

How  
Save Venice  
restored  
one of the  
city's  
lesser-  
known  
treasures.

## Going to the Chapel

In 1966, when a devastating flood in Venice threatened the city's countless architectural and art treasures, benefactors from around the world leaped into action to help protect and preserve them. The task is ongoing; there are now roughly 30 international foundations dedicated to maintaining Venice's aesthetic heritage. In the U.S., its guardian is Save Venice Inc., a nonprofit organization that works closely with the city's superintendents of monuments and arts to adopt projects deemed worthy of immediate attention. Since its founding in 1967, the New York-based group has raised more than \$12 million to help underwrite over 100 projects.

Save Venice's most recent venture was the restoration of the Badoer Giustinian Chapel in the Church of San Francesco della Vigna. The chapel was an unusual choice. It's a much less high-profile project than two of Save Venice's other recent efforts, the restoration of Tintoretto's *Paradise* in the Doge's Palace; or the preservation of the Church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli, which took 10 years and \$3 million to complete. In fact, the Church of San Francesco della Vigna is almost obscure, a bit off the beaten tourist path. The interior doesn't have intricate mosaics, or paintings by a Venetian master, or breathtaking marquetry to lure art lovers or inspire gushing guidebook blurbs. The roof collapsed even before the World Wars, adding rainwater and debris to the insult of persistent humidity. Over time, grime,



soot, and the residue from centuries of cheap ecclesiastical candles and less-than-pristine pigskin cloths used for polishing conspired to coat the intricate marble statues and friezes with ghastly green and black patinas. Scholars had given the church short shrift as well. One article, written by an Italian art historian in the mid-1960s, offered the most attention the church had gotten since it was featured in a famous woodblock map by Jacopo de Barbari in 1500.

The oversight is baffling, because San Francesco della Vigna is an integral part of Venice's history. According to legend, when St. Mark took refuge from a storm on this very site, an angel appeared before him and said, "Peace be with you, Mark, my Evangelist. It is here that your body shall lie, for the city that rises among these lagoons shall invoke you as its protector." The line is repeated on virtually all of the city's civic monuments. The site was marked with a Gothic church built by the Franciscan brethren of Venice in the mid-13th century. In the 1490s, the Badoer family commissioned several liturgical sculptures for a chapel completed in 1509: a marble choir screen featuring narrative reliefs illustrating the life of

above The Badoer Giustinian Chapel in the Church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice is the latest restoration project sponsored by the U.S.-based organization Save Venice.

photos: Ralph Liebermann

The chapel's choir screen features marble work now considered among the greatest masterpieces of Venetian architecture. The choir screen after restoration (below), and before (bottom left).

Bottom right it took three professionals a full year to remove almost 500 years of filth, using a gentle peel-off cleaning solution painstakingly applied four to six times to the same area.

Christ, and a marble altarpiece displaying saints Agnes, Michael, and Jerome, who in this extraordinary rendering holds a Bible in one hand and a magnificent model of an early Renaissance church in the other.

Twenty-five years later, in 1524, a new church on the site was begun as part of the urban renewal plan of Doge Andrea Gritti, who commissioned the great Florentine artist Jacopo Sansovino to replace San Francesco della Vigna's plain Gothic church, convent, and cloisters with a Renaissance beauty. Marc'Antonio Giustinian, the son of the last Badoer, Agnesina, rebuilt the chapel under Sansovino's direction, and salvaged what he could (and what could fit) for the church's new 54-square-meter chapel, which is set to the left of the high altar.

According to Francisco "Toto" Bergamo Rossi, head of the Badoer chapel restoration team, this was the first important example of a technique that would be adopted in other Venetian churches—"to recycle decorations rather than scrap them," he says. In the process of restoring the altar, Toto was able to say which parts of the friezes belonged to the choir screen originally commissioned by Agnesina and which had been added, and when and by whom. He has concluded that panels portraying St. Luke and St. Matthew have been correctly attributed to Antonio and Tullio Lombardo, and that the reliefs of St. John and St. Mark, which have been credited to a number of artists, are most likely the work of Giambattista Bregno. "What's very exciting," Toto says happily, "is that work in the screen and the altar may be considered among the great masterpieces of Venetian sculpture."

Restoring the marble occupied three professionals for a full year. The work was painstaking. "It would take an entire day for me to clean an area 10 centimeters square," says Toto. The team applied a gentle cleaning solution—one that works like a peel-off face mask—four to six times to the same area to reveal the creamy marble beneath the filth. What of the tedium? Toto, tall, charming, and film-star elegant, closes his eyes and laughs. "You must be relaxed and quiet," he says, "and always have the patience to stay on the scaffolding and have respect for what's in front of you. If you're not in the right mind that day, better to go home."

Last October, the Badoer-Giustinian Chapel was dedicated by Dr. Randolph Guthrie, chairman of Save Venice, and his wife, Beatrice, the organization's former executive director, who together underwrote the restoration project. The couple's donation was made in memory of John and Betty McAndrew, the American founders of Save Venice. For more information on the organization, call (212) 737-3141.

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