, for the palace was totally destroyed by fire in 1532. However, in 1528 Francesco Corner moved to Rome, having become a Cardinal, and no doubt took all or some of the contents of his Camerino with him, thus saving them for posterity.[1]

I would submit that this Camerino of Francesco Corner is hardly less important for the history of Italian civilisation than the infinitely more famous Camerino of Isabella d'Este at Mantua, which preceded it by a year or two, and the Camerino of Alfonso d'Este at Ferrera, which followed a few years later. Moreover I would claim that it played no insignificant rôle in the devising of the next great project on the theme of the story of Scipio.

Just about the time that Francesco Corner moved to Rome, Giulio Romano, newly arrived in Mantua, began to devise the great series of tapestry cartoons which came to be called *Le Grand Scipion*. I feel sure that these were originally planned to appeal to the victorious Emperor Charles v. However he preferred tapestries which glorified his own deeds, and so in 1532 the project was taken up by his rival, François Ier of France, for whom it was completed by the Brussels weavers by April 1535.

It was the most fabulous tapestry project of the age, comprising twelve scenes of *The Life of Scipio* and ten scenes of the *Triumph of Scipio*. For two hundred years it was displayed on the great state occasions of the French Court, and during the Revolution it was burned, to recover the gold and silver that had been woven into it. It was 4 metres high and had a running length of some 130 metres, and of course it established a canon of Scipio subjects.[2]

Some twenty years later, in the 1550s, a second set of ten tapestries was woven for Jacques d'Albon, Maréchal de Saint-André, which also later belonged to the French Crown. Of this set, four tapestries survive in the great hall of Hearst Castle at San Simeon on the coast of California, including *Scipio saves his father at the Battle of the Ticino, The Continence of Scipio* and *The Battle of Baecula*.[3]

For a hundred years, many other sets, large and small, were woven by the Brussels weavers from the original *grands patrons*, and in the mid-17th century one such set was purchased by the Zane family in Venice. It was one of the oldest and most celebrated Venetian families. In the second half of the 17th century, the old palace on the Rio di S. Agostino was extensively remodelled by Baldassare Longhena.[4] Originally the Zane set comprised eleven pieces, and six of these are preserved today in Ca' Labia.[5]

These tapestries enjoyed an enormous prestige in Venice. They were thought to be designed by Raphael, and even if this was not quite true, they certainly represented in the city a very notable souvenir of the art of the High Renaissance in Rome. They are among the very few works of art in Venetian palaces which are mentioned in the 18th and 19th-century guide-books, and it may be claimed that they stimulated in Venice a whole new pattern of history painting.

In the great central room, or *portego*, of Ca' Vendramin-Calergi there are seven canvases representing unintelligible bits of Roman history. These have been shown to be the remains of three large canvases which have been cut up, representing three scenes from the story of Scipio. One of them represents a new addition to the canon of Scipio subjects: *Scipio reporting his triumphs to the Roman Senate in the Temple of Bellona*; the reconstruction is confirmed by a sketch for the picture in the Musée des Beaux-Arts at Mirande in Gascony. The other two scenes, *Scipio burning the Numidian and Carthaginian camps in a night attack*, and *The Triumph of Scipio, with Syphax led in chains*, are themes established by the tapestries. These canvases are attributed to Nicolo Bambini, and we are still unable to say for which palazzo they were originally intended. A date ca. 1700-1710 may be suggested.[6]

A second similar project was undertaken ca. 1700-1706 for a modest palazzo belonging to a minor branch of the Corner family, on the Rio di S. Polo in Venice. An old photograph showed some of the canvases in their original position in the portego. Altogether there were six overdoors, one by Lazzarini being dated 1700, and four large canvases representing scenes from the story of Scipio Africanus. All these were removed in the 1890s to the house of Mr. Edward Berwind, 'The Elms,' at Newport, Rhode Island, and the large pictures are still in the house, having been glued to the walls. Two of them are to be found in the hall. *The Continence of Scipio* by Pellegrini, and *Scipio declining Regal Honours* by Paolo Pagani. The latter is again a new addition to the

1 George Knox, 'The Camerino of Francesco Corner,' *Arte Veneta*, XXXII (1978), 79-84.

2 Colonel d'Astier, *La Belle Tapisserye du Roi (1532-1797), et les tentures de Scipion l'Africain* (Paris, 1907). Exhibition catalogue, *Jules Romain: l'Histoire de Scipion* (Paris, Grand Palais, 1978).

3 I am grateful to Ann Miller, Curator at Hearst Castle, for making photographs of these tapestries available to me.

4 Elena Bassi, *Architettura del '600 e '700 a Venezia* (Naples, 1962), 143-4 (99); Elena Bassi, *Palazzi di Venezia* (Venice, 1976), 317-321 (418-427).

5 Terisio Pignatti, F. Pedrocco, E. Martinelli-Pedrocco, *Palazzo Labia a Venezia* (Turin, 1982), 239-244.

6 George Knox, 'Some notes on large paintings depicting scenes from antique history by Ricci, Piazzetta, Bambini and Tiepolo,' *Atti del Congresso Internazionale su Sebastiano Ricci et il suo tempo* (Udine, 1975), 96-104.

Scipio canon.[7] In the dining room are found the two other canvases, *King Syphax of Numidia before Scipio Africanus* by Piazzetta (again a new addition to the Scipio canon), and *The Triumph of Scipio* by Pagani.[8]

Here perhaps two observations are necessary. First, it is remarkable how these painters were continually going back to the literary sources in search of new Scipio subjects, never remaining content with those provided by *Le Grand Scipion*. Second, although the canvases now in 'The Elms' were painted for a lesser branch of the Corner family, it is clear that other families were interested in this theme as well. Thus we hear of Gregorio Lazzarini painting four large Scipio subjects for Ca' Widman: *Scipio rescuing his father, Scipio halting Roman soldiers in flight, Scipio and the Iberian princess*, and *The Death of Sophonisba*.[9] The first and third subjects may be said to derive from the tapestries, but the second and the fourth are again new additions to the canon. All these paintings can no longer be traced, and it seems that they were taken to Rome in the early 18th century.

Apart from the story of Scipio and the Corner, we can note one further case of a cycle of canvases which clearly relate to a family's pride in its supposed ancestors. This is the *Story of Queen Zenobia*, painted by the young Tiepolo for Ca' Zenobio, about 1718. Again this seems to have consisted of four canvases: *The Royal Hunt, The Allocution of Queen Zenobia, Queen Zenobia before Aurelian*, and *The Triumph of Aurelian*, now scattered between the Crespi collection in Milan, the Prado, the Turin Gallery and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.[10] These canvases mark the beginning of a turning away from Roman republican subjects in the direction of the exotic east. A more general approach to Roman history is evident in the canvases of Ca' Barbaro: *The Rape of the Sabines* by Ricci, *Coriolanus and the women* by Balestra, and *Mucius Scaevola* by Piazzetta, and in the ten canvases by Tiepolo for Ca' Dolfin, one of which is dated 1729.[11] Classical mythology is treated more rarely, the conspicuous examples being the three great canvases by Lazzarini, Molinari and Bellucci for Ca' Correr, of ca. 1698, now in Ca' Rezzonico, and the canvases by Tiepolo for Ca' Sandi, of ca. 1725, of which one of two large canvases and two of three small canvases survive.[11a] In the 1720s one notes the beginning of an enthusiasm for Greek drama, particularly Euripides, which culminates in Tiepolo's *Sala di Efigenia* of the Villa Valmarana, and about 1740 the cult of Tasso is born, with Piazzetta's illustrations for Albrizzi's great edition of the *Gerusalemme Liberata*, followed by the Tasso cycles of Tiepolo and Guardi.[12] Apart from the rather special case of the Tiepolos of Ca' Dolfin, which were commissioned by two old Dolfin brothers, who died in 1729, the enthusiasm for scenes of Roman republican history, with its special focus on the story of Scipio Africanus, was clearly over by about 1720, but for Tiepolo at least there was a curious return to Roman history, though with an entirely different emphasis, in the 1740s.

The frescoes of Ca' Labia of 1744 are so celebrated that one is very much tempted to take them for granted. The great central room of the palace is decorated in an entirely theatrical fashion with the quadratura of Girolamo Mingozzi-Colonna, which opens out on either side to reveal on one side *The Meeting of Anthony and Cleopatra*, and on the other *The Banquet of Anthony and Cleopatra*, the supreme surviving secular decorations of Tiepolo in Venice. The whole thing is dazzling and unique, without precursor and without anything really comparable to follow it.[13] One may well wonder how it all came about.

It has now become evident that the decorations of Ca' Labia were preceded by a cycle of canvases, probably painted for the great central room of the Summer Palace at St. Petersburg in or about 1742, comprising two large canvases, which still survive at Archangelskoye near Moscow, four narrrow canvases, which are lost, and a ceiling, for which we may at least have the modello.[14]

It is still difficult to be sure what happened exactly. One may suppose that the Russian Empress Elizabeth Petrova may have had little interest in Repub-

7 George Knox, 'Pagani, Piazzetta and Pellegrini: from Ca' Corner to "The Elms",' *Apollo* (Nov. 1979), 428-437. The attribution of paintings to Pagani in this article are doubted by Lino Moretti, 'Antonio Molinari rivisitato,' *Arte Veneta* (1979), 59-69, postscriptum, who suggests that all the large pictures are 25-30 years later than the overdoors (which I continue to doubt), and Silva Burri, 'Paolo Pagani,' *Saggi e Memorie*, 13 (1982), 47-72, on p. 69. They do not however suggest the name of any other painter.

8 The attribution of this painting to Piazzetta is doubted by Leslie Jones, *The Paintings of Giovanni Battista Piazzetta* (Ann Arbor, 1981), 304-7 (R37.ML), who suggests Antonio Molinari, and by Adriano Mariuz, *l'Opera Completa di Piazzetta* (Milan, 1982), 121 (A. 60), who suggests Giuseppe Angeli (which I continue to doubt). He also proposes the name of Mattia Bortoloni as the painter of *Scipio declining regal honours*.

9 Da Canal, *Vita di Gregorio Lazzarini* (Venice, 1809), XXVIII-XXIX.

10 George Knox, 'Giambattista Tiepolo: Queen Zenobia and Ca' Zenobio: "una delle prime sue fatture",' *Burlington Magazine* (July 1979), 409-418

11 George Knox (note 6).

11a Postcript. The two missing canvases from Ca' Sandi have now been located by Bernard Aikema. They are by a close associate of Tiepolo, and they will be published in due course.

12 George Knox, 'The Tasso Cycles of Giambattista Tiepolo and Gianantonio Guardi,' *Museum Studies*, 9 (Art Institute of Chicago, 1978), 49-95. Exhibition catalogue, *G.B. Piazzetta: disegni, incisioni, libri, manoscritti* (Venice, 1983), 41-43, 67-77.

13 Terisio Pignati et al., 57-141. This is not a proper place to take issue with Pignatti with respect to his rejection of the dating of the frescoes to the summer of 1744. The drawings point very clearly to the conclusion that the decorations of Ca' Labia are earlier than the ceiling of the Scalzi, and the documents make it perfectly clear that the Scalzi ceiling was painted by Tiepolo in the summer of 1745.

14 George Knox, 'Anthony and Cleopatra in Russia...,' *Editing Illustrated Books*, 15th Conference on Editorial Problems (University of Toronto, Nov. 1979), edited by William Blissett (New York, Garland, 1980), 35-55.

lican Rome, but that her imagination may have been more easily captivated by the story of the amorous Queen of Egypt, who 'held the glorious east in fee.' So far as Roman history is concerned, Anthony and Cleopatra are two completely deplorable characters. History is written by the winners and they were undoubtedly losers, but Anthony's political dream was not fundamentally silly, and ultimately the Roman Empire survived in the Eastern Mediterranean for a thousand years after it had collapsed in the West, and the Russian Empire of the 18th century might well see itself as the heir of Byzantium in a political as well as a religious sense. However this may be, the idea of glorifying Anthony and Cleopatra is a thoroughly anti-Roman idea, which seems to originate with William Shakespeare. It could well have been picked up by Francesco Algarotti while he was in England, and sold to the Russian Court while he was on his visit to Russia in 1739.

So we here suggest that it was the fame of the Russian *Anthony and Cleopatra* which inspired the Labia to undertake their monumental scheme of palace decoration. Mingozzi-Colonna's quadratura together with that of Visconti in the ball-room of Ca' Rezzonico are no doubt the last great performances in the Roman tradition of decorative wall-painting, as that tradition was understood in 18th century Venice, even though the subject-matter of the *Meeting* and the *Banquet* represents a total rejection of Republican *gravitas* and *virtus*.