The Ca'Dario: A Message from a *Cittadino*

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In the fifteenth century the Republic of Venice was an oligarchy ruled only by the noble class. Its leaders promoted the idea that people in the various social classes were content with their positions and that each held a well-defined place in society. Giovanni Dario, a member of the social hierarchy's second tier, who were known as *cittadini* or citizens, did not adhere to this belief. He created a unique role within Venetian society where, in addition to being a successful merchant, he served as a diplomat to the Near East and held several high-ranking positions in Venetian social institutions. Through these positions Dario attained a special status that was as close to the elite class as he could realize within the Venetian law.

In the late 1480s Dario built a palace, known as the Ca'Dario (Figure 1), on the southern side of the Grand Canal, about a quarter of a mile before the waterway opens in front of San Marco Piazza. No documentation exists for the architect of the Ca'Dario. Because of stylistic similarities to the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli by Pietro Lombardo (Figure 2), scholars frequently attribute the design to him.[1] Regardless of who the architect was, the design of the Ca'Dario was the result of the patron's desires. While the decorative nature of the palace is discussed at length in the current literature, the focus of this paper will be the manner in which the patron and the social history of Venice affected the design of Dario's palazzo.[2]

Compared with other Venetian palace designs from the fifteenth century, the exterior of the Ca'Dario stands out by virtue of individual characteristics that depart from traditional influences, among them the use of vivid marbles, the rosette motif, and an inscription across the ground floor. Considering these distinctive features and Dario's special place within Venetian society, this paper argues that the building was an expression of his social self-image and desires. Dario believed that he, a *cittadino*, played a role virtually equal to that of contemporary patricians. His actions and the appearance of his palace demonstrate his efforts to align himself with the republic's elite and ruling class.

In addition to its non-traditional features, the Ca'Dario stands out from contemporary homes along the Grand Canal because of its asymmetrical façade and its profusion of ornament. Although most Venetian palazzi from the fifteenth century have some decoration, the typical home of a wealthy individual, whether a nobleman or a citizen, is not nearly as sumptuous as the Ca'Dario, and the majority of palaces have bilaterally-symmetrical façades. For example the central bay, which is designated by a series of arcaded windows on the upper stories, is framed by two side bays with either one or two windows on each level (Figure 3).[3] Because of its narrow site, the Ca'Dario's façade is divided into only two parts, which results in an asymmetrical design.

The ground floor of the Ca'Dario is sheathed in white, cut marble and consists of a central portal and two side windows. Beneath the four colored roundels, which are spaced evenly across the façade, is an inscription (Figure 4): "URBIS GENIO IOANNES DARIUS," or "Giovanni Dario, to the genius of the City."

The three upper stories are arranged in a different manner. Three round-arched windows, framed by columns or pilasters, make up the left side. The right side, separated from the left by a pilaster, has two round-arched windows on either end with a decorative element in the center. This element, a rosette design on the two main floors and a quincunx pattern on the top story, rests on a veneer of yellow-toned marble. Stone roundels in various shades of green and purple are also included at regular intervals throughout the upper stories.

Dario built his palace during a transitional phase of Venetian architecture. Prior to 1450, the city's gothic style was characterized by diverse motifs from the numerous cultures with which Venice had interacted during its long history. Around the middle of the century this style began to merge

This paper developed out of a seminar under Dr. Debra Pincus. I would like to thank her for her advice, encouragement, and enthusiasm with this topic. I would also like to thank Dr. Jack Freiberg and Dr. Robert Neuman for their comments and suggestions.

1 Ralph Lieberman, *Renaissance Architecture in Venice, 1450-1540* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982) plate 16.

2 For a monograph of the palace, see Vittorio Sgarbi, *Ca' Dario: mito e storia di Giovanni Dario e del suo palazzo tra Oriente e Venezia* (Milan: Franco Maria Ricci, 1984). For discussions about the Ca'Dario in surveys of Venetian Renaissance architecture, see Deborah Howard, *Architectural History of Venice* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1980) 108; John McAndrew, *Venetian Architecture of the Early Renaissance* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1980), 215-221; and Lieberman, *Renaissance Architecture* plate 16.

3 For a discussion of the characteristic layout of Venetian homes, see Richard J. Goy, *Venetian Vernacular Architecture: Traditional Housing in the Venetian Lagoon* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 126-35. Figure 3, the Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti, is a fifteenth-century building that was heavily restored in the nineteenth century.

with the imported ideas of the classical revival. The resulting architecture was neither entirely gothic nor classical.

For example, the Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti is typical of this eclectic phase (Figure 3). Various window styles differentiate each of the four levels. The two upper stories have the characteristic pointed gothic arch while the lower floors are distinguished by their rounded and rectangular openings. The regularized placement of motifs on the façade, however, indicates a growing awareness of classical designs.

The builder of the Palazzo Manzoni, which was also built during this transitional period, used fluted pilasters to divide the bays on the upper stories.[4] Furthermore, all of the windows on the main façade are simple, round-arches framed by engaged columns. In spite of its classical elements, the Palazzo Manzoni retained a distinctly Venetian look that would never be confused with a Renaissance palace from Florence. The distinct nature of the Ca'Dario accords perfectly with this stage of Venetian architecture; yet, at the same time it presents a noticeable departure from tradition.

The Ca'Dario was one of the first Venetian houses to be veneered entirely in marble.[5] Replacing the traditional brick and stucco exteriors, the luxurious layer of yellow-toned marble with red highlights, which is possibly the marble *giallo antico,* lends the palace a rich and sumptuous feel. Although palace façades clad entirely in stone only dated from the last two decades of the fifteenth century, the material had a long tradition in Venetian architecture.[6] Colorful marbles and expensive stones had long been used as a prominent building material on the most prestigious buildings, such as the Doge's Palace and at San Marco. These materials were also widely employed in more traditional settings as decorative details, including door and window frames, string courses, and carved reliefs.

Roundels, or circular discs made of fine stone, were a popular ornament for Venetian buildings.[7] Although some of the roundels were solely decorative, others, which often depicted demons, centaurs, and fighting animals, probably functioned as talismanic devices warding off evil or misfortune.[8] The use of Roman spoila asserted the status of the family by suggesting trading or military successes.[9] Numerous roundels adorn the façade of the Ca'Dario. These are in an assortment of colors and sizes, including the rich colors of *verde antico* and red porphyry, a type of spoila that signified imperial status. Although the discs certainly add to the decoration of the Ca'Dario, the expensive stone brings to mind the patron's success and helps to elevate his status. The combination of the numerous roundels and the completely veneered façade were two factors that made the Ca'Dario depart from traditional architecture.

The most striking features on the Ca'Dario are the rosette motifs on the two main floors and the quincunx pattern on the top story. This is the first instance that the rosette motif, which is a sequence of twelve marble discs around a larger porphyry disc, is used in domestic architecture in Venice (Figure 5); a previous version had only been used on the façade of the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli. The design of the quincunx, an arrangement of four circles around a larger circle, was a more prevalent motif.

Looking for the rosette motif's stylistic source, some scholars have suggested a relationship between it and the multiple-colored, interlaced patterns found in the mosaic floors at San Marco.[10] Deborah Howard thinks that the idea could have come from a decoration used on the façades of Egyptian palaces and mosques, which Dario would have seen on diplomatic trips to Cairo in 1473 and 1477.[11] Although these are possible sources of inspiration, the most obvious connection is with the two motifs in the segmented pediment of the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli (Figure 6).[12] Aside from the type of molding that frames the roundels and the number of discs that surround the central element, the two motifs are virtually alike. Pietro Lombardo built the church in 1481 as a permanent home for a painting of the Virgin and Child, suddenly linked to the performance of miracles.[13] Because of the substantial number of public offerings made in response to the miracles, construction on the foundation began within six months. By 1485, the building was complete except for the domed high altar.

Dario had several connections to the church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, which further the likelihood that it was the source of the Ca'Dario rosette. Prior to building his house on the Grand Canal, Dario lived in the Cannaregio district, the same area where one finds the Miracoli. Dario certainly would have been aware of the miracles attributed to the image and the

4 For a discussion of the Palazzo Manzoni, see Lieberman, *Renaissance Architecture,* plate 65.

5 Goy 57-59.

6 Goy 29-32, 57.

7 Goy 81.

8 Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997) 118-120.

9 Deborah Howard, *Venice and the East: the Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture, 1100-1500* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 148-50.

10 The floors of San Marco resemble the Cosmatesque pavements from medieval churches in the vicinity of Rome. Howard, *Venice and the East* 154; McAndrew 220.

11 Howard, *Venice and the East* 153-54.

12 Lieberman, *Renaissance Architecture* plate 16; McAndrew 217. The rosettes at Santa Maria dei Miracoli have eleven roundels encircling a larger disk while the rosettes at the Ca'Dario have twelve roundels.

13 For the Church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, see Ralph Lieberman, *The Church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli in Venice,* diss., New York University, 1986 (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986) especially 226-27 for the rosette motif. Lieberman remarks that the rosette motif does not exist as an architectural decoration before the 1480s, but that it has a long tradition in Venetian pavement decoration, such as at San Marco.

construction for the church. In addition, while Pietro Lombardo was working on the church he was simultaneously remodeling the entryway and courtyard of the Scuola San Giovanni Evangelista, a confraternity of which Dario was a member. As chief officer of the Scuola in 1480, it is likely that Dario knew of the architect's other building projects.[14]

Just as the source of the rosette at Dario's palace is interwoven with the history of the Miracoli, the message that Dario wanted the design to communicate is likewise connected to the church. While the previous literature dismisses the rosette design at both buildings as purely decorative, when one considers that roundels inserted in façades were often protective devices, the prominent position of this motif takes on new implications.[15]

In the middle ages, palaces and mosques in the Near East had architectural reliefs in the shapes of rosettes and discs that were considered as symbols of protection.[16] Likewise, Patrik Reutersward has argued that rosette motifs found on churches and sarcophagi from the early middle ages implied the protective hand of God.[17] These traditions, combined with the fact that the Miracoli sheltered a miraculous image, suggest that the rosette motif likely functioned as an apotropaic device for the church. Dario, who was familiar with the motif, would have appreciated that significance. As a decoration on his new home, he believed the rosette motif of rare and expensive stones helped to elevate his status, and would guard him from misfortune and help him to garner further achievements.

The inscription, "URBIS GENIO IOANNES DARIUS," was one of the first examples of classical epigraphy on residential architecture in Venice (Figure 4).[18] By using classical Latin with proper Roman letters, Dario alluded to a rich tradition of inscriptions on venerable buildings, which made his palazzo stand out from its contemporaries. Several scholars who interpret the text as a dedicatory statement to the city of Venice view it as an effort by Dario to avoid charges of building in an ostentatious manner.[19] In contrast, this discussion puts forth the suggestion that Dario included it as a means of creating a permanent honor to himself as well as to the city of Venice. In Latin, *genius* refers to spirit. When used with *urbis*, which can mean the idea of a city as well as its exact geographic location, the phrase becomes *to the guiding spirit of the city*.[20] Dario's inscription should be interpreted as honoring the actual city of Venice, and the ideas embodied by the Republic. By adding his name to the phrase, he placed himself in the exalted ranks of the Republic and equated himself with the guiding spirit of the city.

Even though his was one of the earliest buildings in Venice to include a Latin inscription, Dario was not the first Renaissance patron to employ an epigraph with personal and civic themes. At the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini (1451) there are twin Greek inscriptions on its flanks which proclaim that Sigismondo Malatesta, the patron, dedicated the building to God and to the state.[21] Although Marilyn Aronberg Lavin stresses that these are part of a larger artistic program to show Sigismondo's twin allegiances, the prominent inclusion of his name at the beginning of the inscription ensures the commemoration of the Malatesta family. In terms of residential architecture, the Casa di Lorenzo Manilio of 1469 in Rome has a classical inscription carved into travertine blocks in the frieze above the ground floor (Figure 7).[22] The text begins with a reference to the rebirth of the city and follows with the name of the patron. Again, the inscription's essential purpose

14 Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 241-242.

15 For discussions of the rosette motif as a decorative element, see Howard, *Architectural History* 108; Lieberman, *Santa Maria dei Miracoli* 226; McAndrew 217. For the apotropaic quality of the roundels, see note 9.

16 Amulets in the shapes of rings, rosettes, discs, and knots made up of interlacing designs, were placed over the doors of houses and used as sculptural reliefs on pottery, water basins, and thresholds as apotropaic devices to ward off misfortune or evil. For further discussion, see Nigel J. Morgan, "Devotional objects and popular images," *The Dictionary of Art*, volume 8, 835; Robert Hillenbrand, "Islamic Art, Subject Matter (ix) Magic," *The Dictionary of Art*, volume 16, 136, 246.

17 Patrick Reuterswärd, "The Forgotten Symbols of God," *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 51.3 (1982): 103-25.

18 Patricia Fortini Brown, *Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996) 255.

19 Brown, *Venice and Antiquity* 255-260; John Onian, "The Last Judgment of Renaissance Architecture," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 128 (1980): 708-709. Franz Babinger suggests that the inscription is a variation of a quote by the ancient author Ausonius, which reads: "Salve, urbis genius, medico potabilis haustu." For a further discussion, see Franz Babinger, *Johannes Darius (1414-1494), Sachwalter Venedigs im Morgenland, und sein griechischer Umkreis* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie de Wissenschaften, 1961) 89, n. 2.

20 I would like to thank Dr. Jack Freiberg for assisting me with this translation.

21 The inscription reads: "Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, son of Pandolfo, Bringer of Victory, having survived many and most grave dangers during the Italic War, in recognition of his deeds accomplished so felicitously and with such courage, for he obtained what he had prayed for in such a critical juncture, has erected at his magnanimous expense this temple to the Immortal God and to the City, and left a memorial worthy of fame and full of piety." For a transcript of the inscription in Greek and a further discussion of the meaning behind Sigismondo Malatesta's inscription, see Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Piero della Francesca's Fresco of Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta before St. Sifismund: 1+S3 !1!;!IS3 5!3 I/3 A?7+3," *Art Bulletin* 56 (1974): 345-374; "The Antique Source for the Tempio Malatestiano's Greek Inscriptions," *Art Bulletin* 59 (1977): 421-422. For a different analysis, see Onian 707-708.

22 The inscription reads: "Urbe Roma in pristinam forma[m r]enascente Laur(entius) Manlius Karitate erga patri[am gent(em) a]edis suo / nomine manlian(as) a s(olo) pro fort[un]ar(um) mediocritate ad for(um) iudeor(um) sibi poterisq[ue suis ipse] p(osuit) / ab urb(e) con(dita) MMCCXXIL an(nis) m(ensibus) III d(iebus) II p(osuit) (ante diem) XI cal(endas) aug(ustas)." Missing portions of the inscription are designated by the brackets. For a further discussion and analysis of the inscription, see Pier Luigi Tucci, *Laurentius Manlius* (Rome: Edizioni Quasar, 2001) 187-224.

is to honor a city and to pay tribute to the person who created the monument.

Although Dario based his inscription on a long tradition of classical architectural epigraphy, he made one significant change. Instead of putting the text in the frieze as at the Casa di Lorenzo Manilio, he placed it across the middle of the ground floor. By positioning the text at eye level, it would be more noticeable to passengers along the Grand Canal and better serve to reinforce Dario's message.

To grasp fully the distinctive nature of the Ca'Dario, we must understand the patron's unique status within Venice. Dario performed many roles as a Venetian *cittadino*. Within the social structure of Venice, the *cittadini* ranked second behind the elite and restricted patrician class.[23] Nonetheless, Dario became a successful merchant who, around 1464, at the age of fifty, began to serve as a Venetian diplomat in the East.[24] Before he retired from diplomatic work in 1489, this position took him to many diverse lands including Egypt, Constantinople, and Persia.

One of Dario's most illustrious moments was in 1479 when he negotiated a peace treaty with the Sultan Mehmet II from the Turkish Empire. In return for his accomplishment, the Venetian Senate gave him property in Padua that would provide an annual income. In addition, he was able to keep a set of golden gowns given to him by the Sultan.[25] The combination of his mercantile and diplomatic successes allowed Dario to amass a great fortune with which to build his new house on the Grand Canal. Furthermore, he provided his only child, Marietta, with a substantial dowry that enabled her to marry the patrician Vincenzo Barbaro.[26] Although Dario could not become a patrician, he provided the means for his decendents to have this status.

As a civil servant, Dario did not spend all of his time abroad; he also held leadership positions in Venetian institutions. In 1480 and 1492 Dario served as the Grand Guardian, or chief officer, of the Scuola di San Giovanni Evangelista.[27] Although nobles were not excluded from membership within these philanthropic organizations, they were restricted from holding offices including the Grande Guardian.[28] Dario also served as secretary to the patrician senate, another role that was exclusively reserved for the citizen class. Positions such as these were eagerly sought, and allowed the *cittadini* a sense of power.[29]

Throughout the history of Venice little internal strife and few popular uprisings occurred. Despite the fact that the nobility controlled the government, an overall sense of harmony created the belief that the people of Venice were content with their positions and saw themselves as essentially equal.[30] Dario, however, was clearly aware of the limitations. In a letter from 1484 to Doge Giovanni Mocenigo, in which Dario was writing to be relieved of his diplomatic post in order to retire to Venice, he states: "And if I were there I would be silent as is suitable to my station, and I would leave speaking to those whom it is given from above."[31] With this acknowledgement Dario made it clear that he realized that upon returning to Venice his diplomatic position, with which he had achieved great success, would no longer offer him a leadership role in the city's government.

When Dario knew he was going to retire from his diplomatic work, he began to build his house on the Grand Canal. Knowing that he could never be a patrician, but cognizant of the fact that he had achieved greater power than most *cittadini*, he chose to create a house that reflected his unique position within Venetian society. The resulting product was the Ca' Dario, which, just like its patron, set itself apart from its contemporaries and departed from tradition.

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23 For a further discussion of the social structure of Venice and the distinctions between the classes see Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* 34; James S. Grubb, "Elite citizens," *Venice Reconsidered: The History and Civilization of an Italian City-State, 1297-1797*, eds. John Martin and Dennis Romano (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2000) 339-364; and Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971) 99-112.

24 For the biography of Giovanni Dario see Babinger 71-117.

25 For a further discussion of the terms and conditions of the peace treaty as well as Dario's recompense and gift see Babinger 84-85.

26 The dowry was 1000 ducats. Babinger 86.

27 Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting* 241-242. The Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, which had a relic of the True Cross, commissioned artists such as Gentile Bellini and Vittore Carpaccio for a series of paintings recording the miracles associated with the relic. For an overview of the scuole organizations in Venice, see Brian Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice: the Social Institutions of a Catholic State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1971) 33-131.

28 Pullan 73-74.

29 Pullan 108.

30 Brown, *Venice and Antiquity* 255. The author cites a quote from Sanudo's *De origine* of 1493, which reads "The poor live here with the wealthy under equality," to convey a sense of uniformity within the treatment of the various classes.

31 Babinger 72; English translation of quote taken from Brown, *Venetian Narrative Painting* 65.

Figure 1. Ca'Dario, *c.* 1488, Venice. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

Figure 2. Santa Maria dei Miracoli,1481-1485, Venice. Pietro Lombardo, architect. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

Figure 3. Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti, fifteenth-century; nineteenth-century restoration, Venice. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

Figure 4. Detail of the inscription, Ca'Dario, *c.* 1488, Venice. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

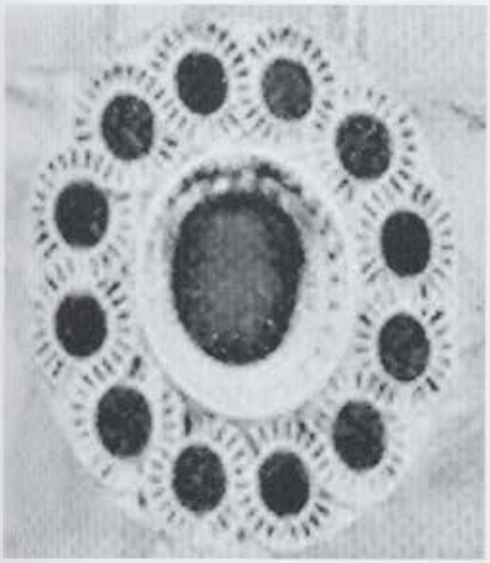

Figure 5. Detail of the rosette motif, Ca'Dario, *c.* 1488, Venice. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

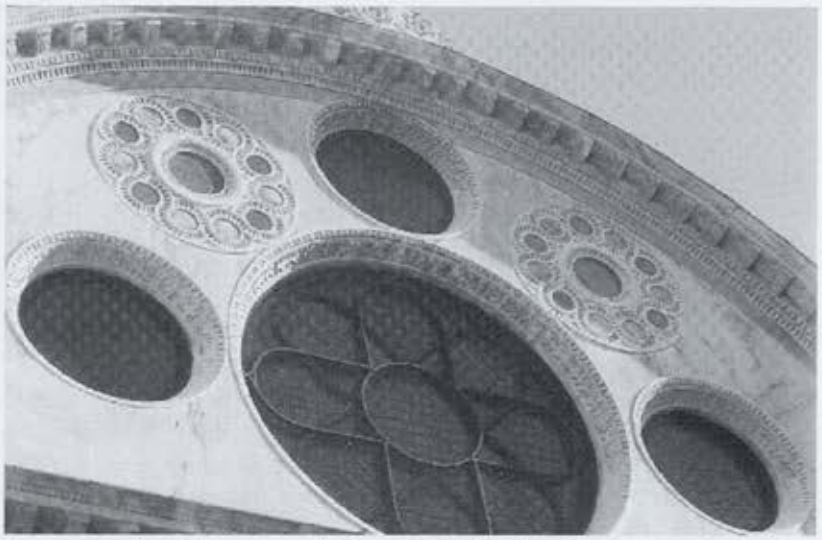

Figure 6. Detail of the rosette motif, Santa Maria dei Miracoli, 1481-1485, Venice. Pietro Lombardo, architect. Photograph courtesy of Segundo J. Fernandez.

Figure 7. Casa di Lorenzo Manilio, *c.* 1469, Rome. Photograph courtesy of Jack Freiberg.