From Darkness to Light
Writers in Museums 1798-1898

Edited by Rosella Mamoli Zorzi and Katherine Manthorne

From Darkness to Light explores from a variety of angles the subject of museum lighting in exhibition spaces in America, Japan, and Western Europe throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Written by an array of international experts, these collected essays gather perspectives from a diverse range of cultural sensibilities. From sensitive discussions of Tintoretto's unique approach to the play of light and darkness as exhibited in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice, to the development of museum lighting as part of Japanese art's self-fashioning, via the story of an epic American painting on tour, museum illumination in the work of Henry James, and lighting alterations at Chatsworth, this book is a treasure trove of illumination contributions.

The collection is at once a refreshing insight for the enthusiastic museum-goer, who is brought to an awareness of the exhibit in its immediate environment, and a wide-ranging scholarly compendium for the professional who seeks to proceed in their academic or curatorial work with a more enlightened sense of the lighted space.

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Cover image: Jacopo Tintoretto, The Adoration of the Magi, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice (graphic elaboration by Pier Giovanni Possamai, The University of Venice, Ca' Foscari)

Cover design: Anna Gass
6. The Light in the Venice Ducal Palace

Camillo Tonini

The history of the Ducal Palace is also the history of the fires that have laid waste to it: each time the monumental building has been rebuilt, adapting itself to the artistic trends of the moment. The palace was established in a Roman-Byzantine style in the twelfth century, before the 1419 fire ushered in the more agile forms of the Gothic. A little more than fifty years later, after the devastation of the 1483 fire, the courtyard façades to the East (the location of the Doge’s apartments and chapel) were made more precious with the addition of the Scala dei Giganti and the masking of the façades with a marble coating that included Renaissance reliefs. The fires that took place in 1574 and 1577 devoured a significant part of the palace in a huge bonfire, destroying the more richly decorated halls, i.e. the Maggior Consiglio, the Senate, the Collegio and Anticollegio. These rooms recovered their magnificent beauty as a result of an iconographic program that was undertaken to celebrate the past pomp of the Republic.

The Palace’s vulnerable wooden structures, the huge ‘teleri’ (canvasses) that completely covered its vast walls, the bundles of papers that the offices (magistrature) of the Republic produced continuously for the good functioning of the State and of Justice: all these represented real and material threats due to the fires that were used for lighting and cooking. Towards the end of the Republic, these dangers were multiplied by the frequent occasions on which the Serenissima Republic would celebrate its civic rites and the increasingly luxurious hospitality afforded to distinguished visitors. However, the most insidious hazards
lurked in those rooms in the interior of the great pile that housed the everyday inhabitants of the palace, including the Doge and his retinue: these included small candles burning in front of the sacred images of religious devotion, the fireplaces — only eleven in the whole palace — that warmed the rooms during the long, cold winter seasons, or the torches used to light the halls where the magistrates and the guards spent the night.

It was therefore necessary to reduce these risks as much as possible by holding every institutional and celebratory occasion in the daytime: light is therefore the protagonist in the Ducal Palace, which, due to its orientation, receives uninterrupted sunlight on its two main façades. Indeed, there is so much light in the Ducal Palace that the ‘teleri’ (canvasses) used to be covered with huge curtains so that the paint pigments would not fade. The most important guests — heads of state, diplomats, famous travellers visiting the palace — would be guided into the building according to the way the light fell on a given day and time, in order to intensify the beauty of the architecture and of the great Venetian artworks that acquired splendour from the light reflected by the water of the lagoon. In the early morning it was better to have the guests observe the works in the halls of the Consiglio dei X, of the Bussola and of the Senato; at noon, those of the Maggior Consiglio and the marble decorations of the interior courtyard; in the afternoon the halls of the Scrutinio, of the Collegio and of the Anticollegio.

Of course the Ducal Palace did not lose its complex relationship to light when the Republic ended its State and political role, and the palace, its symbol, was no longer the exclusive home of the Venetian nobility and the splendid dwelling of the Doge. It became the seat of the French and Austrian authorities in the early 19th century, before transforming into the workplace of civil servants and government employees who performed daily administrative work, far from the levers of power. This changed in December 1821, when a new fire endangered the existence of the palace and caused the Emperor of Austria, Francis II, to decree the total removal of the judiciary, financial and administrative offices that the building housed; only the Statuario Veneto and the Biblioteca Marciana, which had moved into the palace from the nearby Libreria Sansoviniana, kept the spaces that had been allotted to them only a few years earlier.

Thus the palace began its transformation into a museum of itself, a place where the memories of a noble past were preserved, frequented by
a few cultured visitors who were accompanied by a simple usher, or, if they were particularly distinguished, by an erudite scholar of Venetian civilization such as Emmanuele Cicogna, who was appointed to show Emperor Franz Joseph and his retinue through the halls of the palace in 1857. Even then there were those who, in preference to the beautiful halls, chose to visit those rooms that were never penetrated by sunshine, fascinated by the horrible prisons and the ‘black legend’ that cultivated an image of Venice as an implacable executioner and a ruthless avenger in the nineteenth century.

John Ruskin returned to the city in order to prepare his Stones of Venice immediately after the defeat of the Republic of San Marco in 1849, when the conclusion of the bloody Austrian siege had left behind a spent and resigned city. His proclaimed passion for the Gothic style and his hatred of Renaissance symmetries led him to admire the Ducal Palace façade overlooking the Bacino di San Marco; he particularly appreciated the irregular position of its windows, established when the façade was rebuilt during the first half of the fifteenth century. However, the architect’s main aim had not been to obtain a serene aesthetic balance, but instead to convey light into the interior of the building, so that the gilded surfaces of the woodwork would sparkle and the paintings by the great Venetian artists would shine.

The ceiling of this new room, built in the first half of the fifteenth century, was adorned by the paintings of the best masters in Venice, and it was therefore vital to illuminate that gorgeous ceiling and to maintain a serene quality of light in the Council Chamber. This required the admittance of light in simple masses, rather than in many broken streams. A modern architect, terrified of violating external symmetry, would have sacrificed both the pictures and the peace of the council room, placing the large windows at the same level and introducing smaller windows above, like those of the upper story in the older building. But the old Venetians thought of the glory of the paintings and the comfort of the Senate. The architect therefore unhesitatingly raised

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the large windows to their proper position in relation to the interior of the chamber, and allowed the external appearance to take care of itself. I believe the whole pile rather gains than loses in effect by the variation thus obtained in the expanse of wall above and below the windows.³

Ruskin unsurprisingly disliked the public system that lit Piazza San Marco with the feeble light of 144 gas lamps, established in 1844. Some lights were also installed near the Porta della Carta and along the lower loggia of the Ducal Palace. This was the first timid effort to provide Venice with permanent public illumination in its central areas, although this type of public lighting was already established in the great European cities. The big interior spaces of the Palazzo Ducale, however, could only be seen by its numerous visitors during the day, with the advantage of the favorable light that was to be found at certain times and in the best seasons. Despite the entrance fee that was introduced in 1873, these visitors returned again and again.

In his 1882 essay ‘Venice’, Henry James, another frequent visitor, left some keen observations that are still valid for the contemporary tourist about when and how to appreciate the Ducal Palace during less crowded periods:

Fortunately, however, we can turn to the Ducal Palace, where everything is so brilliant and splendid that the poor dusky Tintoret is lifted in spite of himself into the concert. This deeply original building is of course the loveliest thing in Venice, and a morning’s stroll there is a wonderful illumination. Cunningly select your hours — half the enjoyment of Venice is a question of dodging — and enter about one o’clock, when the tourists have flocked off to lunch and the echoes of the charming chambers have gone to sleep among the sunbeams. There is no brighter place in Venice — by which I mean that on the whole there is none half so bright. The reflected sunshine plays up through the great windows from the glittering lagoon and shimmers and twinkles over gilded walls and ceilings. All the history of Venice, all its splendid stately past, glows around you in a strong sea-light. Everyone here is magnificent, but the great Veronese is the most magnificent of all.⁴

In 1886, in the City Council, Count Francesco Donà asked that an electrical generator should be built in Venice: some well-known

businessmen, linked with the tourist industry, took up his challenge and built an officina (workshop) very near San Marco, which provided electricity to some large hotels and to the chandelier of the Theatre La Fenice.\(^5\) The Ducal Palace was not included in this first electrical project; during this time the palace was undergoing radical restorations that had begun in 1875 and were required to safeguard the statics of the precious building.\(^6\)

Giacomo Boni was among the many technicians who took care of the delicate work of consolidation. He was to become Direttore delle Antichità e Belle Arti at the Rome Ministero. In an 1887 pamphlet of his, titled Venezia imbellettata, Boni delivered a heartfelt warning about the danger of fire in the Ducal Palace; this was particularly urgent because the families of many of the guards and the administrators now resided there. It was also home to some public offices, including, from 1891, the Regional Office for the Preservation of Monuments in the Veneto — nowadays the Sovrintendenza — which, at the time, was directed by architect Federico Berchet.

Originally the fire dangers in the Ducal Palace depended on its function as the dwelling of the Doge and of his family, who needed fires in the kitchens, braziers and lights in the apartments, oil lamps possibly in closed glass lanterns, which, however, burned. If a part of the palace was destroyed, it was sufficient to use the contemporary art and rebuild the burnt part with new materials and forms.\(^7\)

The Palace, declared an Italian National Monument, also accommodated the Biblioteca Marciana, which had originally been located in the Sala dello Scrutinio in the fifteenth century, expanding slowly into the hall of the Maggior Consiglio, of the Quarantine and of the lesser tribunals. The sculptures of the archaeological museum were placed, with all their weight, on the ceiling structures of the doge’s apartments. When it arrived in the Palace, the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettered ed Arti expanded from the Magistrato alle Acque on the ground floor to the Torricella of the Consiglio dei X, with its labs and an industrial

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\(^7\) G. Boni, *Venezia imbellettata* (Rome: Stabilimento Tipografico Italiano, 1887), p. 34.
exhibition of wax matches, wallpaper, eye glasses, etc. This change of use created new requirements: not only was the palace to welcome visitors interested in history and aesthetics, but also civil servants and employees who had to carry out their office work. As a result, at least part of the palace had to be lit with electricity, and in 1892 a project was developed with this in mind.

Although the benefits of this decision might seem obvious to a modern reader, the electric incandescent bulbs of the time were not much safer than torches and oil lamps with open burning flames. Keeping in mind this limited technology, it was not unreasonable that the Direction of the Assicurazioni Generali had some doubts, which were expressed in a note of 7 July 1896, sent to the Director of the Regional Office:

> The Insurance Companies have decided that the new illumination does not ensure the safety that most people expected as regards fires (...) This industry, although it has progressed far, is still at its beginning and we trust that it will overcome the present imperfections of the plants.8

These safety concerns were particularly pressing since fires had recently been caused by faulty electrification in a nearby jersey firm, in the Molino Stucchi Giudecca plant, and on the stage of the Malibran Theatre.

The project continued, however, and the electrification work in the palace started in 1896. It was limited to some interior staircases, the firemen’s station, the guards’ rooms, and Berchet’s offices, but it nonetheless sparked a strong reaction in the local newspapers and among a large section of the public, who denounced the profanation of the historical building and feared new disastrous fires.

On 13 July 1896, an article by Antonio Vendrasco, titled *La luce elettrica nel Palazzo Ducale*, appeared on the pages of the daily paper *L’Adriatico*, thundering against what seemed to the author a senseless innovation:

> With a feeling not of wonder but of disgust we have seen in these days a work, already quite advanced, which in our opinion is a real nonsense, as it distorts the real nature and cancels the character of the most superb building in the art world, the Ducal Palace. We mean the installation of electric light, which is being set up in the Ducal Palace, with an alacrity worthy of a better cause. In a few days, thus, due to the

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ignorance of few people and the pecuniary interest of others, in an epoch when electric light was not even imagined, will be lit up with the most powerful product of modern civilization, with an embrace between art and industry which we will call hybrid in this particular case [...] The impulses of these men profaning the most beautiful temple of art, and the work, neither called for or wanted by anyone, should stop, together with the spending of money which should be destined to furnish instead a better culture to many poor people, who often lack mostly a good sense of art and a real and healthy love of the national monuments.\textsuperscript{9}

This scorching polemic did not prevent some artists from continuing to visit the palace, looking for the best light conditions in which to paint its interiors. Among them was John Wharlton Bunney, who lived in Venice between 1877 and 1882 and whose sunny work, \textit{Interno della Sala del Senato}, painted in the morning light, is still with us.\textsuperscript{10} Another well-known work from this period is John Singer Sargent's glorious \textit{Sala del Maggior Consiglio} of 1898\textsuperscript{11}—now in a private collection — in which the warm early afternoon light pours in through the large windows and from the balcony overlooking the Bacino di San Marco, diffusing onto Veronese's bright canvasses. In the background, light hits the \textit{Paradiso} by Tintoretto, belying his fame as a 'tenebroso' (gloomy) painter, won thanks to his canvasses in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, which could not enjoy such generous amounts of natural light.

Photographers, who needed so long to expose their plates that their work took almost as long as the painters' laborious brushstrokes, also began to frequent the palace and to learn the secrets of its light. Their aim was to create images that they could sell at an affordable price to the ever-growing number of hurried tourists who visited Venice.

In 1904 the first official inauguration of the city's electric light system took place. From that date, the creation of new itineraries for visitors, the introduction of novel functions for the rooms, the extension of visiting hours past daylight, and the greater number of amenities required to welcome more and more visitors, have necessitated more

\textsuperscript{9} A. Vedrasco, ‘La luce elettrica nel Palazzo Ducale’, \textit{L’Adriatico}, 13 July 1896. The debate was also taken up by the author on the 17th of the same month.

\textsuperscript{10} Ruskin collected this souvenir of Venice, now at the Sheffield Millennium Galleries.

complex technological solutions that allow everyone to enjoy the palace artworks in every season. Despite the efforts of the palace staff and its director, not all of these solutions have been wholly respectful of this noble palace.