West Meets East in Venice

For centuries Venice has embraced Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam, secular and sacred. That history, now offers an important lesson for our own interconnected—yet increasingly polarized—world

In 1869, when he was 26 years old, Henry James visited Venice for the first time. Like many New England grandees, James sought in Europe the monuments of Greco-Roman antiquity and the Renaissance. However, Venice seems at first to have disappointed him. "I can't for my life surrender myself to the genius of Italy," he wrote to his brother, William. He said he felt "more and more my inexorable Yankeehood."
James was not much impressed by either St. Mark's or the Ducal Palace, which the English critic John Ruskin had called the "central building of the world" for having combined the Roman, Lombard, and Arab styles of architecture. "Travelling Companions," a short story James published a year after that first trip to Venice, seems to express its author's attitude to the strangeness of St. Mark's Square when the main protagonist describes himself as a "half-stupefied traveller to the age of a simpler and more awful faith. I had left Europe; I was in the East."

James probably didn't know that he had stumbled upon an essential historical fact about Venice: its intimacy with the East. The city had been raised, as the British politician and novelist Benjamin Disraeli put it, from the "spoils of the teeming Orient." Venetians pursuing Asian goods undertook long journeys centuries before the European age of exploration that began with the Renaissance. It was the wealth created by this trade with Asia that turned Venice, which began in the sixth century as a straggly settlement on the island of Torcello, into the greatest city of the Mediterranean, and gave it a maritime empire that reached as far as Cyprus. A colony of Venetian merchants existed in Alexandria from the 14th century. Turks, Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, and Africans traveled to the city, and even established permanent outposts in it.

To modern sensibilities, the city does not appear to have changed much over time. With its beauty and glamour, it now serves as a consolation, however temporary, to those of us who live buffeted and bewildered by the modern world. But the city also embodies a long and complex history of

cultural encounters between East and West. This history describes another way of living in an economically and culturally interdependent world—something that takes us beyond the buzzwords we now use (*globalization, clash of civilizations*) to understand the troubled state of our own linked societies.

I knew vaguely about Venice's eastern connections when I first visited it in 1998. I was under the spell of Thomas Mann's symbol-laden novella *Death in Venice*. The first place I went to then was the Lido, on whose desolate beach, amid the Moorish extravaganza of Hotel Excelsior and the Art Deco elegance of the Hotel des Bains, Mann's refined writer-protagonist plays out his passion for a young boy.

The Lido, with its broad avenues and promenades, was recognizably of the West, like the cities I had seen since I left India in 1996. The spacious Baroque palaces and grand boulevards of Paris, the Renaissance town houses of London, and the mock-Roman grandeur of the Mall in Washington, D.C.—they all conformed to my idea of the modern West, whose immense achievements in science and technology from the Renaissance onward seemed to have reached an apotheosis in the grid glass canyons of Manhattan.

I wasn't prepared for the traces Venice still displayed of its connection to the East. Being in Venice itself was to be taken back to the premodern world of my childhood: the small medieval towns in India, the labyrinth of alleys where an occasional decaying mansion stood amid buildings of old exposed brick, and the gloomy houses in whose cramped, often windowless, rooms I had dreamed of escape.

The dappled light on the water and the stones, and the cool damp of the alleys, brought back memories of mild winter afternoons in Benares. Emerging onto St. Mark's Square, facing the strangely familiar jumble of domes, columns, and capitals, I felt myself back in the arcaded courtyards of the great mosques and madrassas (seminaries) in India to which shop-lined alleys lead, dark passages suddenly opening out into expanses of light and color.

I didn't know then that other travelers to Venice had felt the same. Visiting in 1782, the English author William Beckford had written, "The variety of exotic merchandise, the perfume of coffee, the shade of awnings, and the

sight of Greeks and Asiatics sitting cross-legged under them, make me think myself in the bazaars of Constantinople." In 1850, the French writer and aesthete Théophile Gautier had described St. Mark's as an "Oriental dream." Beckford had been more explicit: "I cannot help thinking St. Mark's a mosque."

My own sense of déjà vu was partly explained when I read Ruskin on St. Mark's in *The Stones of Venice:* "It possesses the charm of colour in common with the greater part of the architecture, as well as of the manufactures, of the East; but the Venetians deserve especial note as the only European people who appear to have sympathized to the full with the great instinct of the Eastern races...while the burghers and barons of the North were building their dark streets and grisly castles of oak and sandstone, the merchants of Venice were covering their palaces with porphyry and gold."

It had been easier to notice and understand Moorish influences in Spain and Sicily, which the Arabs ruled for centuries. But how had Venice absorbed its Eastern influences?And how had they managed to be so concealed?

For the first seven centuries of its existence, Venice had looked toward Byzantium for its trade, security, art, and identity. But as the Byzantine Empire weakened, and the Arabs quickly spread across the Mediterranean, Venetians developed stronger links with the Levant and then, even farther, with the spice markets of India and Central Asia, becoming part of a global network of trade. The Venetians finally proclaimed their independence by sacking and looting Constantinople in 1204.

Over the next three centuries, they came into even closer contact with the sophisticated urban and multifaith civilizations that had developed in the Islamic world. Few people had believed the tales of the East told by Marco Polo, who had been nicknamed Marco Il Milione (of the million lies). Now, many Venetians saw for themselves the fabulous cities of Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo.

Just as the household gadgets of middle-class Americans define many people's aspirations in our newly globalized world, so the luxurious lifestyles of the elites of Muslim cities once inspired imitation all over the Islamic world. The nouveau-riche Venetians, too, sought to adopt Eastern

habits of conspicuous, if elegant, consumption. Oriental silks, carpets, ceramics (especially Chinese porcelain), and glass were much in demand among the feudal nobility and the rising bourgeoisie—they helped give Venetian painting its sumptuous colors.

The Venetians expressed their political power too in terms inspired by or borrowed from Muslim lands. The Gothic façade of the Ducal Palace, which was begun in the mid 14th century, emphasized the city's lucrative trading links with the East. Its pink-and-white lozenge pattern was common in Muslim mosques and tombs along the Silk Road in Central Asia, where Venetian merchants traveled frequently. The crenellations on the roof of the palace were probably inspired by similar decorations in Cairo. The marble grilles on St. Mark's Basilica were modeled on those of the great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The Venetian ruling class adopted Arabic words: *sikka, tariff, arsenale, sofa*.

Traces of that medieval world of traders and merchants survive now in the area around Campo Dei Mori in northern Venice. Decay here, unlike in much of Venice, is more than a patina; it hangs mournfully in the air. On the Palazzo Mastelli, there is a bas-relief of a camel, dating from the 14th century. Not far, on the Fondamenta dei Mori, the statue of an Oriental merchant with an oversize turban stands guard on the façade of the house where Tintoretto once lived.

You can only wonder whether Tintoretto, the son of a silk dyer, had any connection with Muslim merchants when you look at his 1562 painting *St. Mark Saving a Saracen from Shipwreck* at the Accademia. In the same, overwhelmingly rich gallery, Moorish slaves lurk incongruously in Veronese's version of the Last Supper. A marble throne with Arabic inscriptions sits in the church of San Pietro di Castello, which was Venice's main cathedral until 1807, when St. Mark's took its place.

Unlike much of Western Europe, with its sword-happy Crusaders, Venice often chose the way of compromise with the Islamic world. Its reluctance to fight Muslims often annoyed the pope in Rome. Religion was important to Venetians, but not as much as trade and coexistence. In 1454, Venice signed a peace treaty with the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II soon after he conquered Istanbul and ended Christian rule in the East. Twenty-five years later, the Doge of Venice sent Gentile Bellini to Istanbul, where he painted, memorably, the Sultan and a boy scribe. Bellini's two years among the

Turks may explain the preponderance of turbaned merchants in *The Procession in St. Mark's Square*.

Two years after Bellini finished this large canvas, the Portuguese discovered the sea route to India and Venice's importance as a center for trade with the East diminished. The explorations of the New World and the renaissance in art and architecture began to give Venetians as well as other Europeans a sense of belonging to a large continent called Europe.
If the city had looked away from Europe as it rose to unprecedented wealth and power, soon it was slowly being drawn, by conquests and conflicts, into the Italian mainland. In 1797, it was finally invaded and defeated by Napoleon. After the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Venice became a stop on Britain's imperial highway to India. The East now began not in Venice but in Suez.

Reabsorbed into Europe, Venice offered convenient metaphors to novelists seeking to define the new worlds conquered by fellow Europeans. Venice "was not Europe" to E. M. Forster, but unlike India, it had "beauty of form." Keen to escape his dull ancestral burghers in Germany, Thomas Mann in his famous story identified Venice with the rational and Apollonian West, threatened only by an East of uncontrollable Dionysian energies.

Shorn of its Asian associations, Venice became part of the 19th century European and American religion called "culture." Only such rich and influential visitors as Henry James enjoyed the privilege of travel then. These Grand Tourists created a sentimental and romantic image of Venice as a city outside time and history that has survived to this day.
This is unfortunate. For the image obscures Venice's extraordinary contemporary relevance. It makes it harder to remember that the city is where East and West met, mostly amicably, in both commerce and art, and where multiculturalism was an unselfconscious, everyday reality, embraced by almost all its inhabitants, rather than a political slogan of ethnic minorities. For the city's most resonant message today is surely this: that a civilization flourishes most when it is open to external influences, when it ceases to be a fortress and lets itself become a crossroads, a place of chance encounters and unexpected minglings.

I was in Venice not long ago when I read in a newspaper one morning that Pope John Paul II, clearly distressed by the state of the world, had

appointed an envoy for a "dialogue" he wished to conduct with religious figures in the Islamic world. The press in Italy seemed full of reports of such grand and seemingly meaningless gestures. But I didn't turn the page of my newspaper to read on, and as I lingered expensively in Caffè Florian, a long and vain letter to the pope began to compose itself in my mind.
I thought of exhorting him to begin his dialogue with the Church's old adversary, Islam, in Venice, the city that had often ignored his predecessors' call for a crusade against the infidels. Of course, I never wrote to the pope, but now I can't help thinking that Venice's record of disobedience probably offers some lessons in diplomacy to all of us. Even more: the city's pragmatic cosmopolitanism may be an antidote to the ideological deliriums of a world losing touching with its past.