

UNCELEBRATED VENICE

Venezia Minore by Egle Renata Trincanato
A New Critical Edition

edited by Angelo Maggi



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Editor's note: In the text, the abbreviation "n.a." refers to the "Numero Anagrafico", an Italian numbering system that corresponds to the civic or street number of a building. Please note that Venice follows a unique system of numbering its buildings. In this edition of the book, we have also updated the house numbering to assist readers in more easily identifying the buildings referenced by Trincanato.

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Francesco Bergamo

Egle Renata Trincanato's Drawings for *Venezia Minore*

Egle Renata Trincanato's drawings play a pivotal role in *Venezia Minore* for two key reasons. Firstly, drawing may be considered as the universal language of architecture, essential for its representation. Secondly, the author's freehand drawings seamlessly enhance her densely detailed text, whether through their historical-critical content or their more descriptive treatment of individual elements and architectural typologies.

The book's first section, which is broadly dedicated to Venice, is subdivided into five chapters and features a substantial array of photographs and other iconographic sources¹. These consist primarily of maps, drawings, and Renaissance paintings by such artists as Vittore Carpaccio, Gentile Bellini, and Jacopo Bellini, among others. In these first chapters, Trincanato's drawings come to the fore where photography falls short, such as in reconstructing perspective views of cityscapes that photography would fail to capture due to the narrow dimensions of many Venetian calli, or in critically isolating the essential elements needed to make the architectural analysis, which runs in parallel in the text, more comprehensible.

In the introductory essay titled *Sapor di Venezia* (*The Essence of Venice*), Agnoldomenico Pica argues how Trincanato's approach offers a completely novel interpretation of a city long believed to have been exhaustively depicted, described, and analysed. The Venice that inspired Trincanato had never been subject to such close and scrupulous analysis, and her preliminary findings revealed that the "bare necessities of life" that shaped the lagoon city² had to (and indeed still have to) operate within spatial constraints, which encouraged simplicity. This is why Venice's

1 See the essay by Angelo Maggi in this present volume, *Humble Houses and Vernacular Architecture in Trincanato's Venice*, p. 15.

2 At p. 54 of the present volume.

uncelebrated buildings transmit much of the city's historical memory (despite the fact that few of these buildings date back to the Middle Ages and most are much more recent). Indeed, our "earliest examples of public housing date back to the fifteenth century"³, and consist of three-story buildings with small windows, just like those that were depicted in Jacopo de' Barbari's Renaissance map. In contrast, the grand noble palaces and *fondaci* have more often undergone costly and significant restorations, architecturally revolutionising entire urban areas.

By carefully selecting and interpreting historical iconographic sources (such as drawings, paintings, and maps), Trincanato manages not only to trace the typological and morphological characteristics of Venice throughout the centuries – identifying the origins of (and rationale for) the city's architectural and urbanistic idiosyncrasies – but she even manages to hypothesise that the distinctive features of the city's grand Gothic and Renaissance architecture were, from the early modern period onward, likely the fruit of the architects who devised Venice's vernacular buildings⁴.

Trincanato's division of Venetian architecture into two major categories – *aulica* (noble) and *minore* (vernacular) – represents a precise and rewarding methodological innovation. The author was well aware of the continuity and intersections between the two, but she uses them to interpret one in light of the other, and vice versa. Although the volume's primary concern is the "uncelebrated" Venice, its first section contains several extensive passages dedicated to the study of noble palaces, particularly the third chapter, which examines the historical evolution of Venetian architecture.

At the end of the first chapter, *Urbanistica veneziana* (*Urban Development*), and on the page opposite the opening of the second chapter, *L'Architettura minore* (*Uncelebrated Architecture*), Trincanato includes two sketches by Le Corbusier that she must have regarded as paradigmatic. These sketches are exemplary in showing how Venice's uncelebrated architecture has contributed, continues to contribute, and still contributes today (demonstrating the relevance of this volume) to the "overall view"⁵ of the whole. The first combines a perspective view with a plan of Campo dei Frari⁶. Le Corbusier's textual annotations describe how from this "petit exemple" one could draw a "leçon prodigieusement abondante." Although the drawing prominently features the large church, the bell tower, the canal, the bridge, and the well head, it is also evident that it was the domestic buildings – the vernacular palaces – that were organised in such a way as to shape the recognisable urban space of Venice, by virtue of their presence and their relationships with everything else.

For the photographs, Trincanato makes clever use of archives and other authors. The few exceptions, which she took herself, feature mainly throughout the fifth chapter, *Gli elementi costruttivi e architettonici* (*Architectural and Construction Features*). Indeed, the scope of this chapter requires a close examination of the cornices, windows, portals, and other elements that are less frequently found in Venice's traditional iconography.

What stands out most for the reader is the volume's extraordinary number of sketches, along with their quality and authorial signature. Whether perspective views or orthographic projections, these sketches stem from direct observation and field surveys. At the beginning of the book, Trincanato makes a point of thanking

3 See p. 77 of the present volume.

4 See pp. 80–81 of the present volume.

5 See p. 47 of the present volume.

6 See p. 53 of the present volume.

Venetians for allowing her into their homes – a prerequisite for observing and surveying courtyards and floor plans of hitherto neglected houses that would otherwise have remained unknown⁷. Floor plans, elevations, sections, and perspective views become predominant throughout the second – and most substantial – part of the volume, which is dedicated to the study of the two sestieri of Castello and Dorsoduro. Each is organised into identical subsections: houses of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; houses of the fifteenth century; houses of the sixteenth century; houses of the seventeenth century; and houses of the eighteenth century. Significant examples from each period are identified, observed, described, and analysed in detail, adopted as “case studies” capable of narrating the city through the urban distribution of architectural features that have accumulated over time.

The orthographic views, in elevation and section, are hand-drawn in black and white, with a decisive stroke of consistent thickness (partly because it would have been impossible to reproduce the considerable amount of graphic information in any greater detail). Yet this is never to the detriment of quality, precision, or legibility: the drawings contain all the necessary graphic information and, when taken together, form a sort of atlas of uncelebrated Venetian architecture. The perspective views, too, have the essence of sketches while managing to accurately capture the proportions and characteristics of various architectural features (where necessary and possible, these are also shown in greater detail through photographs or drawings at closer scales). Trincanato does not appear to have made any corrections to her drawings. Some contours may occasionally intersect, as though a line initially used for construction had to halt even where it continues. However, this, if anything, reinforces our interpretation of architectural stratifications and the articulation of wall surfaces and spatial geometries. A few quick strokes are sufficient to identify brick walls (represented by parallel horizontal lines), stone elements, wooden beams, plaster, coats of arms, and other figurative elements. To relay information related to the use of these spaces, and the human life that inhabited them, Trincanato usually used quick, precise lines to indicate curtains, goods in shop windows, pavements (especially when of particular interest), and even some fully attired human figures. Even these lines, which are relatively “minor” compared to those dedicated to architecture, are deserving of independent study for the insights they provide into the inhabitants of Uncelebrated Venice, and which aspects of their lives played out between public and private spheres, in the shops on the ground floors.

As already mentioned, in the second section, dedicated to the two sestieri, photographs feature where they are deemed available and useful. Historical iconographic sources, on the other hand, are scarce, since the work was conducted in the field – in the here and now of Trincanato’s Venice. Sometimes we encounter an abacus of elements, as in the case of the fourteenth-century arcaded house on Calle Cavanella⁸. The choice concerning which drawings to include depends always on being able to identify long-lasting architectural features. For example, even if the interior has been heavily altered over the centuries, it may still be worth focusing on the elevation, as is the case for the thirteenth-century palazzetto in Salizada San Lio⁹. An exceptional case in the volume is the axonometric diagram of the staircase

7 See the essay by Andrea Iorio in this present volume, *Inside Venezia Minore*, p. 31.

8 See p. 138 of the present volume.

9 See p. 126 of the present volume.

system in the house on Calle Cappello, classified among the seventeenth-century houses in the sestiere of Dorsoduro¹⁰. Egle Renata Trincanato must have felt compelled to create it to illustrate the winged system and the organisation of stairs and corridors, which would have been poorly comprehensible from plans and sections. She notes, in fact, that “the most intriguing feature of this house is its Leonardesque cross-flight staircase, which provides access to two apartments on different levels through the same room, each with its own individual flight”¹¹. In her drawing, the floors almost entirely disappear to reveal the vertical articulation, yet their presence is ingeniously evoked by the interruption of vertical edges.

Although less prevalent than plans, elevations, and sections, perspective views are often used for in-depth analyses of the two sestieri, providing context about the urban environment while assisting the reader in identifying architectural subjects during a hypothetical excursion around the city. Sometimes much more detailed architectural drawings are included, particularly for elevations, where shading and texture provide precise information on colours, materials, decorations, and the state of a façade’s conservation. These drawings were made by Trincanato’s students at the then Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia¹², which the author thoughtfully incorporated to enrich the volume. We might imagine that she would have wanted the same level of detail for each building, but beyond the incalculable time this would have required, it would have been impossible to maintain the same level of coherence found throughout her body of drawings. Such coherence also facilitated the comparative study of each building she surveyed.

The design of the long and varied sequence of graphic information that runs throughout the volume also deserves our attention. Through her refined editorial montage, Trincanato articulates a complex discourse which readers can follow and engage with on several levels (scale, detail, relation to the city, historical-critical depth etc.). Unfolding throughout such a substantive volume, this structure gives the reader a glimpse into the vastness of uncelebrated Venice, through the systematic sampling the author conducts both chronologically and topographically, across two sestieri.

By closely examining Trincanato’s drawings and comparing them with the buildings of present-day Venice, we find that Venice’s vernacular (*minore*) architecture still today forms the baseline of the city: its underlying character, and the architectural atmosphere that makes it recognisable at very first glance. As Trincanato seemed to suggest through those two sketches by Le Corbusier, the role played by this Venice is fundamental to the city’s identity: the result of a collective project extended over time. What short-term tourist rentals are now inflicting on this humble architecture, without thought or care for its cultural importance, is just one of the many reasons that Trincanato’s book remains so relevant today.

¹⁰ See p. 264 of the present volume.

¹¹ See p. 265 of the present volume.

¹² Today Università Iuav di Venezia.



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***Venezia Minore* by Egle Renata Trincanato** **A New Critical Edition**

First published in 1948, *Venezia Minore* – or *Uncelebrated Venice* – is Egle Renata Trincanato's landmark study of Venice's urban fabric from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century. A pioneering architect and scholar, Trincanato was the first woman to graduate in Architecture from the Regio Istituto Superiore di Venezia in 1938. Her meticulous research laid the foundation for later morphological studies, shaping the way we understand the city's lesser-known architectural heritage.

Now, on the 77th anniversary of its original publication, this new English critical edition brings Trincanato's insights to an international audience. Rich with her original drawings and archival materials preserved in the Università Iuav di Venezia's Archivio Progetti, this edition also reproduces her rare layout mockup – annotated by hand and carefully composed. More than a book, *Uncelebrated Venice* stands as a testament to Trincanato's vision of the printed page as both an intellectual and artistic creation.

A must-read for scholars, students, architects, and lovers of Venice alike, this volume invites readers to rediscover the city's hidden architectural treasures through the eyes of one of its most influential thinkers.

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