REPRESENTING THE LAW IN THE MOST SERENE REPUBLIC
Images of Authority from Renaissance Venice

Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School
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An exhibition curated by
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Lillian Goldman Law Library,
Yale Law School
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Woodcut of the Lion of St. Mark on the back cover, title page, and section headings is from: *Leggi, terminazioni, ed ordini spettanti alle Scuole Laiche di Divozione* (Venice, 1764).
During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Venice was a prosperous and powerful state that played a central role in the political and economic affairs of Italy, Europe, and the wider Mediterranean. It not only occupied the small, northern Adriatic lagoon we might think of today, but also ruled many territories in northern Italy, Croatia, and the eastern Mediterranean. By the year 1500, Venice could claim that it had been a sovereign republic for more than a millennium. Its apparent endurance and peacefulness were attributed to the stability of its government, the selflessness of its leaders, and the liberty of its citizens – all traits widely admired by foreign commentators.

Venice’s reputation for tranquility, freedom, and republicanism, not to mention beauty and piety, constituted the so-called Myth of Venice, which the city actively cultivated. Indeed, Venice was so highly esteemed for its effective government that it came to be known as La Serenissima, the Most Serene Republic.

Representing the Law in the Most Serene Republic illustrates the roles of law and authority in the Venetian government during the Renaissance. The first part of the exhibition introduces the most significant officials and symbols of the Republic, while the second demonstrates how laws were crafted, debated, publicized, and often broken. The show’s protagonists are the Doge and highest magistrates of Venice; the governors they appointed to rule the Republic’s territories abroad; the law-makers in the Senate; and the law-breakers consigned to prison or the galleys – all of them illustrated in finely executed illuminations, drawings, prints, and numismatic portraits.

Christopher Platts
History of Art, Yale University
Elected for life from among the Venetian nobility, the doge was the symbolic sovereign of the Republic and, legally, *primus inter pares* in the patriciate. He chaired the most important legal, administrative, and judicial bodies, including the Great Council, Senate, and Council of Ten, but his statutory powers were strictly limited. Above all the doge was Venice’s figurehead: he played the central ceremonials role in an endless series of processions and pageants that broadcast the Republic’s wealth, stability, and strength throughout Europe and the Mediterranean.

The complex structure of Venice’s government consisted of numerous officials and councils. Besides the doge, the most important magistrates were the Grand Chancellor, who supervised the 100 secretaries in the Chancery; the Savii Grandi, who were part of the Collegio, the supreme executive committee of the Senate; the members of the Council of Ten, which, with broad judicial powers and anonymous informers, handled state security; and the Avogadori di Comun, or state prosecutors. Larger bodies like the courts, the Senate, and the Grand Council – from which the highest ranking magistrates were drawn – also handled legal, administrative, and electoral matters.
1. **A Venetian Doge, 19th century (after Giacomo Franco, *Habiti d’huomeni et donne venetiane…, Venice, 1609*).**

Pen and ink and brown wash on paper. Yale University Art Gallery, 1965.33.29 (facsimile).

An unidentified Venetian doge, dressed in official regalia, gestures toward an open window. Through it we glimpse the Piazzetta of San Marco, the political and ceremonial heart of Venice. To the left of this public square is the state library and campanile, to the right the Doge’s Palace, and in the distance the Basilica of San Marco, which served as the doge’s private chapel. The columns in the foreground, which honor Venice’s patron saints Theodore and Mark, were also known as the Columns of Justice because between them criminals were pilloried or hanged for all to see.
Every year the doge gave a silver medal, called an osella, to specially designated recipients, most of whom were members of the Great Council, Venice’s electorate of more than 1,000 patricians. On the obverse of this example from 1571, Doge Alvise Mocenigo I (r. 1570-1577) kneels before Saint Mark, Venice’s patron saint, to receive his blessing and the Republic’s official standard emblazoned with the Lion of Saint Mark. The representation alludes to actual Venetian ceremonial, for after being elected and swearing an oath, the doge would receive this very banner as a ritual confirmation of his legal authority.
3. Turks Surrender to Doge Marcantonio Giustinian (obverse) and Winged Lion of Saint Mark (reverse), 1687.

This finely cast silver medal, made by Georg Hautsch of Nuremberg, commemorates Venice’s victories against the Turks in the Morea (in southern Greece) during the mid-1680s. The obverse illustrates two Turkish commanders surrendering to Doge Marcantonio Giustinian (r. 1684-1688), who wears the ducal corno (horn-shaped hat) and bavera (ermine-trimmed cape). On the medal’s reverse is a symbolic representation of Venice as the rampant, winged lion of Saint Mark, brandishing a sword and holding a dolphin – which suggest Venice’s might on land and sea – while crushing underfoot the enemy’s bow and arrow. Because Venice was known as the Republic of Saint Mark, images of the Evangelist Saint and his attribute, the winged lion, are ubiquitous in Venetian Renaissance art and architecture.
4. Doge Francesco Morosini (obverse) and Personification of Venetia Accepting Tribute from her Subject Territories (reverse), 1690.

This silver medal features an exquisite portrait of Doge Francesco Morosini (r. 1688-1694), hero of the Morean War (1684-1699) and successor to Doge Marcantio Giustinian (see no. 3). Whereas Giustinian was depicted on a small scale within a narrative episode of Turkish surrender, Morosini is represented by his prominent, frontal portrait, staring out intensely. Behind him are war trophies that allude to his victories and imbue him with an aura of authority. This powerful image is balanced by an allegory on the medal’s reverse: Venetia, or Venice personified as a female doge, sits enthroned on the sea as she accepts tributes from her subject territories, including Athens, which Morosini himself had conquered.
On feast days throughout the year, the doge and other magistrates participated in highly structured processions in the Piazza of San Marco that reinforced the Republic’s political hierarchy and demonstrated its religious piety. In the bottom center is the doge, identifiable by his horned cap, ermine-trimmed cloak, and yellow robes. Around him are the insignia of his office: the ducal throne and foot-cushion, umbrella, and sword, all granted to him – so the myth goes – by Pope Alexander III in the twelfth century. Also worth noting are the comandadori, or heralds who publicly announced new laws and resolutions (near the church portal); the balotino, or boy who handled the election ballots (in front of the doge); and the Illustrissima Signoria, or highest magistrates (behind the doge).
The Grand Chancellor (at left) was the head of the Republic’s chancery, whose 100 secretaries registered everything that was undertaken by the many councils and other government bodies in Venice. He sat for every meeting that was attended by the doge, and, with the secretaries under his control, read and kept secret the most important messages sent to the Republic, whether from its own governors and diplomats abroad or from foreign allies or enemies.

The Savio Grande (at right) was one of 16 elite officials who, with the doge, his six counselors, and the three heads of the Courts of Forty, constituted the powerful Collegio. This group, which was the supreme executive committee of the Senate, managed the Republic’s everyday affairs including diplomatic, military, and ceremonial matters.
Venice ruled a large part of northern Italy and the Dalmatian coast of Croatia, as well as numerous islands and territories in the eastern Mediterranean. Controlling this empire required a multitude of governors (called rettori), both civil (podestà) and military (capitani). These officials, drawn from the ranks of the Venetian nobility and elected by the Grand Council, were usually commissioned by the doge for short terms of 12 to 36 months, after which they would return to Venice to report on their tenure. Most were eager to assume their posts, not only for the generous salary but also for the valuable experience, which would help them attain more important government positions and thus climb the Venetian political hierarchy.

Each governor received specific directions regarding his duties, including, for instance, that he must respect the local statutes of the city or territory he would be ruling. In most cases, the governor would pay to have these official instructions written in beautiful script on fine parchment, with a lavishly painted and gilded title page. These manuscripts, called Commissioni (Ducal Commissions), are some of the most visually striking legal documents of the Italian Renaissance, and four are on display here alongside representations of the very doges who issued them.
This splendidly illuminated page opens the Ducal Commission of Federico Renier, who was appointed both *Podestà* (civil governor) and *Capitano* (military governor) of Crema in northern Italy. The text begins with the imprimatur of Doge Leonardo Loredan (r. 1501-1521).

The appointee’s coat of arms hangs in the cartouche below, while the winged Lion of Saint Mark fills the upper field. That the Lion is poised on both earth and water is significant: its stance alludes to Venice’s power on land and sea. The beast also holds an open book, which refers to Venice’s legendary association with Saint Mark the Evangelist. Also notable in the decorative border are the Angel Gabriel and Virgin Mary (upper left and right), two bishop saints (center left and right), and Saints Francis of Assisi and Anthony of Egypt (lower left and right). All six figures would have held significance for either Renier – perhaps they were his patron saints – or the Venetian Republic, which was supposedly founded on the feast day of the Annunciation.
8. **Portrait medal of Doge Leonardo Loredan, circa 1501.**

Bronze. Yale University Art Gallery, 1959.13.27.

This portrait medal represents the bust of Doge Leonardo Loredan (r. 1501-1521). During his dogeship, both Federico Renier and Petro Foscillo – among hundreds of other Venetian patricians – were commissioned as governors of Venice’s subject territories (see nos. 7 & 9). Doge Loredan wears his robes of state and official hat over a skull cap. His delicately rendered features, including his hooked nose, hollow cheeks, and subtle smile, reveal the skill of the medalist, Giovanni Guido Agrippa, who signed the reverse. That the Doge’s likeness seems so naturalistic and so similar to his official, painted portraits suggests that the medalist had access to either the doge himself or one of his painted or drawn portraits.

Loredan would have commissioned numerous casts of this portrait medal – including this very example – for family and friends as keepsakes and for politically significant individuals as a form of self-promotional propaganda.
In this elaborately decorated Ducal Commission, it is unclear whom Doge Leonardo Loredan (r. 1501-1521) originally appointed governor of Chania, Crete, because the name we see, “Petro Fuscolo,” was evidently written over an erasure. The coat of arms in the lower margin is indeed that of the Foscolo family, but this too could cover an erasure. From contemporary documents we know that a certain Petro Foscolo was appointed governor of Riva del Garda (in northeast Italy) by the same doge in the early 1500s.

Like the title page of the other Ducal Commissions in this exhibition, this one includes the winged Lion of Saint Mark in the upper cartouche. To the right and left of the spacious text block are Saint Luke and his Ox, which suggests that this Evangelist Saint was important to whomever was originally appointed.
Padua was home to one of Italy’s most important universities, at which many Venetian doges and patricians studied law before entering politics. Because of Padua’s significance within the Venetian Republic, its governors were often men of considerable political experience and clout. This figure represents the Podestà, or Civil Governor, of the city around the year 1575. He is not named or otherwise identified because this illustration comes from a Renaissance album amicorum, or friendship album; in this popular genre, the figures did not represent specific people but rather specific types – such as officials or courtesans – identifiable through dress, gesture, and bearing.
11. *Institutio in potestatem civitatis Bergomi data Laurentii Venerio ab Andrea Griti duce Venetiarum, 1524.*

Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment. Rare Book Collection, Yale Law Library.

Issued under Doge Andrea Gritti (r. 1523-1538) in 1524, this Ducal Commission appointed Lorenzo Venier Governor of Bergamo. About Venier’s life we know much. He was a skilled lawyer; he published books on theology, philosophy, and law; and several times he was elected to the important position of *Avogador di Comun*, or state attorney and guardian of constitutional law. Venier also served as one of the 16 *Savii Grandi*. He held all these positions before he was commissioned to govern Bergamo, one of Venice’s most significant northern Italian cities. After his tenure there, he governed another northern Italian city, Rovigo, before he died in 1527. His career is a fascinating example of the multifaceted political life of a powerful Venetian patrician.
This silver coin, called a *mocenigo* after the doge under whom its type was first minted, represents Doge Andrea Gritti (r. 1523-1538) kneeling before Saint Mark as he receives the official banner of Venice. It was under Doge Gritti that Lorenzo Venier was appointed Governor of Bergamo, and Federico Renier (or a member of his family) was appointed Governor of Verona (see nos. 11 & 13).

On the reverse of this coin is an image of Christ blessing with his right hand and holding a globe in his left. The globe refers to his authority over heaven and earth, some of which – the coin’s visual propaganda suggests – he shares with Doge Andrea Gritti by way of Saint Mark. More precisely, the iconographic program on the two sides of the coin implies that Christ is the ultimate power, Saint Mark the intermediary between God and man, and Doge Gritti the recipient in this chain of authority. In fact, the Venetian banner that Gritti receives – which every doge accepted upon his election and oath-taking – was a manifestation of his God-given power to rule.
Like one of the other Ducal Commissions nearby (no. 9), this example may or may not have been issued to the Venetian patrician, Federico Renier, named on the title page. For in this case, as in the other, the name we see today has been inserted only after the original name was erased.

Evidence suggests that a member of Renier’s family, if not Federico himself, was originally appointed Governor of Verona. First, the coat of arms in the lower margin, which appears to be original and not painted over an erasure, is that of the Renier family. Second, Saint Francis, wearing a gray habit in the roundel on the right, also appears on the title page of Federico Renier’s genuine Ducal Commission as Governor of Crema (no. 9). It thus stands to reason that this Ducal Commission was issued to either Federico or another member of the Renier family also devoted to Saint Francis. At this time there were several politically active men in the Renier family, so it is entirely possible that this lavish manuscript once belonged to one of them, and that someone, at a later date, erased the name of the original appointee and wrote in Federico’s.
Consisting of 120 members elected by the Grand Council, the Senate was the primary legislative body in Venice. The much larger Grand Council also issued decrees, but its main function was electoral. Both the secretive Council of Ten, which mostly dealt with state security, and the Signoria, the elite group of counselors and heads of the courts that supervised the doge, could veto legislation.

Venetian laws were collected in the city statutes, first compiled and codified in the early thirteenth century and later revised in the fourteenth. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Senate and Grand Council proposed, deliberated on, and passed countless decrees and resolutions, which were then proclaimed by official heralds in prominent places throughout the city and, simultaneously, printed as pamphlets or broadsides and posted for all to read. These legal documents were, in turn, collected and bound into volumes, several of which are on display here.

Laws in Venice concerned all sorts of matters. They treated, for example, long-distance trade, business contracts, and commercial partnerships; loans, taxes, inheritance, and dowries; elections and oaths; the rights of women, Jews, and foreigners; the boundaries between secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction; and, of course, criminal acts of many kinds.
Ink on paper. Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library (facsimile).

This drawing shows electors being chosen in the Grand Council. *Ballotini*, the young boys who drew ballots (or lots) for each member, move up and down the aisles carrying electoral urns containing one silver ball for each member and a small number of gilded balls representing the number of electors required for a given vote. Members who drew gilded balls became electors. There could be several rounds of such balloting for more important elections. It was believed that following this procedure would increase the likelihood that the chosen electors would be impartial.

On the dais at the top are the doge, his six official counselors, the *Savii Grandi*, and several other officials. Once a member of the Grand Council drew a gilded ball, he would join this group on the dais until all the gilded balls were drawn; at that point, the recently chosen electors would retire to another room for more balloting or to vote.
De le aduocation in uenefia da effer tolse t. Concern.

De le nne uescante fora del no colto a la eì (sic). Concern.

De le nne a e fora de nne uescante debo eìl deluàe - Concern.

De le nne da inuarte fora de uenefia - Concern.

De eìle na ne le qual intuismarine parte faràu adate - Concern.

Finisse la tabula sopra il modo & ordine del nauitar.

Comenza alcune parte messe in el gran confìgio

M eìce Lxxi ìns matri in el gran confìgio

La ordenation sopra li Capitanei de le persone - Concern.

M eìce Lxxii adì xiiii novembre in el grado confìgio

Che miuò lo dovo p le fìstoce facìe posìa in rìmeter de li benì - Concern.

M eìce Lxxiiii adì y fìstoce in el grado confìgio

Sopra quelli che comprà le pascalìon de le camere & officii nostri

M eìce Lxxiiii adì sopra scripto in el grado confìgio

Che setentìssimo miuò lo dovo habita postttade - Concern.

Adì fìstoce in el grado confìgio

Che un nodari no posìa far rettamento fësta telìmoni

M eìce Lxxi adì xiiii settembre in el grado confìgio

Che li figlioli non posìa fìstrìgà cì li fòi patìri - Concern.

M eìce Lxxv adì xiiii novembre in el gran confìgio

Sopra li brentì di fiu lenadì p li judei examìnation - Concern.

M eìce Lxxv adìxxvii febraro in el grand confìgio

Sopra li rettìmìcé che sòno fìsti per li nodari de uenefia

Adì sopra scripto in el gran confìgio

Consuirdoine in execution de le necessità sopra Gaìaldì - Concern.

M eìce Lxxv adì xx octubri in el gran confìgio

Sopra li giudicato de procuratori - Concern.

Finisse la tabula de li ìnati de uenefia
This book is the first printed edition of the statutes of Venice. The well-known printer Filippo di Pietro, who mostly published literary texts, was responsible for its fine layout and typography. The book’s buyer, who in this case has not been identified, commissioned an illuminator to paint his coat of arms on the opening page of the first chapter.

The Venetian statutes were first codified in the 1240s under Doge Jacopo Tiepolo (r. 1229-1249). They comprised five books of laws, to which the future doge Andrea Dandolo (r. 1342-1354), an accomplished legal scholar, added a sixth in 1331. Dandolo not only appended new laws but also revised the first five books by eliminating conflicting statutes. For two centuries his updated edition would endure with only minor alterations, even though Venice’s legislative bodies passed many laws and resolutions during this time.
NOVE LEGGI, ET
ORDENI DI DIVERSI
CONSIGLII DI VENETIA,
dall'Authentico efrarri, & all'uso del
Palazzo necessarij.

Che nimo impetrar posti li beneficii Ecclesiastici dell'iunij
Ne procurar la privatione loro.

§ In Pregadi. 1480. xxii. Settembre.

VI A multæ incommensuratet errores, & can-
dalas potest occurrere, propter modos qui te-
neatuir in procurando pristionem nostrorum
Praetorium, & Beneficiatorum in Dacatu no
stro, & in alij locis nostri & terris exiutenti,
& necessarium sit pristidere.

Vidit pars, quod aliquis nostor ciuiz, ut il-
delis, aut forinatis, clericus, ut laicus, coniun-
quæ conditio existat, ne audeat, præsumat, nec debeat per se, ut eum
alius modo ut legem pristigare, ut imperare aliquod beneficio,
vel prælatum confirmare, in nostro Dacatu, nec in alicuius terras & loci
nostris, quæ non uicerit, & in quæ sit prælatus euis; Nec procurare pristv-
nationem, ut ammissionem, seu translationem aliquis dictorum Pri-
latorum & Beneficiatorum directæ, ut indirectæ, sub pena perpetui
banni de Venetia, & de omnibus terris, & locis eorum Venetiarum, de
quisbus ehis non posset hic gratia, domum, remissio, ut recompen-
tio sub pena D. 1980, pro quodlibet ponente, ut conferentie partem in
contractum. Et si aliquis committeret, & sacret contra hanc nostram
intentionem, & obtineret aliquo ex dictis Beneficiis & Prælatibus, non
gaudet aliquo modo dicto Beneficio, ut Prælaturam quam accipere,
vel redditus, provenitus, vel utile in omnibus eis, sed committerit ommi-
na in reparacionem & utilitatione dicti beneficii, ut prælature, per eum
modum qui Domini uideatur.

Che nimo posti impetrar Breu del Pontefice, ouero Legato
contra la volontà del Tesadori.

§ In Pregadi. 1480. xxii. December.
This late-sixteenth-century volume is a collection of decrees adopted by several different legislative bodies. The woodcut frontispiece depicts Justice as a crowned woman, sitting on two crouching lions and holding a sword in her right hand and scales in her left. She embodies not only Justice but also Venice itself, for often in Venetian art, *Venetia* was depicted precisely in this way so as to promote the justness of Venetian law and government.
De obstendendo illius Capitoliorum, et alia Const. sub pena librarum Decem:

nulla autem, et singula Capitoliorum scilicet Capitoliorum, nec non singula Consilia teneor observeare, et observare faciendum sub pena librarum Decem, quod si non faciendum, Aduocatores commissa res ipsa dicent, penam intra octo dies nisi per aliquod consilium absolutas fuerint, ubi potestatibus, quid ego negando.
This beautifully decorated manuscript, known as a Giuramento, contains the oath of the government-appointed Counselor of the sestiere (district) of San Polo in Venice. In 1569, the Venetian patrician Giovanni Soranzo held this position, and he commissioned this lavishly illuminated legal document, the title page of which includes his name in large golden letters; his patron saint, John the Baptist, in the upper left corner; and his coat of arms in the lower margin.

A Giuramento was issued to all six Counselors of Venice and included a description of the doge’s responsibilities. Counselors were members of the Collegio, the government’s highest executive committee. Two years before his appointment as Counselor, Soranzo had served as the Venetian governor of Bergamo, in northern Italy. In his new post, he held significantly more political power, as he deliberated on the most essential matters and had constant access to the doge.
tendono primi, e coi del carico loro; non potendo mai più effettivarsi in alcun altro carico pubblico.


Sono tenuti li Pronuditori sopra i Banchi, con li giornali del Banco veder, e inquirir chi ferme sottdette forme dalle quali si può comprendere, che vi sia contrattato di valore, con autorità di castigar li contrafattori delle leggi nostre in questa materia disonomeni, secondo la continenza di esse leggi, e ciò per lessen al lato ad esse valore.

1607. 3. Decembre.

Publicato sopra le Scale di San Marco per Vicenzo q. Antonio, e sopra le Scale di Rialto per Vido Martini Comandador.

Stampata per Antonio Pinelli.
Stampator Ducale.
This volume contains a series of Venetian decrees bound together. The left-hand page concludes a resolution adopted by the Senate concerning bank transactions. From the colophon, printed in the middle of the page, we learn that on December 3, 1607 – only two days after the Senate finished deliberating – the resolution was promulgated “above the steps of San Marco” and “above the steps of Rialto.” The official heralds would have announced the resolution from atop the Pietre del Bando, or Stones of Proclamation, just outside the Basilica of San Marco and opposite the church of San Giacomo at the Rialto. Loud, public recitation by multiple town criers was the typical manner in which Venetian decrees were publicized.
In the lower left corner of this detailed etching by Canaletto, a herald makes an official announcement on behalf of the Venetian Republic. Most likely he reads aloud a new decree that the Senate adopted just days earlier. He stands atop a short, wide column, called the *Pietra del Bando*, or Stone of Proclamation, which is still located outside the Basilica of San Marco, only a few meters from the main entrance to the Doge's Palace. As a large crowd gathers around the herald to listen, the enormous ducal palace looms over the scene, reminding the viewer where the Senate had convened to formulate the very resolution being proclaimed. For those who did not hear the announcement, or learn of it by word of mouth, its content would also be printed and posted in public places.

At right is a detail of the herald and (to the far right) another depiction of a Venetian herald reproduced from Cesare Vecellio, *De gli habitì antichi et moderni…*, 1590 (Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library).
As in any big city, crime was a problem in Venice. People gambled, blasphemed, fought in public, and carried weapons; they defrauded, robbed, and assaulted one another; and, most grievously, they committed murder and leaked state secrets.

The accused were tried in one of the three Courts of Forty or, if the alleged crime was serious enough, by the Council of Ten. Torture was commonly used to extract confessions. Today, one can still visit the room in the Doge’s Palace where officials would suspend the accused by a rope tied to his arms folded behind his back. Common punishments for minor crimes such as brawling or carrying illegal weapons were fines, whippings, or short jail sentences. More serious offenses such as assault or theft warranted severe corporal punishment, such as mutilation, or banishment from Venice for several years. From the mid-sixteenth century, many criminals were assigned to Venetian galleys as slaves. The very worst transgressions, like murder or treason, called for execution by hanging, burning, decapitation, or even quartering, all of which usually occurred in public between the Columns of Justice opposite the west façade of the Doge’s Palace.

The prisons were located inside the ducal palace and additional ones were built in the adjacent Palazzo delle Prigioni in the late sixteenth century. The famous Bridge of Sighs connected the Doge’s Palace to the new jails. Prison sentences, however, were not common as punishments; jail time was instead meant to coerce the convict to pay his fine or otherwise satisfy his sentence.
Many crimes, fascinating today for the insights they provide about Venetian Renaissance society, were condemned by the Council of Ten through resolutions like this one. On August 27, 1577, the Council decreed that men should not trick women into having sexual relations by making false promises to marry them. This injunction was repeated in 1612, when it was stated that the guilty party would be “severely punished.” This could have meant a heavy fine equivalent to the woman’s dowry, bodily mutilation, or even banishment from Venice for several years.
This evocative print, rich in tonal effects, captures the dramatic mood in which the English Romantic poet Lord Byron christened this Venetian monument the Bridge of Sighs. It was from this bridge that prisoners who had been tried and sentenced in the Doge’s Palace (on the left) might sigh as they caught their last glimpse of Venice before being locked away in a cell in the Palazzo delle Prigioni (on the right). Before the Bridge of Sighs and Palazzo delle Prigioni were built in the decades around 1600, prisoners were held in cells in the Doge’s Palace. The harsh conditions convinced the Council of Ten to build new, more accommodating prisons across the canal.
In 1542, galley captain Cristoforo Da Canal first proposed to the Senate that Venice’s many prisoners serve as galley oarsmen. He believed that this punishment was more humane than mutilation and less expensive for the state than supporting criminals in prison. Three years later the Senate accepted Da Canal’s proposal and appointed him the first “Commander of the Condemned.” His idea proved popular, for by 1569, a dozen galleys were staffed by about 150 convicts each. According to this 1620 resolution of the Venetian Senate, criminals could serve as oarsmen on Venetian galleys for a period of eighteen months, at half or full pay.
In the center of this fine etching by Canaletto is the Palazzo delle Prigioni, or Palace of the Prisons, erected in the late sixteenth century to replace some of the old prisons inside the Doge’s Palace.

Not all the prisoners in the old cells of the Doge’s Palace had to endure awful conditions; a report from 1480 reveals that some prisoners could look out through windows onto the Piazzetta and converse with bystanders. Apparently the poor could beg for alms; artists could practice their craft; and rich men could play chess and dice. Prison sentences in Venice were not usually punishments; men were usually condemned to prison until they could pay fines, be assigned to galleys, or otherwise satisfy their sentences.
Suggested Reading


Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library
Moira Fitzgerald, Access Services
Anna Franz, Access Services
Kathryn James, Early Modern Collections
Anne Marie Menta, Public Services
John Monohan, Public Services

Yale Law School
Jan Conroy, Public Affairs
Shana Jackson, Law Library
Emma Molina Widener, Law Library

Yale University Library
Tara Kennedy, Preservation
Amanda Patrick, Communications

History of Art, Yale University
Jakub Koguciuk

Yale University Art Gallery
Lynne Addison, Registrar’s Office
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Diana Brownell, Prints & Drawings
Theresa Fairbanks-Harris, Conservation
Suzanne Greenawalt, Prints and Drawings
Laurence Kanter, European Art
Nancy Macgregor, Registrar’s Office
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Jane Miller, Coins and Medals
Heather Nolin, Exhibitions
Christopher Sleboda, Graphic Design
David Whaples, Digital Media

History of Art, Harvard University
Charlotte Gray

Farley P. Katz
Designed and typeset in Aldine401
by Michael Widener.