

Blake de Maria. *Becoming Venetian: Immigrants and the Arts in Early Modern Venice*.

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As Blake de Maria points out in her conclusion, the so-called Myth of Venice — the ideology that the stability of Venetian society was due to its governance by a closed caste of native patrician families — has largely obscured the significance of nonnobles and immigrants in the city. Her book makes an important contribution to our understanding of both Venetian history and art history by examining the commercial, social, and artistic activities of a group of wealthy merchant families who immigrated to Venice in order to become citizens (*cittadini*).

The study is firmly grounded in archival research; more than fifty pages of appendices supply archival references, in some cases transcribing full documents. These sources allow de Maria to reconstruct the business and the domestic worlds of nine families — Balbiani, Cornovì dalla Vecchia, Cuccina, d'Anna, dal Basso, di Mutti, Raggazoni, Torniello, and Turloni — who emigrated from different homelands but came to form what she calls a “consortium.” After an initial chapter briefly setting the groundwork for the study — including a rather forced argument that Venice has “natural tendencies toward diversity” (18) due to the circumstances of its foundation and its geographical location — she paints a vivid picture of how these families adopted Venetian business-social practices, such as the *fraterna* (where brothers were incorporated as a business) and “enforced bachelorhood” (to limit heirs), while banding together in international joint ventures involving a staggering assortment of goods, from foodstuffs to textiles to gems. Business ties were reinforced through endogamous marriage, and over the course of the sixteenth century, “[t]hese wealthy immigrants transformed themselves from a disparate group with shared economic interests into a veritable clan” (35); by 1583 three of the families were ranked among the ten wealthiest in the city (31). According to de Maria, these *cittadini*, rather

than the patricians who by this point had by and large abandoned these types of large-scale commercial undertakings, controlled the mercantile world of Venice.

The following chapters are devoted to the forms of art patronage that the families undertook to establish their presence in the city. Two short chapters (inexplicably divided and separated from one another) treat the group's involvement with artistic affairs at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco. Although de Maria contributes little that is new in this well-trod territory, she does reveal how the *scuola* served as a power base for her consortium. Chapter 4 covers "high visibility" family chapels in San Salvador and San Francesco della Vigna, demonstrating how the naturalized citizens rivaled the nobles on their own ground and were responsible for commissioning quite remarkable works of art in the public sphere.

Owning a house in Venice and thus contributing to the physical beauty of the city was an important marker of citizenship. Chapter 6 focuses on the still-extant facades of the houses of the d'Anna and Cuccina families, noting in passing several other houses owned by consortium members. The palace interiors, and especially the material culture housed therein, are given fuller treatment in chapter 7. While De Maria appropriately focuses on three surviving commissions — Titian's famous *Ecce Homo* for Zuanne d'Anna, the four giant canvases by Veronese for the Cuccina palace, and (least well-known but most revealing) the frescoes depicting scenes from his own life commissioned by Giacomo Raggazoni for his villa in Sacile — these are well contextualized with comparative material drawn from the other families for which there are documents, but no surviving works. It is here that de Maria's (not entirely new) contention that the naturalized citizens were not simply keen to emulate patrician practices, but were "leaders in taste, free from certain social and civic restrictions that bound their patrician counterparts" (xi) finds its greatest support. Raggazoni's remarkably self-aggrandizing fresco cycle (it is difficult to imagine any Venetian patrician engaging in quite such a flagrant act of self-promotion), shows himself and his family members receiving favors from the Queen of England, the Turkish Grand Vizier, the King of France, the Dowager Empress, and the Doge of Venice as well. Although the works of art and architecture themselves do not always receive the attention and full analysis they deserve, through her archival work de Maria unquestionably brings to light a fascinating aspect of Venetian society.

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