

Venice Interpreted Anew

David Carrier

Venice, the City Triumphant, reveals herself . . . like a great, a superabundant banquet, where all the riches accumulated throughout centuries of war and commerce are to be set out without stint. What richer fountain of pleasure could there be to initiate life in insatiable desire?

Gabriele D'Annunzio

Venice . . . city of stone and water, the most stupendous, the most far-reaching of humanistic creation . . . The one permanent miracle, and the presence of this miracle in the heart of Europe for fifteen hundred years is an historical factor whose influence is too vague and large for its conceiving by historians.

Adrian Stokes

At a distance from terra firmament, ideas of the natural and the normal are redefined, and what seems miraculous made real.

Paul Hills

Venetian architectural planners took advantage of the stimulating natural properties of their aquatic space and their geographical control over their visitors to craft a fantastical image of their city from the water, in large part to substantiate the myth of its miraculous birth.

Daniel Savoy

EVERY TOURIST DISCOVERS IMMEDIATELY HOW UNUSUAL IS VENICE, the only major Italian city entirely on water. Many cities have rivers running through them, or lakes or oceans at the edge. But in Venice, you travel by water. In the warren of narrow streets, the commonplace advice is apt: Allow yourself to get lost! You are always near water, whose optical qualities are constantly changing with the weather and thanks to passing boat traffic. As Paul Hills observes: “No city built on land can offer so brilliant and so strange an intermingling and intensifying of the color of the sky and the color of the buildings on the surface of its thoroughfares.”¹ “It is one thing to walk past a building,” Adrian Stokes wrote, “another to slide past, to slip slowly in a continuous movement.”² Indeed, even looking out your window is a novel experience, as Jean-Paul Sartre noted: “The water is too well-behaved: you don’t hear it. Growing suspicious, I lean out: the sky has fallen in there.”³

When young, spending a month in Venice learning Italian, I brought the three volumes of John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1841-1843). The more recent editions are abridged, for few readers make their way through Ruskin’s prose. Later, I studied Marcel Proust’s critical account of his youthful adulation of Ruskin. And now, thanks to Robert Hewison’s *Ruskin on Venice: “The Paradise of Cities”* (2010), I learned the history of Ruskin’s discussion.⁴

Ruskin defined how many people understood Venice. Since he offers a suggestive account of the relationship between the unique situation of the city and its art, accounts of Venetian painting regularly begin with a brief Ruskinian description of its setting. In 1971 S. J. Freedberg said:

Nature combined with the work of man to enhance the fascination of the sensuous world. The atmosphere of the sea-borne city heightens the existence of seen things. Color is deepened on the damp-saturated air and sharpened by the sea-reflected light, which also may make complicating interactions among colors. The air has an apparent texture which it lends to surfaces perceived through it, and the atmosphere accentuates the sensuous skin of substance.⁵

In his more recent account, Hills develops that idea:

To the Venetian patrician, the lapping of water at the walls of his palace placed his domicile in touch with the keel’s way, and reminded him of the sea-borne traffic that was carried to and fro over the horizon, moving between the visible and the out-of-sight.⁶



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice, the Bridge of Sighs*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 68.6 cm × 91.4 cm (27.0 in × 36.0 in). Tate Britain, London.

And as John Steer noted, the distinctive features of the city’s art are presented in the way that it depicts its subjects:

The painters of Venice only rarely illustrated their city, and when they did they tended to seize on its permanent characteristics rather than its flux; but its unique visual qualities entered into their whole way of seeing and, fused with the decorative traditions inherited from Byzantium, determined the direction which Venetian painting took.⁷

Generally, after brief notes about the setting, scholars focus on paintings. However, the Ruskinian tradition argues that interpretation of art needs to consider its setting as well. In 1909, Henry James magnificently summarized this view, asserting that the city is itself an artwork.

⁷ John Steer, *Venetian Painting: A Concise History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1985).

¹ Paul Hills, *Venetian Colour. Marble, Mosaic, Painting and Glass 1250-1550* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

² Adrian Stokes, *Venice. An Aspect of Art* (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), 1.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Venice from my window,” *Venice and Rome*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull, 2021), 79.

⁴ Robert Hewison’s *Ruskin on Venice: “The Paradise of Cities”* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010)

⁵ S. J. Freedberg, *Painting in Italy. 1500 to 1600* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1971), 76-7.

⁶ Hills, *Venetian Colour*.



Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Venice: The Dogana and San Giorgio Maggiore*, 1834.
Oil on canvas, 91.5 × 122 cm (36 × 48 1/16 in.).
Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public Domain / Open Access.

Nowhere . . . do art and life seem so interfused and, as it were, so consanguineous. All the splendor of light and color, all the Venetian air and the Venetian history are on the walls and ceilings of the palaces; and all the genius of the masters, all the images and visions they have left upon canvas, seem to tremble in the sunbeams and dance upon the wave. That is the perpetual interest of the place— that you live in a certain sort of knowledge as in a rosy cloud. You don't go into the churches and galleries by way of change from the streets; you go into them because they offer you an exquisite reproduction of the things that surround you. All Venice was both model and painter, and life was so pictorial that art couldn't help becoming so. With all diminution's life is pictorial still, and this fact gives an extraordinary freshness to one's perception of the great Venetian works.⁸

8 Henry James, *Italian Hours* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 48.

According to Ruskin, “great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts — the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art.”⁹ And art provides the most reliable record. What now is living and what is dead in Ruskin's account? To answer that question, we consider Stokes's account of the materials of Venice, Hill's discussion of its light and Daniel Savoy's analysis of its waterways.

9 *The Works of John Ruskin*, St. Mark's Rest (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, nd), 7.

When Adrian Stokes (1902-72) was young, Ruskin's influence was still very important. Stokes privileged what he called the ‘Quattro Cento’ (from the Italian *quattrocento*), that is, sculpture with an harmonious, unstressed unity. He speaks also, by analogy, of Quattro Cento painting and architecture. *The Quattro Cento* (1932), surveying Italy, includes a short chapter on Venice. Then *The Stones of Rimini* (1934) focuses on the Tempio Malatesta, a Quattro Cento monument where the sculptures of Agostino di Duccio (1418-81) show “water and water-life congealed into stone.”¹⁰ And so he advises: “Spend a day in Venice with eyes on the ground.”¹¹ As a writer “can better visualize a place when he has left it . . .”, so you too can understand Venice by approaching it indirectly.¹² *Venice* (1944) has a critique of Ruskin's history; a constructive analysis of the Venetian aesthetic; and an account of Giorgione's *Tempesta* (1508).

10 Adrian Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, reprinted in *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2002), 155.

11 Stokes, *The Quattro Cento*, reprinted in *The Quattro Cento and Stones of Rimini*, 12.

12 Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 100.

Taking Ruskin's title, *The Stones of Venice*, literally, Stokes describes the history of limestone. “If we would understand a visual art, we ourselves must cherish some fantasy of the material that stimulated the artist. . . .”¹³ Limestone, formed of compressed organic materials, can be carved to express the story of its creation, fantasies of marine life, and the history of stone, brought to the surface, an extended temporal process displayed all at once in images.

13 Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 20.

According to an old myth, Venice had ideal harmony, without any serious internal conflicts. This, it was often said, was why the Republic lasted so long. *The Quattro Cento* brings together of separate elements, without stress. When a figurative image depicts more than one person, artists speak of composition; when an idea has more than one component, philosophers discuss synthesis, while political philosophers tell how a nation is composed

of citizens. And Stokes speaks of “identity in difference,” a phrase borrowed from philosophy, to describe the ideal unities of Venice's architecture.

Stokes' Venice is an ambitious, fully realized account. Since graduate school I've been rereading it. But it has not entered the literature. Ruskin, however, another self-taught private scholar, was enormously influential. Even now Garry Wills' *Venice: Lion City - Religion of Empire* (2001), an amazing synopsis by a gifted outsider, an Americanist, takes issue, with deep respect, with Ruskin's basic argument.¹⁴ But Stokes has remained relatively obscure, and that makes it harder to judge his deeply original claims. The situation of Hills and Savoy is distinctly different. They are rooted in academic tradition, and so their claims will get commented on.

14 Garry Wills' *Venice: Lion City - Religion of Empire* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

“No city built on land,” Hills writes, “can offer so brilliant and so strange an intermingling and intensifying of the color of the sky and the color of the buildings on the surface of its thoroughfares.”¹⁵ The very nature of the self is transformed in Venice. We're invited “to experience (the city) as spectacle, heightening the sense of the world as something that seems to look back, to return the gaze, to mirror and enhance consciousness.”¹⁶ The commonplace sense of intersubjectivity has been transformed. Hills demonstrates that the setting really does create a unique lighting, and so transforms how we understand Venetian art.

15 Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 9.

16 Hills, *Venetian Colour*, 18.

The most brilliant set-piece in *Stones of Venice* describes how visitors entered the city before the train bridge was constructed.¹⁷ The modern approach from the Marco Polo airport by speedboat recaptures these effects, speeded up as suits a jet-age traveler. Daniel Savoy's *Venice from the Water* offers a systematic study of the importance of this site. He uses superlative large plates to illustrate how the Republic controlled visitors' entries to the city. “The palaces of Venice were aberrations, alien entities that hovered inconceivably on the water, the opposite of building in the land-oriented viewer's historical field of lived experience.”¹⁸ After reading his book, everyday experience of the waterways looks different. You see that the light in Venice is unlike that of any Italian landlocked city.

17 See my “The Aesthete in the City,” reprinted in my *The Aesthete in the City. The Philosophy and Practice of American Abstract Painting in the 1980s* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1994), Ch. 4.

18 Daniel Savoy, *Venice from the Water. Architecture and Myth in an Early Modern City* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 70.

19 *Museum Skepticism: A History of the Display of Art in Public Galleries* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

Twenty years ago I argued that the site of an artwork can have a decisive influence on its interpretation.¹⁹ More recently, I briefly applied that claim to Venetian art.²⁰ Radically developing that idea in close detail with lavish large color photographs, Hills and Savoy provide one starting point for innovative contemporary discussion of Venice. **A**

20 David Carrier, “Museum Skepticism Revisited: the Lessons of Venice,” *Counterpunch*, Dec. 6, 2024. www.counterpunch.org/2024/12/06/museum-skepticism-revisited-the-lessons-of-venice