

Venice Illuminated: Power and Painting in Renaissance Manuscripts.

Helena Katalin Szépe.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018. 400 pp. \$70.

The Venetian *ducali* are manuscripts that were created throughout the period of the late Middle Ages to the eighteenth century for the purpose of recording the texts of promises, oaths of office, and commissions of various office holders, from doges to galley captains. Though their original function had been to confirm and delineate the terms of political office, these books are not only official documents but also precious containers of works of art. Over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in particular, the elected officers increasingly commissioned and paid for exquisite illuminations to decorate the pages of their *ducali*. Depicted in rich pigments and with a profusion of gold are portraits of the patrons wearing robes of office; members of the Holy Family and saints, especially Saint Mark; and allegorical figures representing the virtues. The texts are often framed by elaborate floral and zoological motifs intertwined with a family coat of arms supported by putti. Though physically small, these paintings, which incorporate elements of classical statuary and architecture frequently set against a stunning backdrop—a broad blue horizon, expansive Terraferma landscapes, far-flung exotic territories—give the impression of monumentality.

Helena Katalin Szépe has meticulously surveyed 1,000 of these manuscripts and fragments dating from 1382 to 1624, using the *ducali* as a lens through which to examine a broad spectrum of Venetian culture, politics, and art patronage over the course of two and a half centuries, demonstrating how the books “were transformed through art into enduring monuments promoting state ideals, individual status, and family memory.” She is concerned above all with the strategies of self-presentation employed by Venetian patricians through the *ducali*, which “had become a prized arena for expression of the civic self” (36). Although Venetian patricians outwardly embraced an egalitarian civic image, Szépe demonstrates how these books functioned to enhance individuals’ reputations and increase their families’ statuses within the republic. Moreover, the medium chosen for this self-presentation points to “the high value placed on the arts of the book in Venice, and their perceived usefulness in negotiating state identity” (20).

The volume is divided into three parts: part 1, “Material and Symbol,” explores the significance of the book as material object in the city of Saint Mark, as part of the collective creation of a Venetian identity, as well as the broader significance of documents and monuments in the republic’s self-imaging. Part 2, “Evolution,” examines each of the three basic types of *ducali*: the Promissioni of doges; the Commissioni/Giuramenti (Commissions/Oaths) of procurators; and Commissioni (Commissions) of galley captains and rectors (*rettori*), distinguishing different sources of funding for each, as well as specific imagery employed in relation to each office. The author draws on visual evidence from such sources as tomb monuments, votive paintings, and antiquarian portraits to

contextualize the programs of the *ducali* images. In part 3, “Themes and Programs,” the author takes a two-pronged thematic approach to analyzing the imagery, first looking at that employed in the rectors’ manuscripts, reflecting their experiences and attitudes toward serving abroad, and then by exploring the ways patricians chose to commemorate their participation in the Holy League and Battle of Lepanto in their *ducali*. At the end of the volume, the author provides a highly useful finding guide listing all the *ducali* by current location, as well as indications of online databases of these manuscripts.

Though long known to specialists in Venetian manuscript painting, and studied extensively by scholars such as Giordana Mariani Canova and David S. Chambers, for others this masterly study of the *ducali* will open a fascinating perspective on the world of Renaissance Venice. This volume will be of particular interest to those in the fields of Venetian art history, early modern ego documents, and the history of the book. Lavishly illustrated, with 225 stunning color reproductions, Szépe’s book is a delight for the eyes as well as the mind.

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The Henri IV Series. Alexis Merle du Bourg.

Ed. Bert Schepers, Brecht Vanoppen, and Isabelle Van Tichelen. Trans. Jane MacAvock and Abigail D. Newman. *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard* 14.2. Turnhout: Harvey Miller, 2017. 484 pp. + 105 color pls. €175.

The aspirations, layout, and political import of the series of paintings dedicated to the life of Henri IV (1553–1610) at the Luxembourg Palace remain among the great enigmas of seventeenth-century European painting. Contracted on 26 February 1622, when Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) was in Paris to discuss plans for a gallery dedicated to the king’s consort, Maria de’ Medici (1573–1642), and one celebrating the life of the late French king, the painted cycle for the latter was never completed. From the beginning, the vision for the second gallery seemed ill defined and neglected. While the contract sets the series theme—“to represent and paint all the battles of the late King Henri the Great, the encounters he made, his combats, his captures and sieges of towns along with the triumphs of the said victories in the manner of the triumphs of the Romans, following the program that will be provided by her majesty” (12–13)—and stipulates that the canvases should be painted by Rubens’s own hand, it specifies neither the number of compositions nor their subjects. The twenty-four canvases for the Medici Gallery were installed in 1625 (now Paris, Musée du Louvre), but the canvases slated for the Henri IV Gallery received attention only in fits and starts, subject to the French court’s interest and the demands of the artist’s diplomatic career, until the project was definitively abandoned in 1631. Even the consideration of alternates, such as Guido Reni