

The Historical Regatta of Venice

by Antonio Forni and Marina Tipaldi

VENICE, known as serenissima (Most Serene) in the olden days, was ruled by an autocratic republican government for almost a millennium and remained one of the unquestionable dominating powers of the Mediterranean basin for many centuries. Its political decline led to the loss of its independence in 1797, even this being overwhelmed by the Napoleonic conquests. However, each year with the fall of summer, almost exorcising its own defeat, Venice represents the "Historical Regatta," a rich and pompous spectacle as in the times of its greatest splendour.

As for a century by now, even this year, the first Sunday of September saw the rebirth of the city in a sparkling of fabrics, tapestries, damask and precious cloth materials, appropriately placed on the balconies of the buildings that overlook the main water street that winds across along the entire agglomerate of islands which

form the city.

The Historical Regatta is one of the traditional spectacles to which the Venetians are most close. Born as a race for big transport boats in the lagoon that surrounds the city, it was subsequently transformed into a simple race of small rowing boats, similar to gondolas, called *san-dolini*. These are preceded by a magnificent procession on epochal boats that passes along the entire Canal Grande, from early afternoon almost till sunset, and that aims at nostalgically evoking the glory of a State whose power and richness was based on its maritime force. The procession comprises of thirty-two boats, led by the *Serenissima* (the Government Boat) with the banner of the city that gives way to the *Dogaresa* (the boat of the Doge's wife), that hosts the Doge, pronounced *Doge*, the King of Venice and Caterina Corner, the Queen of Cyprus. In fact, the procession is inspired by the celebrations

that Venice paid this queen of Venetian origin when, in 1489, on the death of her husband, she made a donation to the Republic of the Greek Island.

Caterina is escorted by twenty gondolas with two oars, with noble ladies and ambassadors, and followed by ten barks, some named *Veniziana*, *Rezzonico*, *Chiese*, *Nettuno*, *Naviglio*, *Querini*, *Floreal*, *Caralli*, *Geografica*, *Bizantina*. One talks of boats with many rowers decorated like boats of the eighteenth century constructed in 1930 by Nino Gagnoni, one of the greatest Gondola makers of Venice.

From the tip of the San Elena gardens, at the eastern extremity of Venice, the *san-dolini* leaves at one shot of a gun for the race covering the whole of the San Marco Basin, along the Riva degli Schiavoni entering the Canal Grande and reaching up to the Railway Station. Here, in the middle of the Canal, a pole is placed around which the boat racers have to

skillfully take a round, and then return back and arrive at the Ca' Foscari (Foscari's Palace, the seat of the University of Venice) in the heart of the city, where the public authorities wait for the first four boats on a richly adorned floating raft, to bestow the prizes to the winners among the oarsmen of all the spectators at the windows balconies, on the bridges and the banks.

The Historical Regatta is surely one of the best occasions to spend some days in this unique city of the world. Venice is made up of more than a hundred islands connected amongst themselves by 354 bridges which serve to cross 177 canals, of which the Canal Grande is the principal artery that divides the city in two clearly distinct zones.

The bridges that cross the Canal are three in number, the one of Rialto, the most suggestive and important one, constructed in the XIIIth century, that in the past played the role of connecting the San Marco area, the political area of Venice and the Rialto area itself, the commercial area of the city: the one of the Accademia and the one of the Station, both of them constructed in this century.

We believe that one of the simplest approaches to Venice, whose charm surely lies in the beautiful glimpses that one suddenly catches of the narrow streets of the city where one often gets lost, is to start the visit from the area of the Railway Station. A little away is the Square of Saint Rocco, famous for historical memoirs and masterpieces of art kept in the church and in the homonymous Great School, a secular association of master artisans who were the heads of the different arts. The Greek School founded in 1515, is famous for the beautiful cycle of paintings with which the genius of Jacopo Tintoretto (XVIIIth century) decorated the magnificent halls by transforming them into an incomparable gallery of masterpieces of a religious theme that along with the wooden statues of the upper hall form a suggestive spectacle of vibrant forms in dialogue among themselves.

Close to Saint Rocco stands the imposing and one of the biggest Venetian churches, the gothic church of Santa Maria della Salute. The grandiose interior preserves treasures of incomparable beauty like the two canvases painted by Tiziano (XVIIIth century) for the high altar, *L'Assunta* and the altar of the Pesenti family. On the right lateral side of the church, the cenotaph in white marble of the sculptor Antonio Canova (XVIIIth century) and the painting of Giovanni Bellini (XVIIIth century) preserved in the vestry. In the centre of the church itself there is the marvellous wooden choir with precious inlaying belonging to the fifteenth century.

The best thing to do, after having concentrated on admiring such a beautiful interior is to take a walk in the open air, towards Santa Margherita square where one can find a good choice of restaurants, swimming with young life. On the road, do not forget to have a look at the San Panatolon church whose ceiling is made of a single painted canvas that is the biggest in the world.

Close to Santa Margherita square is the eighteenth century Venetian museum, Ca' Rezzonico, set up in the old palace of the Rezzonico family, that gives us a clear idea about how a noble house was prepared in the eighteenth century, when Venice came to be a fascinating cultural and "tourist" capital, destination of intellectuals and travellers, coming from every part of the world. From the palace one can enjoy a magnificent view along a good portion of Canal Grande, from Ca' Foscari, up to the Accademia bridge and further on.

The bridge's name derives from the Accademia di Belle Arti that is situated at its foot. It hosts both a museum as well as a modern school.

For a lover of ancient paintings, with a couple of hours in hand, the museum, big and very beautiful offers an excellent choice of Venetian paintings from XIIIth century up to late XVIIIth century, with works of many painters who have rendered immortal the fame of Venice.

In case the weather permits, a valid alternative could be a walk along the rafts, from the Jesuit church up to the Custom's point from where the whole of San Marco Basin can be viewed. This place once rich with life and movement, because it was here that the ships that used to supply wood and coal to the city moored - today, is touched only by a few tourists, sentimental and in love.

Continuing the walk one reaches the church of Santa Maria della Salute, the most superb example of local religious baroque architecture designed by the architect Baldassare Longhena. In 1631, as a vow of the city against plague that had decimated the population. Here each year, on the 21st of November, the church is the pilgrimage destination of Venetians who offer a candle to the Madonna to thank her for their health.

The San Marco complex consists of a homonymous square, that was always and is even today the place most dear to the Venetians, where the most significant happenings of the town life assume the most typical and most different forms.

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which ensured that the "arts and crafts" reflowered from the XII century onwards.

It is well-known that Italy's production fabric rests on a myriad of small and medium-sized enterprises, and is organized geographically along the lines of industrial "districts" and "areas". It would be more correct to say that the Italian system rather than being organized "on" the territory is in actual fact organized "by" the territory and by the "history" of the territory.

Attentive scrutiny of the map of Italy's industrial districts reveals the profound historical roots and the "moulding" which geography has imposed on both the location of the production activities and their fusion. It is not difficult to discern the signs of the two "great" events mentioned above in these distant roots. The ceramic center of Sassuolo in Emilia was the appendix of the Etruscan expansion to the north of the Apennines and later became a vital Roman node for controlling the territory and trade towards the North and North-East Europe. "Forum Sempronii" (the forum-market of Sempronio) is now Fossombrone, the upstream terminal of the furniture district of Pesaro-Urbino. "Faber Janus" (the smith on the river Janus who used water and mountain timber to work iron) is today Fabriano, one of the biggest household appliances centers in Europe, whose roots lie in mechanical engineering, and which is situated at the mouth of the Esino valley, today an internationally important mechanical engineering district.

But beyond these "Roman signs", it is undoubtedly the experience of the Comuni, which has contributed the most to shaping the map of this "extended" industrialization which is concentrated in the industrial districts, which typifies Italian industry. The Comuni were in fact the first line of "defence" of citizens who, faced with frequent and destructive foreign invasions, "climbed up into" the hills and mountains and even when they remained on the plains or close to the rivers they were forced to build "town walls, watch towers, draw-walls that the seeds of the genetic revolution which characterizes Italian industrialists were sown. The Comuni needed autonomy, also economic and production autonomy. Hence there came into being within the town, arts and crafts directed at the "internal market". The town had to be self-sufficient. And it is here that were born manual skills, inventiveness, imagination of those who lived within a restrictive town wall but were spurred on in their spirit to also look beyond poet Giacomo Leopardi's "dear and solitary hill which prevents the eye from seeing all of the horizon."

It is the self-sufficient economy of the Comune which renders one to produce on one's own or under the direct control of the consumer who is also a neighbour. That stimulates the need to "hold the reins" of the entire production process assuming responsibility for the product as a whole. There was also born an ancient concept of "solidarity". The "communal" ownership of woodland, of the land high on the mountains where "everyone" could go and collect wood (but not cut down trees), pick berries, mushrooms, etc. But the medium-sized "branches" one collects on the mountains can either be burnt or else used to make "small" items of furniture. Big items of furniture, on the other hand, need a tree trunk which can be transformed into planks. Thus specialization in the manufacturing of chairs, benches, and stools came into being. Today, Udine and the Friuli region, are one of the capitals of chair production in the world.

And when at the end of the Fifteenth century there came that revolutionary scientific and technological discovery in agriculture known as crop rotation, Renaissance Italy "exploded". The new technology brought about a drastic increase in agricultural productivity with the same land, tools and work (and therefore with parity of production factors employed), there was considerably much more final product. This sudden economic surplus was as yet unable to find forms of industrial investment because there did not yet exist those industrial production techniques which needed steam or electric technologies and were to appear only two or three centuries later. This sudden "surplus" allowed the Comuni, the Principality and Italy's thousand courts, to build the Renaissance, to invest in art and culture. Thus there came into being not only what tourists to Italy admire today - Florence, Venice, Urbino, Parma, but also the other thousands and thousands of cities full of wonders which are no less extraordinary despite being less known to most foreign students and even Italians. And when the aristocracy "sat" on this wellbeing and "consumed" its own "assets" over the decades and centuries, and was compelled to gradually sell them off piece by piece to the new emerging bourgeois class of professions and trades, an unsustainable imbalance between economic power and political power was brought into being.

The French Revolution broke out, and the productive bourgeoisie ceased to invest in luxurious, splendid palaces, paintings and tapestries, and then the industrial revolution came on the scene. However the Ital-

From City- States

ian economy was touched only marginally by these phenomena. Of course, big companies also came into being in Italy, but the Comuni would reflower and the fabric of the diversified and diffuse world of small and medium enterprises would be woven only following the great opening of international markets and the world economic integration which commenced with the reconstruction after the Second World War.

The Spirit of the Comuni Lives on in the Era of the Global Village

And it was then that it appears that the very cells, the genetic code of the Italians of the Comuni reawakened and once again accepted the challenge which the world of open borders placed before all, including those towns and villages which for centuries had remained extraneous to the trends which moulded European and world history. The walls still remain as do the old "businesses" which today are those millions of small and medium enterprises that are still attached to their own town walls but now communicate with the entire world. Technology and the organization of the industrial and the post-industrial eras combined with their skills, genius and inventiveness have transformed them into operators, into intelligent and interactive terminals with the well-diffused Internet, now the reality of international markets. And so when the enterprise's clients are no longer the circle of friends and acquaintances "within the household walls", but rather the "entire world", there explodes the growth of the small and medium enterprises, and there re-emerge the roots of the trades learnt and "metabolised" over the centuries.

But traditional characteristics remain strong. The enterprise is born in a family, the family is linked to the territory, on the territory there are numerous families, and hence many enterprises are born. Here, therefore, we find that great leap, the technological and organizational "discontinuity" which lies at the base of the success of the industrial districts. This myriad of small and medium enterprises does not, in fact, follow a "chaotic" and casual trend but rather traditions, the rivers, the valleys. The district enjoys quantitative growth because it generates one enterprise after another on the bed of traditions and rivers to gradually form the beehive. The family-run small and medium enterprise is accustomed to grow by its own forces, it does not wish to lose control of itself and in this sense its growth possibilities, though considerable, would appear limited vis-a-vis the size of the domestic and international out-let markets. There is therefore an "infinite" space for other companies, for other families, who "see" success from up close, who know they can do the same, take risks and do them.

The spirit of the old communities produces not only the effect of imitation and growth by induction but also, often almost spontaneously, and in some cases with but a minimum of design, the stimulus to "organize" the district, diversifying and specialising production, integrating the various phases and, in the end, making the industrial district appear as a large integrated industry with considerable economies of scale and a strong production organization. This is not however, a big industry with a single, big plant divided into sections where thousands of employees work side by side under the

guidance of technicians and managers. This is a big industry where the various sections are independent enterprises managed by owners who every day take the business risks and involve their employees also in successes and difficulties. And there is in fact a strong "social control" on part of the local community on the entrepreneurs' capacities, on his profit allocation decisions, on the development of the enterprise and, in many aspects, also on the quantity and quality of his life and that of his family, precisely because there are thousands of entrepreneur families similar to one another.

How Industrial Districts Came About

One can perceive two "main roots" which engendered the birth of Italian industrial districts and the growth of this fabric of small and medium enterprises. The first is that of those districts which came into being around and in synergy with big companies which extended their supply network, diversifying their sources and always needed the small and medium enterprises "around" the big companies to grow because, together, they were a winning team on international markets. The second concerns those that evolved directly from the ancient roots which were born by "parthenogenesis" with the local territory and aim at the final consumer both in the domestic market and the international one.

It is here that the districts' structure and organization is of primary importance for understanding the structure of Italy's small and medium enterprises.

(Abridged)

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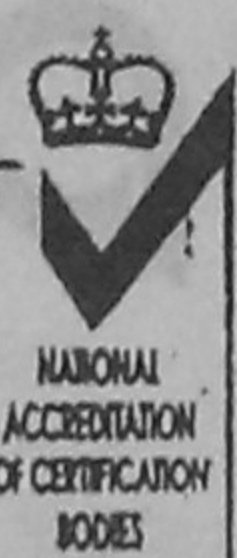
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