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Chiesa di Santa Lucia

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1. Chiesa di Santa Lucia: An Introduction

When traveling to Venice today, many visitors pass through the Stazione di Venezia Santa Lucia, Venice's only train station. Located on the western end of the Cannaregio district, this train station is an arguably unsightly piece of modern architecture; an eyesore compared to the architectural structures of Venetian antiquity that populate the *sestiere*. If, however, one were to travel to Venice as little as one-hundred fifty years ago, one would see something quite different on that western side of the Cannaregio, facing the canal. For centuries, and until the mid-nineteenth century, stood the church of Santa Lucia [Figure 1], a remarkable architectural structure that experienced the patronage and artistic license of many during its lifespan. Santa Lucia was not always dedicated to the patron saint of the blind, as the name suggests. The church and the Augustinian convent that went along with it were originally dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In 1204 the body of Saint Lucy was transferred from Constantinople to Venice, where it was installed in San Giorgio Maggiore. On January 18, 1280, the relics were once again moved to Santa Lucia, and in 1284 the church began celebrating Saint Lucy's feast day. The church's name at the time was La Nuntiata, after the Annunciation, and its title would only be changed to Santa Lucia sixty-three years later, in 1343.

On July 14, 1590, the Venetian Senate conceded the land along the canal to the Augustinian nuns, and afterwards Santa Lucia underwent a major renovation that occurred mostly during the seventeenth century. In 1592 the choir and the *capella maggiore* were completed, at which point Saint Lucy's relics were transferred from the convent to the chapel. On November 21, 1617, Santa Lucia was consecrated in honor of both the Annunciation and of Saint Lucy under Doge Giovanni Bembo. One other significant consecration to include is that of

the altar of Santa Lucia's Nativity Chapel, which was consecrated by Giovanni Tiepolo on December 6, 1629.

Whether dedicated to the Virgin or to Saint Lucy, Santa Lucia always stood in honor of a female religious figure and with the convent, always inhabited by devoted female believers. As we shall see, Santa Lucia became an important space for female spirituality; it was a place for women to worship among women, rather than as second-class citizens sectioned off from the rest of the (male) congregation, setting it apart from most other Venetian churches of the time. The imagery that was contained within Santa Lucia reflects this unique aspect of the church, and directs us toward some of the answers regarding its creation. Why were the church's patrons (many of whom were men) so committed to establishing this Christian haven for young Venetian women? How did it function as such, and why was it ultimately unsuccessful in securing the funds to maintain its purpose? These are just some of the questions addressed in this study of Santa Lucia.

2. Palladio's Posthumous Involvement

The nearly forty years that separate Palladio's death from the consecration of Santa Lucia inspire conversation surrounding the extent of this architect's involvement in the tedious construction process. Such skepticism is valid, but recent scholarship suggests that while Palladio may not have been physically present during construction, his "undoubted sensitivity to liturgical spaces" had an unmistakable influence on the design of the Santa Lucia [Figure 2]. Palladio's ambition necessitated innovative solutions to a contemporary problem: that of accommodating female spirituality.¹

¹ Tracy Elizabeth Cooper, *Palladio's Venice: Architecture and Society in a Renaissance Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 169.

At the request of his long-time patron Leonardo Mocenigo, Palladio designed a new family chapel and high altar, which would occupy a prominent position within the church. The 1565 commission set in motion the reconstruction of the church in its totality, occurring in stages over the course of three decades.² The interior structures of the Santa Lucia were the first to be renovated and are decidedly easier to trace to Palladio's earlier works. The Santa Lucia's "double-apse form," for example, is said to have originated with the church of the San Giorgio Maggiore, whose dates of design and construction would have placed this architectural work directly before the Santa Lucia on Palladio's curriculum vitae.³

Venetian historian Tracy E. Cooper acknowledges such concrete connections between Palladian interior structures, but insinuates that Palladio's dedication to the meaningful expression of architectural spaces made his process somewhat independent of precedent. The decision to incorporate classical forms in the design of the Mocenigo Chapel, for instance, was made with careful consideration of its function as a memorial site.⁴ Thus, the broader design of the Santa Lucia must be understood within the context of its function as a convent. The architectural feature that best elucidates this claim is the *barco*, which is comparable to a modern day balcony, located above the entrance to the nave [Figure 3]. The *barco* was accessible through a private second-story entrance from the convent and offered the Augustinian nuns of the Santa Lucia a private space for worship while allowing visual access to the high altar.⁵ The inclusion of the *barco* in the design of the Santa Lucia displays a keen interest on the part of the architect in the practical function of a spiritual space.

² Ibid., 167.

³ Ibid., 168

⁴ Tracy Elizabeth Cooper, *Palladio's Venice: Architecture and Society in a Renaissance Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 168.

⁵ Ibid., 170.

Generally less accepted as the design of Palladio is the Santa Lucia's Grand Canal façade. The rationale inciting the controversy is clear in that the façade of the Santa Lucia conspicuously deviates from those on which Palladio was known to have worked. The three Venetian church façades most closely associated with Palladio utilize a distinct aesthetic solution, placing a colossal temple front before the nave and a divided pediment before each of the side aisles.⁶ The argument has been made that the characteristics of the Santa Lucia façade, such as the thermal windows and two-story design, resemble various 17th century Venetian churches but warrant no real connection to the earlier facades of Palladio.

One such church bearing a remarkable resemblance to the Santa Lucia is the Casa delle Zitelle [Figure 4], whose construction took place from 1574-1597. The facades of the churches, constructed largely during the same period, are aesthetically consistent, and several other parallels between the two seem to imply that the resemblance is far from coincidental. First, the attribution of the Casa della Zitelle is plagued by the same issue as the Santa Lucia; scholarship recognizes the involvement of Palladio, but again, the attribution is made problematic by his untimely death in 1580.⁷ More astonishing is the connection between the functions of the two spaces. The Casa delle Zitelle was founded by a group of patrician widows to essentially educate young Venetian girls they had saved from lives of prostitution. The lives of the adopted girls were to become regulated by the church, thus, the space of the Casa delle Zitelle was designed with the intention of accommodating such a transformation.⁸ The extent of Palladio's involvement in each project is perhaps unknowable, but the interdependence of function and

⁶ Rudolf Wittkower, "Principles of Palladio's Architecture," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 7 (1944): 119.

⁷ Tracy Elizabeth Cooper, *Palladio's Venice: Architecture and Society in a Renaissance Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 173.

⁸ Vanessa Chase, "The Casa delle Zitelle: Gender and Architecture in Renaissance Venice" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2002).

form embodied in the two, and the derivation of this concept in the work of Palladio, is a topic that warrants further consideration.

3. The Patrons of the Santa Lucia Church

As mentioned earlier, the growing community of Augustinian nuns was given ownership of Santa Lucia in 1467. However, the population of the convent continued to grow until the late sixteenth century and thus, its financial resources were relatively limited. Similar to many Augustinian churches in Venice, the Church of Santa Lucia was largely dependent on outside sources, such as private patricians and government subsidies, in order to finance the development of major projects. Typically, primary sources of funding were acquired from influential family connections with members of the convent, individuals such as the governing abbess, prioress, or lay associates. Additional sources of funding were found through families that had historical ties to specific burial chapels within the church. Regarding the Church of Santa Lucia, the Venetian patrician Leonardo Mocenigo played a crucial role that ultimately led to complete reconstruction of the Santa Lucia Church in the 16th century.

As a sole heir, Leonardo Mocenigo inherited the rights to the Santa Lucia chapel from his paternal grandmother, Pellegrina Foscari Mocenigo. The chapel had originally belonged to Pellegrina's maiden family and was passed along to the Mocenigo family after patrimony. Consequently in Venice, females during this time had very little control over their wealth and an intermediary often carried out commissions. For Pellegrina, her grandson Leonardo served as intermediary. Stated in her final will, Pellegrina wished "to honor the good memory of her father" (*la buona memoria de suo padre*),⁹ and Leonardo respected her wishes by commissioning Palladio to renovate the Foscari family burial *archa* into a proper chapel. "The purpose of the

⁹ Cooper, Tracey E. *Palladio's Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 167.

chapel was both sepulchral and with the prestige conveyed to the convent by this important patronage, it also had the place of honor as the *capella maggiore*.”¹⁰ Moreover, throughout the Mocenigo chapel renovation, Palladio and Leonardo began to share the same ambition of creating a new religious space that was accommodating to female spirituality. As a result, Palladio’s involvement with the Santa Lucia Church that initially began with the Mocenigo chapel in 1565 ultimately lead to the renovation of the entire church.

In addition to Leonardo Mocenigo, Donato Baglioni was yet another recognized patron that contributed to the development of the second chapel within the Santa Lucia Church. Unlike the Venetian patrician Mocenigo, Baglioni was a Florentine noble. Moreover, one motivation for Baglioni’s generous contribution to the Church of Santa Lucia maybe largely related to both his sister and daughter being Augustinian nuns. Similarly, as Mocenigo and Palladio were striving to create a new space for female spirituality, Baligioni’s contribution helped re-enforce the importance of Santa Lucia’s renovation.

Following the development of both the Baligioni and Mocenigo chapel, the rest of the Church of Santa Lucia was finally reconstructed and eventually consecrated by the Patriarch Vendramin in 1617. The completion of Santa Lucia was no doubt a result of Mocenigo, Baglioni, and Palladio’s strong motivation to give a new identity to female spirituality and female sacred space.

4. The Chapels and Artworks of Santa Lucia

Upon entering the church, the viewer passes by Palma’s peaceful *St. Thomas Aquinas with Saint Jerome* (c. 1610) on the left hand entrance of Santa Lucia [Figure 5].¹¹ As the viewer

¹⁰ Ibid, 169.

¹¹ Boschini, Marco. *Le minere della pittura: compendiosa informazione* (Venice: F. Nicolini, 1664).

walks clockwise around the church, they find the Chapel with Saint Lucy's sepulcher the *Cappella Maggiore*, the Chapel of the Nativity, the central *Altar Maggiore* and along the right side the Nicola Peeters Chapel, the Madonna del Parto Chapel, and an unidentified chapel space. Two rare nineteenth century photographs [Figure 6, 7] document Saint Lucy's Chapel and the *Altar Maggiore* and archive the interior of the church. These are sites of devotion that linked female spirituality, particularly that of the Virgin Mary, with the life and relics of Saint Lucy and the prominent patrons of the church.

The Chapel with Saint Lucy's sepulcher, financed by the Baglioni family, contained the reliquary of Saint Lucy and several paintings by Palma. In the center, above the altar, hangs Palma's painting *Virgin Mary with Saint Lucy*, which also contains portraits of the Baglioni family. Donato Baglioni's sister and daughter were Augustinian nuns, and this painting connects the spiritual lives of these contemporary women to the devoted lives of Saint Lucy and the Virgin. To the sides of this iconographically rich painting, Palma produced two oil works depicting separate episodes of Saint Lucy's life.

In Palma's *Saint Lucy in Ecstasy*, Saint Lucy is before the sepulcher of Saint Agatha, where she stands in oration asking for help for her mother Eutitia's illness. This is a highly empowered moment of female spirituality, wherein Saint Lucy sees a vision of Saint Agatha who tells her, "Sister Lucy, why ask of me what you can yourself give unto your mother?"¹² This painting creates a connection between Saint Lucy's healing power and her preserved relic nearby. Saint Agatha serves as an important inspiration for Saint Lucy, who is a powerful woman herself. Perhaps the contemporary viewer would get a sense of empowerment after

¹² Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *A Dictionary of Miracles: Imitative, Realistic, and Dogmatic* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1901), 16.

visiting Saint Lucy's own sepulcher and re-creating a moment of communion between the powerful, spiritually enlightened deceased and the pained follower in need of guidance.

On the other side of the sepulcher, Palma painted *The Transportation of Saint Lucy from Constantinople to Venice*, illustrating an important part of Saint Lucy's mythology. Venetian followers of Saint Lucy would feel proud that her body was rightfully in their city. The church of Santa Lucia was not always dedicated to the female saint, and having Saint Lucy's body in Venice completely changed her significance. Furthermore, Palma's *Transportation of Saint Lucy* is placed in the same chapel as her reliquary, the remains of Saint Lucy's body. One enters the Chapel of the Reliquary and experiences the life of Saint Lucy as they see the relics of Saint Lucy's body.

The central, and most important chapel on the left hand side of Santa Lucia is the Mocenigo Chapel, or the *Cappella Maggiore*. This chapel contains rich marble columns and gilt bronze figures representing the Annunciation. Leonardo Mocenigo, a strong supporter of Palladio, was the impetus for the renovation of Santa Lucia and funded this prominent chapel. Accordingly, Alessandro Vittorino made a sculpture of Mocenigo for a niche in the chapel [Figure 8].

Towards the back of the church, the Chapel of Nativity holds many small paintings and an altarpiece with angels by Bonificio. Unlike the earlier constructed chapels, Giovanni Tiepolo consecrated this chapel on December 6, 1629.¹³ The Nativity is a central scene of birth and female spirituality, a theme that is repeated throughout the chapels of the church. This chapel is

¹³ Musolino, Giovanni. *Santa Lucia a Venezia: Storia, Culto, Arte* (Venice, Italy: Ferdinando Ongania, 1961).

further embellished with altars made of needlework embroidery, creating a unique chapel scene.¹⁴

Continuing around the church, the viewer comes next to the back wall of the structure. The original *Capella Maggiore* and *Altar Maggiore* had been situated along the wall facing the entrance of the church, but was rotated 90 degrees following the renovations to Santa Lucia in the 1610s, when it became and remained the *Capella Maggiore*, so as to assert the Mocenigo chapel as the structure's primary worship space. However, the *Altar Maggiore* on the back wall probably served as the chapel of the sacrament until Santa Lucia's destruction.¹⁵ The architecture of the space echoes that of the facing wall and illustrates a consistency and balance within the space after the renovation, with some variation to accommodate the lack of windows and doors on the *Altar Maggiore* wall.¹⁶ Sources suggest that there may have been three paintings by Maffeo Verona in the *Altar Maggiore*: in the center, God the Father in glory and the martyrdom of Saint Lucy, and on either side, portrayals of Saint Carlo Borromeo and Saint Cecilia.¹⁷

Beginning down the right side of the church and to the right of the *Altar Maggiore* is a smaller chapel commissioned by Nicola Peeters. The space contains two paintings by Palma, one depicting the *Eternal Father and Angels* and the other the *Encounter of Saints Anne and Joachim* [Figure 9]. The depiction of Saints Anne and Joachim fit into the underlying theme of the Virgin and Santa Lucia as a feminine space. Anne and Joachim, as the Virgin Mary's parents, add a sense of familial connection between the spaces. Palma's *Eternal Father* raises the sense of holy lineage as the omnipotent hand guiding the lives of Saints Anne and Joachim and the Virgin.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Cooper, Tracey E. *Palladio's Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 171.

¹⁶ Boschini, Marco. *Le minere della pittura: compendiosa informazione* (Venice: F. Nicolini, 1664).

¹⁷ Ibid. Zorzi, Alvise. *Venezia Scomparsa* (Milano: Electa, 1972).

The right central section of Santa Lucia contained a chapel space identical in layout to and directly across from the *Cappella Maggiore*. While the space used the same Palladian layout as the Mocenigo chapel, it was designed by a different architect.¹⁸ This chapel housed several important works by Palma. At the center of the space stood the Madonna del Parto altar, a large marble structure with Corinthian columns. The altarpiece, painted by Palma, depicted the pregnant Virgin, a rare and unusual representation of the Madonna [Figure 10]. The imagery of the pregnant Virgin fits into the context of Santa Lucia as a more feminine ecclesiastical space, as it highlights the Virgin's femininity, purity, and holiness. In relation to the other iconographic programs within the church, the Madonna del Parto and its imagery would not have been out of place amongst paintings of the Virgin's parents Saints Anne and Joachim and such strong female religious figures as Saint Lucy, Saint Cecilia, and Saint Agatha.¹⁹ Above the Madonna del Parto altar hung the organ with painted doors, which also stood in the large central right chapel. The outside of the doors depicted the Annunciation, while the inside contained images of Saint Lucy and Saint Augustine [Figure 11, 12].²⁰ Notably, the doors were also designed by Palma, giving a consistency to the works within the space. The placement of an Annunciation scene in the space reinforces the piety and holiness of the Virgin, as the fruition of Gabriel's visit is depicted in the scene directly below the organ doors.

An image of an altar entitled "Deposizione della Croce" appears in Boschini's *Le minere della pittura: compendiosa informazione* [Figure 13].²¹ However, in the other sources found on the history of Santa Lucia, no mention of a Deposition of the Cross can be found. When situating the various artistic elements of the church, each chapel had works and altars that could be

¹⁸ Zorzi, Alvise. *Venezia Scomparsa* (Milano: Electa, 1972).

¹⁹ Boschini, Marco. *Le minere della pittura: compendiosa informazione* (Venice: F. Nicolini, 1664).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

confidently placed within them, with the exception of the first chapel to the right of Santa Lucia's entrance. Based on that conclusion, the first chapel on the right side of the church likely housed the altar of the Deposition of the Cross depicted in Boschini and completes the placement of original elements within the context of the church's reconstruction.

5. Conclusion

In 1861 Santa Lucia was destroyed to make room for the train station that remains in the Cannaregio *sestieri* of Venice today. A church that prospered from the interests of Venetian families in the spiritual lives of their female ancestors (as with Mocenigo) and of their female descendants (as with Baglioni), Santa Lucia did not have enough patrons with personal connections to the church by the mid-nineteenth century to endure amidst the growing industrialization of Venice. The Augustian nuns were moved to Sant'Alvise, and Saint Lucy's relics were transferred to San Geremia the day before the demolition. As for the art works inside Santa Lucia, some were transported along with the relics to San Geremia as well [Figure 14]. Thirty decorative elements from Santa Lucia, including the bust of Mocenigo were taken to the patriarchal seminary, and private collectors probably bought up the rest of the sculptures and paintings within the church. Based on this knowledge, perhaps someday images of the works will be collected and placed within a digital reconstruction of Santa Lucia so as to recreate a space of such unique feminine spirituality.



Figure 1. Santa Lucia, c. 1861

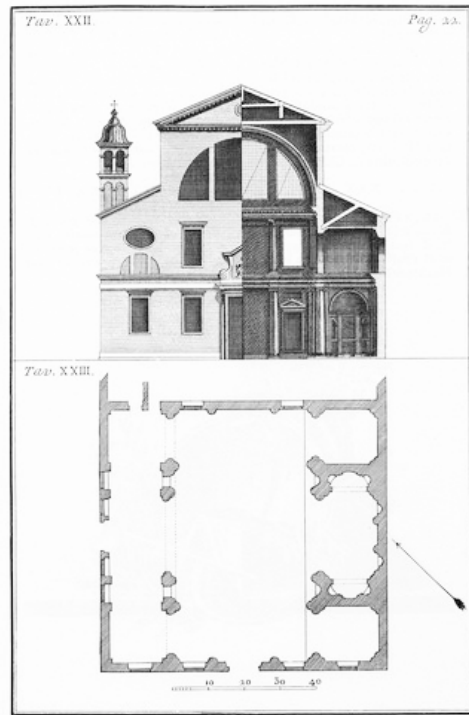


Figure 2. Altered design and floor plan for Santa Lucia, based on Palladio's original design



Figure 3. The *barco*



Figure 4. Casa delle Zitelle



Figure 5. *Thomas Aquinas*, Palma il Giovane



Figure 6. *The Chapel of Saint Lucy*, c. 1860.

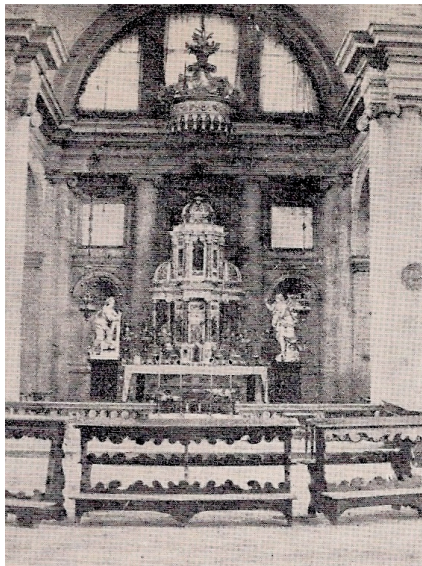


Figure 7. *Altar Maggiore*, c. 1860.



Figure 8. Copy of the bust of Leonardo Mocenigo by Alessandro Vittoria



Figure 9. *Saints Anne and Joachim*, Palma il Giovane

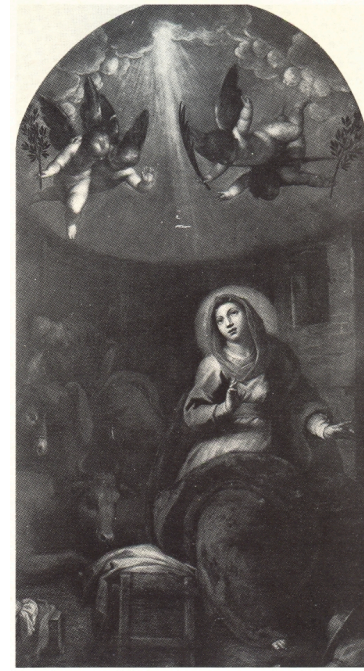


Figure 10. *Madonna del Parto*, Palma il Giovane, 1628



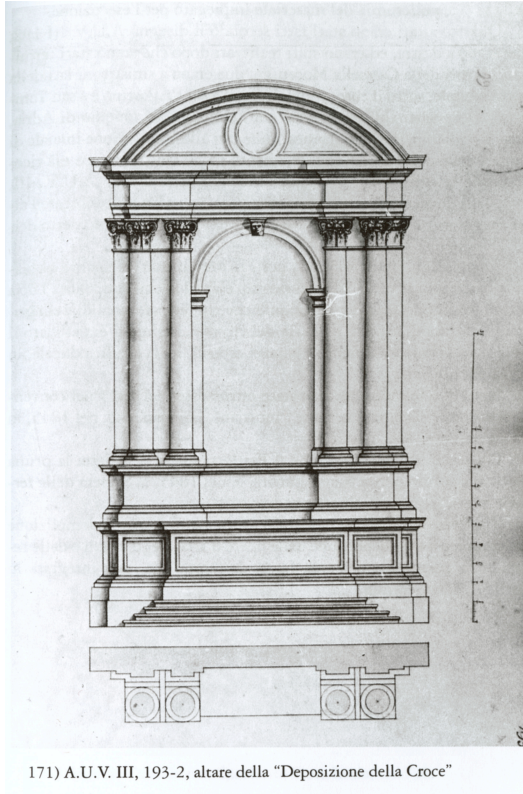
Portelle d'organo Palma il Giovane (†1628)

Figure 11. *Organ Doors*, Palma il Giovane



Portelle d'organo Palma il Giovane (†1628)

Figure 12. *Organ Doors Interior*, Palma il Giovane



171) A.U.V. III, 193-2, altare della "Deposizione della Croce"

Left: Figure 13. Altare delle Deposizione delle Croce from Boschini

Below: Figure 14. The relic of Saint Lucy, as displayed in San Geremia today

