

Typical Venice? Venetian Commodities, 13th-16th Centuries

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The question of what makes 'Venetian' commodities 'Venetian' brought together a wide range of scholars from different fields of research at the Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani in Venice. Taking place from March 3rd to March 5th 2016, the international conference 'Typical Venice? Venetian Commodities, 13th -16th Centuries' not only aimed to discuss the term 'commodity' itself, but also its specific relation to Venice, which more than any other city is identified with commercial and mercantile activity during the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Co-organized by Philippe Cordez (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) and Romedio Schmitz-Esser (Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani), 'Typical Venice?' also marked the midterm event for the LMU-based research group 'Premodern Objects. An Archaeology of Experience' (Elitenetwork of Bavaria). Commodities, construed as „things in a certain situation“¹ rather than as a fixed object-category, were explored in terms of their fabrication, exchange, distribution and consumption both within and beyond Venice.

The various ways in which objects are connected to sites of production were discussed in the opening remarks of the two organizers: Linking an enamelled glass beaker bearing the motif of a camel with the iconography of the mosaics at San Marco, PHILIPPE CORDEZ (Munich) shed light on how long-distance Venetian trade with Egypt and the Levant was materialized in specific commodities. The significance of 'branding' in premodern commerce was explored in ROMEDIO SCHMITZ-ESSER's (Venice) introduction: In order to associate their own products with Murano and the Lagoon, Tirolese artisans de-

liberately applied the term 'Venetian' to the white glass made in the Alpine region of 'Glashütten' during the 16th century.

The first conference panel began with STEFANIA GEREVINI's (Milano) talk on Venetian rock crystal artefacts in the 13th and 14th century. After giving a short introduction on the sourcing of the material, its manufacture and trade was explained: Objects made of rock-crystal not only served as economic investments, but also as export goods with a strong symbolic value. Due to their innovative carving skills and the Lagoon's commercial network, Venetian artisans were able to respond to the wide demand for translucent liturgical and secular objects in this period.

Access to maritime trade routes was equally important with regard to the circulation of enamelled glass in the Early Middle Ages: In her re-examination of a group of enamelled glass fragments found in London, TANJA TOLAR (London) demonstrated how Eastern techniques were adapted to the Western consumer market of Venice. Glass beakers, bowls and bottles 'made in Venice' were most likely exchanged for raw material such as silver and tin, since archaeological evidence for glass fragments of this kind in the Lagoon itself is scarce.

Material evidence is not lacking concerning Venetian goldsmithery – but still some of the most significant works of the Trecento and Quattrocento have been neglected in the literature to date. This was made clear in MANLIO LEO MEZZACASA's (Padua) talk, in which he took a closer look at three liturgical objects at Rimini, Chieti and Giovinazzo. These examples not only highlight the artistic skill of Venetian goldsmiths at that time, but additionally reveal their ability to compete in the international market without losing their specific 'venezianità'.

BENEDETTA CHIESI (Florence) posed the question of what can be considered specifically 'Venetian' in terms of ivories and artefacts made of bone. She dealt with a stylistically coherent corpus from the 14th century, with attention to the exact localization

¹ Appadurai, Arjun: Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value, in: *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by A. Appadurai, Cambridge 1986, p. 3-63, here p. 13.

of workshops as well as the dialogue between ivories and other media common to the Veneto and Lombard area.

The collaborations across artistic media and among different crafts were also key to NATHANIEL SILVER's (Boston) talk on Venetian panel painting. By adding sophisticated sculptural work, elaborate frame designs and carved 'ornamento', the woodcarvers of the Serenissima contributed to the high esteem of Venetian panels in the 14th century, which were exported to churches in Bologna, Pavia and Florence.

Apart from the division of the crafts and the specialization of techniques in Venice, the city's intellectual climate also encouraged the production of 'key-commodities' in the 15th-17th centuries. In his keynote lecture entitled 'The City of Innovation: Renaissance Venice and the Creation of New Objects for a Global Market', LUCA MOLÀ (Florence) addressed the Venetian openness to technological innovation and the responsiveness to changing consumer tastes. In addition to diverse commercial and political strategies employed by artisans, merchants as well as government agencies, the introduction of copyright and patent-right in the second half of the 15th century likewise exemplifies the city's effort to protect industrial discoveries and intellectual property. Venetian dyed scarlet cloth, the famous white soap of the Vendramin family or special caskets made in Venice for Ottoman officials would become international 'trade-marks' in the mercantilist society of the time.

Innovations and identity were also questions of interest to LUCAS BURKART (Basel) in his talk on glass 'à la façon de Venise' on the following day. In order to rethink glass as commodity, term and Venice-related object category, a shift from Michael Baxandall's theory of the 'period eye' to the notion of 'period senses' was proposed, taking into account also the tactile experience and practical expertise entailed in glass making.

The matter of physical access and sensual experience was also raised in the following presentation by LEAH R. CLARK (The Open University) on Venetian objects in the Este/Aragonese collections. Individual knowledge of the value of things was important for estimating the paintings, ce-

ramics, gems, Chinese porcelain, counterfeit porcelain and damascene ware bought in the Serenissima. The classification and integration of both 'Venetian' and foreign products in local collections reveal how a Venetian origin was constructed in the ducal inventories in Ferrara.

The exportation of Venetian products across the Adriatic was the main focus of the next talk. Outlining the economic relations between the Venetian world and the Romanian princedoms in the 16th century, CRISTIAN LUCA (Venice) demonstrated how raw material and agricultural-pastoral products were exported from Romania, while manufactured articles and luxury ware were imported from Venice and Murano. Reacting to the explicit demand by the elites and upper middle class clients of Romania, a diverse range of commodities were shipped to Wallachia, Moldova and Transylvania, including also 'minor Venetian wares' such as medical and cosmetic products.

Understood as a semi-luxury commodity and as a conceptual category, 'Venedigisch Papier' played a prominent role in late medieval and early modern Austria and southern Germany, as pointed out by MEGAN WILLIAMS (Groningen) in her talk. Its fine white surface and smooth finish was prized among scholars, chancelleries, ministers, diplomats, merchants and artists. Paper not only served as a writing support or communications medium, but also as a meaning-generating and representational commodity essential for the Venetian authorities.

Remaining focused on paper, the next conference talk by DARIO M. ZORZA (London) examined the Venetian book industry of the 16th century. In order to convey a sense of trust and reliability in Venetian products and to guarantee long term relationships with customers, the printing and publishing business was strictly regulated with regard to material and quality standards.

Turning away from paper and books towards textiles and fabrics, the closing talk of this section offered significant insights into the politics of the Venetian textile trade with Dalmatia. Providing newly unearthed material, SILVIJA BANIĆ (Zagreb) focused on three different silk types from the 16th cen-

ture: While the pile-on-pile crimson velvets, the 'archetype' of a luxurious Venetian fabric, were reserved for senators and members of the Republic, the crimson-coloured silks and patterned damasks were also sent to high-ranking officials in Dalmatian regions. These transactions can also be seen as political act: The wearing of Venetian toga and vesta by rectors in Split and Zadar also implemented Venetian state-iconography in cities under Venetian dominion at that time.

Apart from being an extravagant and elite raw material, sugar also played an essential part in the Serenissima's festival culture. After explaining how Asian and Egyptian agricultural techniques were adopted to enhance the cultivation of this 'soft-commodity' in the Venetian territories of Crete and Cyprus, ANNA MARIE FISKER (Aalborg) illustrated how the city's wealth and splendour was showcased through elaborate sugar sculptures and banquet decoration in the 16th century.

Taking as her starting point the problematic category and terminology of the so-called Veneto-Saracenic ware of the 16th century, ELIZABETH RODINI (Baltimore) discussed this object category in relation to consumption, sumptuary laws and mercantile practices in Venice. Here the question of 'Venetian origin' remains problematic, since, for example, some damascene objects may have been produced in the Lagoon and then decorated in Eastern workshops. Furthermore, the successful Venetian appropriation of foreign motifs and decoration opens up the potential for imitation as an intentional artistic strategy.

Processes of appropriation were also a key aspect in SUSANNE THÜRIGEN's (Munich) talk on South-German clocks as 'Venetian' commodities: In the 16th century, the workshop of Jakob Marquardt in Augsburg produced various clock-cases with Moresque-décor for both the German and the Italian markets. Their ornamentation, inspired by Venetian embroidery pattern-books, not only testifies to the creative translation of styles from the textile medium into metalwork, but also to the circulation of skills between important artistic centres of the period: The Levant, Venice and Augsburg.

Revisiting the topic of 'product placement'

in Venetian festival culture, EVELYN KORSCH (Erfurt) traced the ways in which certain textiles were connected to the allegorical figure of Venetia. The myth and self-representation of the Serenissima's unique beauty, splendour and wealth through trade was not only achieved through the display of brocade, damask, satin and velvet fabrics in diplomatic encounters and court ceremonies but also through visual media where certain textiles were allegorically attributed to different alter egos of 'Venetia'.

Similarly, Venetian leather shields of the 16th century can be considered as objects of prestige and at the same time as vehicles for representation. This was laid out by JULIA SAVIELLO (Munich) in the closing presentation of the conference. Gilded and decorated in the pseudo Ottoman style by Venetian artisans, these shields were intended for local use in the first place: As 'trophies' of the Serenissima's global connections and trade network, they were carried during processions and showcased in the highly esteemed stately armouries or in the private porteghi. What these leather shields reflect is the Venetian approach to the Ottoman Empire both artistically and militarily: Their particular ornament and display mirror the ambivalent relationship between Venice and Constantinople, being all at once one of peaceful diplomacy, conflict and commercial profit.

During the lively discussions a number of questions arose: Why were some commodities at times more successful than others? What led to the emergence and to the disappearance of certain object groups from the market? How did the Venetians so creatively adjust their products to the specific demands of both religious and secular customers? One important outcome was the realization that the term 'commodity' itself might prove insufficient for the whole phenomenon and instead 'Venetian strategies' of commodification must be taken into account: How the city's identity was carefully fabricated not only in terms of architecture and visual media, but also by exporting the very idea of 'Venetian-ness' in the form of commodities throughout the world. In order to understand how 'typically Venetian commodities' were envisioned, handled and collected in a range of contexts,

the regional focus was expanded also beyond the Serenissima's territories and the Mediterranean. Ultimately, the conference took a twofold approach to 'Venetian commodities': on the one hand, a wide range of case studies and material evidence was presented in order to analyze the physical and stylistic features of diverse object groups. On the other hand, specific artefacts were discussed with respect to concepts and methodologies, turning away from materially and geographically confined categories towards an understanding based on sensual experience and the significance of objects for Venetian society. To create a closer connection between both conceptions might be a useful point of departure for future research and case studies of other cities. Ultimately, the conference took a twofold approach to 'Venetian commodities': on the one hand, a wide range of case studies and material evidence was presented to analyse the physical and stylistic features of diverse object groups. On the other hand, certain artefacts were discussed with particular respect to concepts and methodologies, turning away from materially and geographically confined categories towards a perception based on sensual experience and their significance for the venetian society. To create a closer connection between both conceptions might be a useful point of departure for future research and case studies in other cities.

Conference Overview:

Introduction

Philippe Cordez, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Of Venetian Camels and Commodities

Romedio Schmitz-Esser, Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, Venetian Glass Production in the Alps

Chair: Jan Keupp, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster

Stefania Gerevini, Università Commerciale Luigi Bocconi, Milano, Commodities „Made in Venice“: The Case of Rock Crystal

Tanja Tolar, University of London, Re-Examination of Enamelled Glass Fragments From London – Venetian Ticket to Economic

Success?

Chair: Petra Schaefer, Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani

Manlio Leo Mezzacasa, Università degli Studi di Padova, Sull'exportazione di oreficeria sacra veneziana di tardo Trecento e Quattrocento

Benedetta Chiesi, Firenze, I manufatti „veneziani“ in avorio e osso tra XIV e XV secolo. Problemi di riconoscimento e localizzazione

Nathaniel Silver, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, „In magna ars de talibus tabulis et figuris.“ Panel Painting as Venetian Commodity

Keynote

Luca Molà, Istituto Universitario Europeo, Firenze, The City of Innovation: Renaissance Venice and the Creation of New Objects for a Global Market

Chair: Julia Oswald, Northwestern University / Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Lucas Burkart, Universität Basel, Glass „à la façon de Venise“ – How Does a Material Shape Social Identity?

Leah R. Clark, The Open University, The View from Ferrara: „Venetian“ Objects in Este/Aragonese Collections

Cristian Luca, Istituto Romeno di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica di Venezia / Università del Danubio Meridionale di Galati, Esportazioni e merci veneziane nei Principati Romeni del sec. XVI

Chair: Joanna Olchawa, Universität Osnabrück

Megan K. Williams, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, „Venedigisch Papier“ as Concept and Coveted Commodity in the Late Medieval and Early Modern „World of Paper“

Dario Michele Zorza, Victoria and Albert Museum / Royal College of Art, London, Crafting the „Venetian Quality“: The Book Industry in Sixteenth-Century Venice

Silvija Banić, University of Zagreb, Silks of the

Serenissima. Three Case Studies on 16th Century Venetian Textiles in Dalmatia

Chair: Susanne Thürigen, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

Anna Marie Fisker, Aalborg Universitet, Sugar – A Venetian Soft Commodity

Chair: Thomas Kührtreiber, Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit, Krens

Elizabeth Rodini, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Damascene Ware in Venice and Beyond: A Study of Commodities in Context

Susanne Thürigen, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Processes of Appropriation – South German Table Clocks as Venetian Commodities

Evelyn Korsch, Universität Erfurt, Venetian Silk Cloth: Agency, Effects and Meaning

Julia Saviello, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, The Cuoridoro's Trophies: Venetian Leather Shields

Tagungsbericht *Typical Venice? Venetian Commodities, 13th-16th Centuries*. 03.03.2016–05.03.2016, Venice, in: H-Soz-Kult 08.06.2016.