

How Did Venice Contribute to the Italian Renaissance?

Venice, or Venezia in Italian, was founded in the 5th century on shallow islands along the coast of the Adriatic Sea when the outsider Veneto tribe moved to the swampy islands in the lagoon for safety. Venice was ruled by many different groups, but by the 13th century, it was one of the most prosperous trading cities in Europe. Today, Venice is considered one of the most romantic and beautiful cities in the world.

In the Middle Ages, the Byzantine Empire provided exotic trade goods from Asia and the Islamic world to Venice. Venice was located between the Eastern Mediterranean and western Europe and controlled most of the ports in the Adriatic Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. It established trading posts as far east as the Black Sea. Goods brought back from the East by Venice's merchant navy were then shipped to consumers across Europe by land and sea routes. Along with the trade goods, ideas and knowledge from the East were introduced to Europe through this important port city.

Social Systems

There were three social classes in Venice:

- The upper class was the **aristocracy**, the original noble families who had controlled Venice since tribal times and who could vote for the government.
- Below the aristocracy were the *Cittadini Originarii*, the "original citizens," of the Republic who could hold public office but not vote.
- The third social class was the common people, who also had some rights as citizens but could only apply for a limited number of government positions.



aristocracy: the nobility or those with inherited titles

basilica: a Roman Catholic cathedral of particular honour

San Marco **Basilica**, built between the 11th and 14th centuries, is a mixture of Eastern and Western architectural styles. It is a reminder of Venice's contact with other cultures; Byzantine architects began the construction and early Renaissance architects finished it. Today, the beautiful cathedrals of the city-states are still in use. They show the central role religion played in people's lives during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.



I wonder ... what do the important buildings and monuments built today show about our worldview?



Marco Polo sailing from Venice in 1271

Marco Polo is famous for his writings about his adventures on a journey to Cathay (China). As a teenager, he travelled with his trader father along the Silk Road. Their journey to Cathay and back took 17 years. Refer to the Silk Road map on pages 16 and 17. When they returned to Venice in 1295, people were fascinated with the story of his experiences and the exotic societies he encountered. He recorded his story in the book *Il Milione* (*The Million*), which was read with excitement across Europe. Some historians consider his story a collection of tales from a variety of sources rather than a true story of his personal adventures.

Venice was the main trading centre with the Islamic world since the early Middle Ages. Many new concepts related to mathematics, navigation, trade, and trade goods were first introduced to Europe through its traders. Many words with Arabic origins or from other places along the Silk Road were adopted into English to explain the new concepts.

Admiral — *amir al-baHr*
"commander of the sea"

Alfalfa — *alfas,fas,ah* "fodder"

Algebra — *al-jabr* "reintegration"

Calico — *Qaliqu:t* (from Calicut, a city in India)

Candy — *qandi* "sugared"
(from India)

Cheque — *sha:h* "king"

Coffee — *qahwah* "coffee"

Cotton — *qutn* "cotton"

Crimson — *qirmazi*, from *qirmiz*, the insect that provides the dye

Giraffe — *zara:fa* "giraffe"

Jar — *jarrah* "large earthen vase"

Lemon — *laymu:n* "lemon"

Lilac — *li:la:k* "lilac"

Mattress — *matrah* "mat, cushion"

Mummy — *mu:miya*
"embalmed body"

Orange — *na:ranj* "orange"
(originally from Sanskrit)

Safari — *safari:y* "journey"

Satin — *zaytu:ni* (from Zaytun, a city in China)

Sofa — *s,uffah* "raised dais with cushions"

Sugar — *sukkar* "sugar" (originally from Sanskrit)

Tambourine — *tanbu:r*
"small tambour"

Tariff — *ta riifa* "notification, price list"

Zero — *s,ifr* "empty"

Government

Venice was a republic. The head of government in Venice was called the Doge. In 1297, a group of wealthy noblemen of the aristocracy ruled that only their families could vote for the doge and belong to the government, or Great Council. These families, which made up only 2% of the population, made up the oligarchy that ruled Venice. However, many of the Cittadini Originarii became wealthy merchants and were able to buy positions in the aristocracy.

The Senate and Great Council made government decisions. The doge headed the Senate and was elected for life. He often had very little power, being dominated by the members of the Great Council.

I wonder ... how does the government in Venice compare to the governments in Alberta and Canada?

Scuole

The citizens of Venice implemented a new social institution, the scuola, out of civic duty, tied to religious beliefs. Scuole were associations that met for prayer sessions, collected money for good causes and, most importantly, held masses for their members who were sick, dying, or dead.

Venetians lived in fear of punishment in the afterlife for sins committed in this life. Donations to the needy and good deeds were thought to lessen the punishment awaiting them at death. People could combine their efforts through the brotherhood of the scuole and achieve this important duty for all their members.

Smaller scuole provided charity for their own members, being the forerunner of social systems such as employment insurance. Rich and poor members donated according to their wealth, and the pooled money supported elderly and sick members and their widows and children.

Scuole is the plural form of scuola.



Venice, from *Galleria del Carte Geografiche*, Egnazio Danti, 1580–1583. Venice was a powerful city-state that controlled many parts of the existing trade routes between Europe and Asia.



Venice canal, present day. Much of Venice's magic comes from its water-filled canals that are still used as streets.

armory: a place where weapons and ammunition are kept



Two female Carnival masks. Venice is famous for its Carnevale celebrations. *Carnival* comes from the Latin word for “Farewell, meat!” It is a celebration held before Lent, during which Christians were not allowed to eat meat. Lent is a religious period of fasting leading up to Easter.

The Venice Carnival tradition began around 1162 to celebrate a victory over a nearby enemy city. As the years passed, the celebration became a tradition and by 1268, the partiers used masks to hide their faces, a tradition that still continues today. By covering their faces, the rich and the poor were equal and could escape from the rules of their social class.

I wonder ... how do some people today observe Lent?

I wonder ... do other religions have practices similar to Lent?

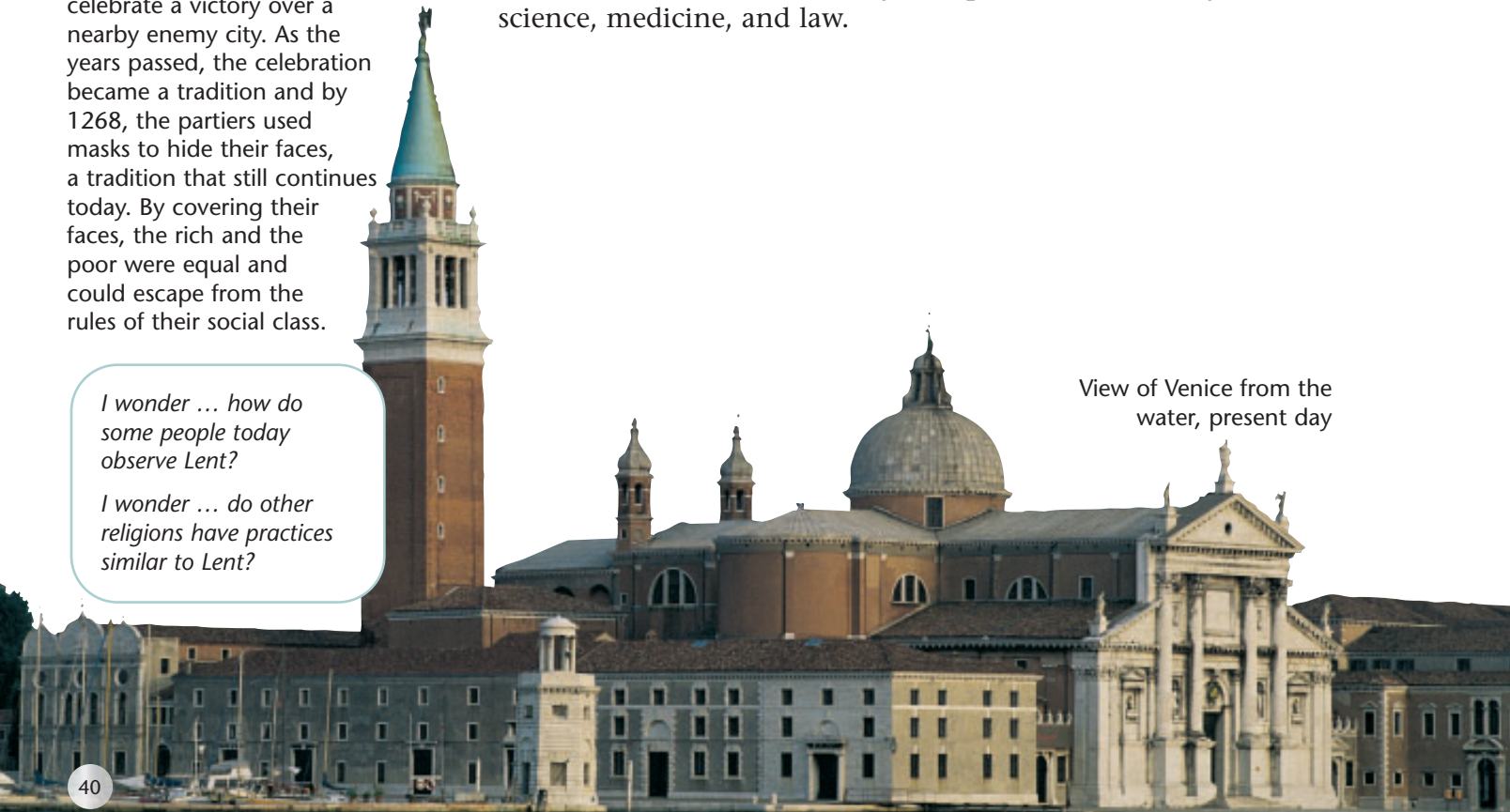
Scuole grandi were large scuole, often with more than 500 members, with many wealthy members. They gradually accumulated huge wealth. They then provided charity to needy citizens throughout Venice. They also gained status for their scuole by enhancing the city of Venice: building meeting halls of grand architecture, decorated with valuable works of art.

Venice Gains Importance

Venice became an important city-state for many reasons:

- It had a stable form of government.
- It was more successful in sea trade than any other city-state, in large part because it had built up a strong shipyard, naval base, and **armory**. The merchant class became very wealthy through trade with the East.
- The new merchant class supported the arts, so artists flocked to the city.
- Venice became the centre of the European book trade. It was the first Italian city-state to use the mechanical printing press, invented in the mid-1400s, for commercial purposes. Books of all kinds were printed: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew texts for scholars; romances, novels, and elementary readers; musical scores; atlases and maps; illustrated anatomical and botanical texts.
- It also had a famous university that promoted the study of science, medicine, and law.

View of Venice from the water, present day



THE FAMOUS AND THE TALENTED of Venice



Marco Polo



Sansovino



Tintoretto



Bellini



Manutius

Marco Polo, adventurer and writer
Jacopo Sansovino, sculptor
Jacopo Robusti Tintoretto, painter
Giovanni Bellini, painter, influenced with his use of colour and light
Aldus Manutius, established Aldine printing press to publish Greek and Latin classics

Other Venetians

Jacopo Palma, known for his portraits of women
Johanne of Speier, first printer in Venice
Nicolas Jenson, one of the first printers to design the Roman type for printing presses
Lombardo family, sculptors and architects

REFLECT AND RESPOND

1. What were some of the details of the elements of worldview of the citizens of Venice — social systems, political and economic systems, and culture — that were presented in the last few pages? Use a graphic organizer to show the details of the Venetian worldview.
2. Why did Venice become an important city-state?
3. Discuss in groups: Venice was home to many artists and architects. Why do you think there are no women artists shown on the bulletin board on this page?
4. Compare and contrast parts of Canada's social system to the Venetian system of scuole.