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ACTA HISTORIAE ARTIS SLOVENICA

Artistic and Architectural Heritage
of the Nobility Between Old and New Regimes

Umetnostna in arhitekturna dediščina plemstva
med starimi in novimi režimi

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The Molin Collection Between the Old and New Regime

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Abstract:

The Molin Collection Between the Old and New Regime

1. 01 Original scientific article

Starting from the cross-analysis of printed texts, manuscripts and works of art preserved in the city's museums, the essay reflects on the impact that the political, social and cultural upheavals triggered by the fall of the *Serenissima* had on the taste of the conservative Venetian nobility. In particular, it examines the case of Girolamo Ascanio Molin (1736–1814), a politician, scholar and writer who, between the late 18th and early 19th century, built an extensive collection, whose physiognomy evolved according to the historical context, the frequentations of the senator, the opportunities provided by art markets and the self-representation strategies adopted by the patriciate in response to the New Regime.

Keywords: art collecting, Republic of Venice, collective identity, Venice, Girolamo Ascanio Molin (1736–1814)

Izveček:

Zbirka Molin med starim in novim režimom

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek

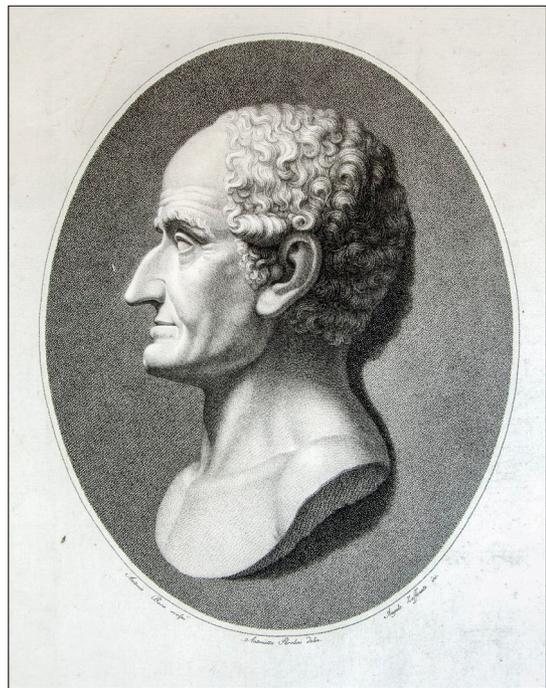
Izhajajoč iz navzkrižne analize tiskanih besedil, rokopisov in umetniških del, hranjenih v mestnih muzejih, avtorica v članku razmišlja o vplivu političnih, družbenih in kulturnih sprememb, ki jih je sprožil padec Beneške republike, na umetnostni okus konzervativnega beneškega plemstva. Izpostavljen je primer Girolama Ascania Molina (1736–1814), politika, učenjaka in pisatelja, ki je na prelomu iz 18. v 19. stoletje zgradil obsežno zbirko, katere sestava se je razvijala v skladu z zgodovinskim kontekstom, prisotnostjo senatorja na umetnostnem trgu in možnostmi, ki jih je ta ponujal, in s strategijami samoreprezentacije, ki so jih beneški plemiči sprejeli kot odgovor na novi režim.

Ključne besede: umetnostno zbirateljstvo, Beneška republika, kolektivna identiteta, Benetke, Girolamo Ascanio Molin (1736–1814)

The essay aims to reflect on the collecting practices of the Venetian patriciate at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, specifically in the peculiar period between the fall of the *Serenissima* and the establishment of foreign governments, which witnessed profound changes in the art markets. In particular, this study will evaluate the effects that the political, social and cultural upheavals that took place around 1797 had on the taste of the conservative members of the old nobility, most troubled—in both economic and identity terms—by the decline of the Old Regime, and therefore on the physiognomy of the collections handed down by previous generations. This phase, populated by multifaceted and ambiguous protagonists—poised between contrasting tendencies—was disregarded by critics, who underestimated the implications it had on the ways of interpreting and using heritage, as well as on subsequent experiences of historicising and periodising artistic phenomena.¹

Girolamo Ascanio Molin

In order to begin addressing the question at the heart of the study, we first address the figure of Girolamo Ascanio Molin (1738–1814) (fig. 1), a Venetian patrician who, between the second half of the 18th century and the first decades of the 19th century, distinguished himself in various spheres of city life, becoming a politician, scholar, writer and collector of great renown among his contemporaries. The last descendant of the Molin di San Maurizio family,² he manifested from a young age a sharp and versatile intellect, which enabled him first to receive a solid education in Modena and then to embark upon an intense and illustrious political career in his homeland.³ From a natural debut at the age of twenty-six as a *Savio agli Ordini* (executive consultant), he came several times to be a member of the *Signoria*, the Council of Ten and the State Inquisitors, as well as magistracies with delicate juridical-economic competences, distinguished always by his strongly conservative and pro-oligarchic



1. Angelo Zaffonato, *Portrait of Girolamo Ascanio Molin from the bust by Antonio Bosa, 1835, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia, Venice* (2023 © Archivio Fotografico, Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia)

¹ By way of example, see Zorzi, Favaretto and Bravetti, eds., *Collezioni di antichità*; Favaretto, *Arte antica*; Aikema, Lauber and Seidel, eds., *Il collezionismo a Venezia*; Borean and Mason, eds., *Il collezionismo d'arte*. Despite the recent publication of some texts dedicated to the collectors of the period (see Borean, *La galleria Manfrin*), to which we must give credit for having raised some initial questions, there is still a lack of an organic study that considers the protagonists and market dynamics of this transitional historical moment, as well as the period immediately following.

² Barbaro, *Arbori de' Patritii veneti*, 227.

³ Gamba, *Narrazione intorno alla vita*, 6.

views.⁴ His public appointments did not end with the collapse of the *Serenissima* in 1797. Despite his advanced age and profound dissent during the first Austrian domination, he was appointed General Director of Police, a role he held for a short time before retiring to private life in 1803.⁵ A “rigid and severe, conscientious and patriotic” man, to use the words of Filippo Nani Mocenigo (1847–1921), Molin always showed nostalgia for the glorious past of his beloved homeland and open contempt for foreign domination (especially for the French one), sentiments that were expressed in the verses of the numerous poems he wrote during those years.⁶

The Collection in the Palace of San Stin

The biographer Bartolomeo Gamba (1766–1841) reports that, from a young age, Molin combined his political commitments with erudite studies and the accumulation of art objects, a lifelong passion that turned into a systematic and all-encompassing activity (also from an economic point of view) in the 1780s–1790s and, above all, in the years following his departure from the political scene.⁷ Perceived as a source of consolation in the most troubled historical and personal moments, collecting was the prerogative of the last generation of the Molin family, who, in the persons of Girolamo Ascanio and, to a lesser extent, his brother Angelo (1740–1797),⁸ wished to give a new twist to the meagre pictorial collections inherited from their father Giovan Girolamo (1711–1784),⁹ also in order to showcase the restored social status of the San Maurizio branch of the family tree. The outcome comprised more than forty thousand objects, perfectly reflecting the nobleman’s diverse areas of interest. Inside the palace in San Stin, celebrated as a “temple sacred to Minerva” in contemporary literary chronicles,¹⁰ there was a large natural history cabinet, a library, a gallery of paintings, prints and drawings, and an antiquarian and numismatic collection, in a mixture that, although following an established (if not obsolete) trend in the late 18th century—that of encyclopaedism—, had undoubtedly original features, which will be discussed shortly.

⁴ For a detailed list of the offices he held during the Republic, see Gambier, “Girolamo Ascanio Molin,” 94. The case of the *novatori* Carlo Contarini and Giorgio Pisani, indicted for attempting to subvert the established order within the Venetian ruling class, is emblematic of Molin’s political positions. See Cozzi, Knapton, and Scarabello, *La Repubblica di Venezia*, 585–90.

⁵ Gottardi, *L’Austria a Venezia*, 30, 165.

⁶ Della Frattina, “Girolamo Ascanio Molin,” 1035–60.

⁷ Gamba, *Narrazione intorno alla vita*, 18–19.

⁸ To this day, there is limited information available on Angelo. We know that he was mainly active within the *Quarantia* and the *Collegio dei XXV*, and that he devoted himself to managing the affairs of the house together with his elder brother. Like Girolamo Ascanio, he cultivated a passion for the arts in all their forms, taking part in the debates of private academies, primarily the *Accademia degli Orfei* and the *Accademia di Belle Arti*, and shaping his own personal collection (Girardi, “Musica strumentale,” 507; Pavanello, ed., *L’Accademia di Belle Arti*, 1: 60). This nucleus was later acquired by Girolamo Ascanio, as evidenced by Angelo’s will (Atti Gio. Battista Erizzo, no. 125, box 365, Testamenti, Notarile, Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASV)) and a letter sent by senator Molin to Tommaso Obizzi on 12 January 1797 (C.A. 1001e/138, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, Biblioteca Civica di Padova (BCP)).

⁹ For Giovan Girolamo’s will, see Atti Dell’Acqua, no. 3873, box 31e, Miscellanea testamenti notai diversi, Cancelleria Inferiore, ASV; for the inventory of his possessions see no. 9, box 479/144, Inventari, Giudici di Petizion, ASV.

¹⁰ Gamba, *Narrazione intorno alla vita*, 19. Appreciations were also made by Moschini, *Della letteratura veneziana*, 2: 79; Dandolo, *La caduta della Repubblica di Venezia*, 158–59.

In addition to the nearly twenty thousand items acquired by the Venetian museums from a bequest made by Girolamo Ascanio himself,¹¹ the *post mortem* inventory offers a dependable overview of the collection.¹² Drawn up immediately after the patrician's death with the purpose of quantifying his legacy, it lists, room by room, the objects found in the palace (of common use and not), providing, in the case of works of art, the artist's name (or presumed author), the estimated value, the location and sometimes rough measurements. The register, preparatory to the property divisions, was the outcome of a meticulous procedure that lasted ten-months (May 1814 – February 1815) and involved, besides the heirs and testamentary executors, some of the most proficient art experts of the time: the antiquarian Giovanni Meneghetti, the print merchant and engraver Teodoro Viero (1740–1819), the curator of the Accademia di Belle Arti Pietro Edwards (1744–1821), the bookseller Domenico Draghi, the silversmith Andrea Zambelli, the dealer Giacomo Franchini and the jeweller Antonio Peruzzi.

The two *piani nobili* and the mezzanine of palazzo Molin housed approximately seven hundred paintings, placed within sumptuous stucco or wooden frames, or lied on the floors of the rooms. The great masters of the 16th and early 17th century (or believed to be so) were the protagonists, displayed, as was the custom, in the gallery, the visual heart of the building. Preference was granted to the significant names of the Venetian school (Giovanni Bellini, Titian, Giorgione, Jacopo Bassano, Jacopo Tintoretto, Andrea Schiavone, Bonifacio de' Pitati, Felice Brusasorci, etc.), alongside, albeit almost exceptionally, works by Caravaggesque and Emilian painters, and the German, Flemish and Dutch schools (Lucas Cranach, Matthijs Bril the Younger, Joseph Heintz the Elder, Jan Van Scorel, Pauwels Franck and Pieter Bruegel, for example), of which there were mainly landscapes and still lifes.

The inventory mentions, among the most valuable works that can be identified today, a *Madonna Enthroned with Saints Sebastian and Jerome* by Bartolomeo Montagna (Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. no. 189), from the church of San Sebastiano in Verona; a *Saint Jerome* by Marco Basaiti (inv. no. 140); a panel with *Flying putti* today attributed to Paris Bordone (inv. no. 150); a *Christ among the Doctors* originally assigned to Giovanni da Udine and today generically ascribed to the Venetian school of the fourth decade of the 16th century (inv. no. 216); and the *Chess Players* (inv. no. 124) initially attributed to Caravaggio and later to a follower. The protagonist of a second revival among Venetian collectors during the 18th century, Lucas van Leyden had a significant role among the "forestieri", since he was present with at least two canvases on biblical themes, the *Mystical Marriage of St. Catherine* (inv. no. 141) and the *Crucifixion* (inv. no. 149), valued by Edwards at five hundred lire each, but later identified as copies of excellent workmanship. Equally remarkable, finally, is an atypical group of views and scenes with farm animals, game and flowers from the Nordic school, which can be identified in the canvases now deposited at the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro, among which we find *Fountain with Animals* (inv. no. 154) and a *Still Life with Birds* by David de Coninck (inv. no. 108), two baskets with flowers painted in "stile fiammingo" (inv. no. 165 and 166), a *Winning Cock* and a *Chiocchia with chicks* by Melchior de Hondercoeter, as well as the *Landscape with Peasant Women and Herds* already attributed to Nicolaes Berchem (Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. no. 120).

The Molin collection showed little interest in contemporary art, which, with the exception of a few canvases by artists working in the lagoon (such as Canaletto, Bernardo Bellotto, Sebastiano and

¹¹ Inventario di Venezia: Eredità del fu G. A. Molin, Giusti del Giardino, Molin, Archivio di Stato di Verona (ASVr).

¹² See the last paragraph. The artworks comprising Molin's bequest remain in Venice to this day and are distributed among the Gallerie dell'Accademia, the Correr Museum, the Galleria Giorgio Franchetti alla Ca' d'Oro, the National Archaeological Museum and the Biblioteca Marciana. For a comprehensive list of the pieces, see Candeaogo, "Girolamo Ascanio Molin."

Marco Ricci, Giambattista Tiepolo and his master Gregorio Lazzarini), found more space in graphics, where the 18th century dominated both quantitatively and qualitatively over earlier periods. Among the works located in the *camera* and *cameroni* that were confirmed authentic after their public acquisition were a *Courtyard with Stairs* by Michele Marieschi (Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. no. 445), two canvases by Francesco Zuccarelli depicting respectively a *Landscape with Shepherdess and Child* and a *Landscape with Rest in Egypt* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. no. 448 and 451) and, above all, two pastels by Rosalba Carriera portraying an elderly lady and a young gentleman (Gallerie dell'Accademia, inv. no. 484 and 489).¹³ An album of almost two hundred drawings by Gaspare Diziani, whose provenance remains uncertain to this day, is also of particular importance.¹⁴

However, the collection's true essence and pride were the antiquities, appreciated by contemporary connoisseurs for their variety and quality, certainly comparable to those of the museums of more famous personalities such as Pietro Persico (1745–1802), Domenico Almorò Tiepolo (1763–1836), Almorò Pisani and Leonardo Grimani.¹⁵ Scattered throughout the garden, the inner courtyard, the rooms on the mezzanine and the main floor, statues, busts, bas-reliefs, epigraphs, bronzes, ivories, gems and cameos, belonging to the Greek, Etruscan and, above all, Roman world, were intermingled alongside paintings and drawings.¹⁶ What aroused the observer's amazement—notes Girolamo Dandolo (1796–1867)—was the extensive numismatic cabinet, which, in special showcases in a dedicated room, housed tens of thousands of medals and coins arranged in homogeneous series (inspired by Eckhelian principles), ranging from the Greek period to modern times.¹⁷ In fact, Girolamo Ascanio attempted to assemble a collection that would provide a comprehensive representation of the vast array of artifacts from ancient and, to a lesser extent, medieval and modern workshops, with a view to “scientifically” investigating the customs and habits of the classical world that resonated so much in cultural circles after the excavation campaigns, especially the Roman ones.

Finally, on the first floor of the Molin palace, there was a small natural science cabinet, containing various specimens of plants, flowers, shells, stuffed animals, minerals and rarities of all sorts, accompanied on the library shelves by scientific texts that were useful for their study.¹⁸

The collection essentially had a typical profile for the time and the area to which it belonged.¹⁹ However, as anticipated, it was counterbalanced by specific peculiarities, occasionally stemming from genuine curiosity, occasionally from an early adherence to trends that would shortly become widespread.

As far as the picture gallery is concerned, a glance at the inventory first reveals that it boasted an unusual selection of Venetian artists from the 14th and 15th centuries, the so-called “Primitives”.

¹³ A portion of the collection can be viewed in the artworks presently in the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice. For further information, refer to Moschini Marconi, *Opere d'arte dei secoli XV e XVI*; Moschini Marconi, *Opere d'arte dei secoli XVI*; Moschini Marconi, *Opere d'arte dei secoli XVII, XVIII, XIX*.

¹⁴ The drawings, now in the Correr Museum, were partly published in Dorigato, “Gaspare Diziani,” 2: 15–152, and will be the subject of the author's forthcoming study.

¹⁵ *Giornale dell'italiana letteratura*, 39: 321–22; Gamba, *Narrazione intorno alla vita*, 19; Moschini, *Della letteratura veneziana*, 2: 79; Fapanni, *Elenco dei Musei*, 87.

¹⁶ For more details, see Candéago and Pilutti Namer, “Girolamo Ascanio Molin.”

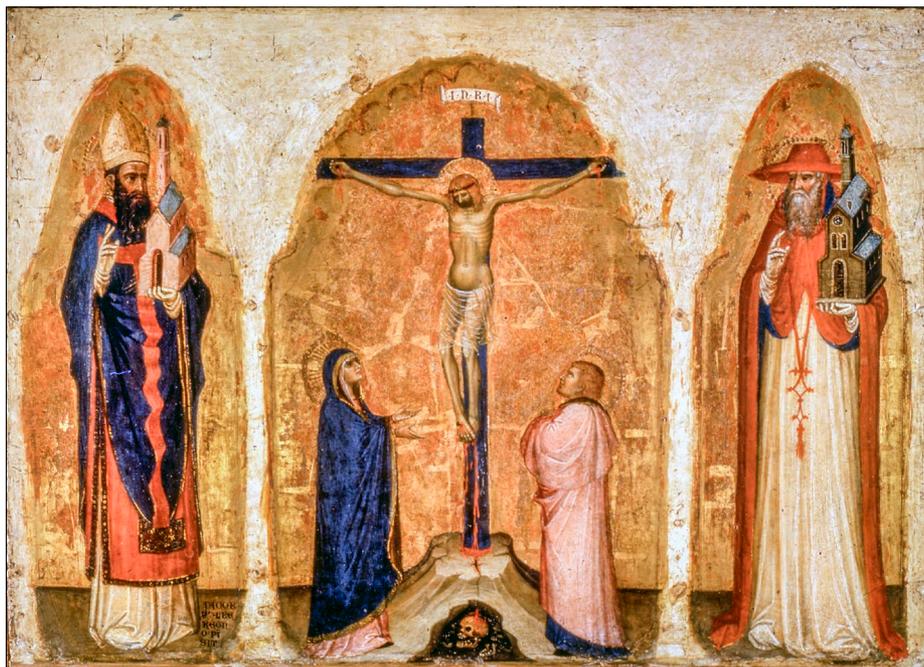
¹⁷ Dandolo, *La caduta della Repubblica*, 158–59. Some specimens are published in Saccocci, “Collezione Molin,” 188–91.

¹⁸ Moschini, *Della letteratura veneziana*, 4: 118; Dandolo, *La caduta della Repubblica*, 158.

¹⁹ For a comparison with other collections of the time, see Borean and Mason, eds., *Il collezionismo d'arte*, and in particular Borean, “Dalla galleria al ‘museo,’” 3–47.



2. Stefano "plebanus" di Sant'Agnese, *Coronation of the Virgin*, 1381, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (© Archivio fotografico G.A.VE, courtesy of Ministero della Cultura)



3. Jacobello Albergno, *Triptych of the Crucifixion: Christ Crucified between the Virgin, Saint John, Saint Gregory, and Saint Jerome*, after 1380, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice (© Archivio fotografico G.A.VE, courtesy of Ministero della Cultura)

In the *Camera della Chiesetta* and the adjacent room on the *piano nobile*, around fifty paintings by renowned personalities such as Jacobello del Fiore, Antonio di Puccio known as il Pisanello, Bernardino da Siena, Tommaso da Modena, Stefano “plebanus” di Sant’Agnese, Jacopo Albergno, Caterina Vigri and Gentile da Fabriano stood out (figs. 2–3).²⁰ Although some individual pieces by lesser-known artists were included, the preference was given to the Murano artists Antonio and Bartolomeo Vivarini, represented by no less than four panels; to Carlo Crivelli and Lorenzo Veneziano, both present with two works each; and to the Sicilian Antonello da Messina, who could boast as many as three examples. At the beginning of the 19th century, with the cult of antiquity reigning supreme, these kinds of works were not yet widely valued for their aesthetic appeal, so much so that they were appreciated only by a very small circle of individuals who approached them for a predominantly historical interest, i.e. to trace the origins of the different Italian schools of painting. In the Veneto region, the historicisation of mediaeval and early Renaissance figurative experiences, to which this attraction can be associated, had been promoted since the first half of the 18th century by figures such as Carlo Lodoli (1690–1761) and abbot Jacopo Facciolati (1682–1769), and later stimulated by shrewd dealers and receptive collectors, including John Strange (1732–1799), Giovanni De Lazara (1744–1833) and Teodoro Correr (1750–1830).²¹ It is difficult to establish, due to the lacunae in Molin’s correspondence on paintings, whether this collection activity aimed to build a complete gallery of Venetian painting, capable of visually narrating the main stages of local art, along the lines of the “histories of painting” that were being published at the time; a project that perhaps would not have seemed incongruous in the broader context of the (perhaps never completed) rearrangement of the collections undertaken by the senator between 1795 and 1806 and inspired by stricter classification criteria than in the past.

Among the antiquities, however, it is worth noting that Molin’s attraction for antiquity contemplated Egypt, a region to which we can trace small canopic jars made of marble or terracotta, bronze idols, mummies and abraxas in precious stones. In fact, although this field had already been explored to some extent (albeit in a different spirit) in the previous century by figures such as Alvise Corner, Antonio Cappello (1652–1729) and Andrea Corner (1686–1730), collecting *aegyptiaca* at the time was really only popular with the Nani di San Trovaso and Grimani di Santa Maria Formosa families, as well as with Girolamo Zulian (1730–1795) and Tommaso Obizzi (1750–1803).²² It was only after Napoleon’s campaigns in Egypt (1798–1801) that this trend became widespread, a factor that perhaps partly explains Girolamo Ascanio’s inability to recognise the numerous forgeries proposed to him by his advisors from the last decade of the 18th century onwards.

A parallel argument can be made for the various artefacts referring to the Etruscan civilisation, the collection of which remained an exquisite niche activity until the late 1790s. At the time, in fact, some of the volumes that would lay the foundations of future Etruscology—first and foremost the *Saggio di lingua etrusca* and the *De’ vasi antichi dipinti vulgarmente chiamati Etruschi* by abbot Luigi Lanzi (1732–1810)—had recently been published and still enjoyed little circulation and notoriety among the patriciate,²³ who still preferred artworks of greater visual impact and aesthetic value.

²⁰ Caburlotto, “Un’equivoca ‘fortuna,’” 187–209; Caburlotto, “Girolamo Ascanio Molin,” 373–76, and pages to follow.

²¹ Previtali, *La fortuna dei primitivi*, 234–35; Tormen, “Dipinti ‘sull’asse,’” 31–32.

²² D’Amicone, “Antico Egitto,” 22–26; Favaretto, “Antichità egizie,” 190–94. About the Grimani, see De Paoli, “Intorno a Palazzo Grimani,” 419–59. About the Nani museum, see Favaretto, *Arte antica*, 206–20. About Zulian, see De Paoli, “Antonio Canova,” 19–36.

²³ Camporeale, “Luigi Lanzi,” 19–42.

Lastly, it should be noted that, alongside the pieces traditionally most coveted by the Venetian nobility (marble statues, bronze statuettes, coins, epigraphs and inscriptions from the Greek and Roman spheres), there was also a wide spectrum of everyday objects (idols, lachrymatories, *balsamaria*, *fibulae*, cutlery, keys, coins, etc.) produced by North-Italic workshops, as well as finds from excavations then being carried out on the mainland. Such a targeted form of collecting in terms of period and provenance for *instrumenta* was at the time completely new to the Veneto context, where an indistinct accumulation of such materials had previously occurred.²⁴

The coexistence of such different orientations contributed to the encyclopaedic character of the Molin collection, which, misinterpreted by critics as the senator's lack of a definite taste,²⁵ was actually a response (stratified over time and entirely personal) to his multifaceted acquaintances, to the cultural period poised between Enlightenment tendencies and pre-Romantic feelings, and to the market's availability. This is supported by Girolamo Ascanio's correspondence, which also demonstrates that the acquisition of these items ("Primitives", *aegyptiaca*, Etruscan artefacts, *instrumenta* and everyday objects of local provenance), rather unrelated to the prevailing trends of the time, began later than that of other types of objects, concentrating in particular in the last years of the nobleman's life, namely around the fall of the *Serenissima*.²⁶

The Context: Frequentations, Markets and Identity Research

The first factor to consider when attempting to frame the manifestation of these trends is certainly the frequentations that Molin was cultivating. The development of taste was in fact an activity that was done in community, through proposing, comparing and discussing. It is evident from his correspondence that the most significant encounters for the definition of his critical and therefore collecting personality took place within Venetian society, where the exercise of political duties and attendance of private academies favoured the meeting of people close to him in terms of artistic and erudite interests. Giacomo Giustinian Recanati (1757–1813)²⁷ and Giovanni Almorò Tiepolo (1763–1836)²⁸ certainly played a major role. Tied to Molin by a special friendship, they involved Girolamo Ascanio in the study and purchase of local antiquities from his youth, primarily *instrumenta*, whose value they were able to grasp in terms of identity as well as history and art.

The marquis Tommaso Obizzi,²⁹ a lively intellectual and avid collector from Padua, and perhaps, to a lesser extent, Teodoro Correr³⁰ seem to be responsible for the curiosity about *aegyptiaca*.

²⁴ Cisotto Nalon, "L'instrumentum," 68–76.

²⁵ Rizzi, "Girolamo Ascanio Molin," 8–10.

²⁶ Molin's epistolary is largely divided between the Biblioteca Marciana (Ms. It. X, 195–97 (= 6689–91)—which preserves three volumes with 654 missives sent by and to Girolamo Ascanio between 1777 and 1803—the Biblioteca Civica of Padua (Raccolta manoscritti autografi, C.A. 1001) and the State Archive of Verona (Giusti del Giardino, Molin, Corrispondenza). In addition to these groups, there are about four hundred single sheets scattered in institutions throughout Italy (Venice, Treviso, Verona, Bassano, Udine, Ravenna, Florence, Rome).

²⁷ Favaretto, *Arte antica*, 192–93, 195; Cecchini, "Collezione Giustinian Recanati," 274.

²⁸ Zorzi, *Collezioni di antichità*, 98–99; Favaretto, *Arte antica*, 193, 217–18; Borean, "Giovanni Domenico Almorò Tiepolo," 310–11.

²⁹ Coppola and Tozzi, "Pezzi egizi."

³⁰ Romanelli, "'Vista cader la patria,'" 95–115.

The former engaged Molin in a high-level debate and introduced the senator to the thriving market he referred to, thus giving him the opportunity to acquire materials to which he might not otherwise have had access.

Under the stimulus of mutual acquaintances, this network also comprised geographically distant figures, such as abbot Luigi Lanzi and the Roman cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731–1804),³¹ who piqued Molin's interest in Etruscology, as well as in the "dark" ages of art.

Also exemplary is the nobleman's bond with Mauro Boni (1744–1817), a bibliophile, numismatist and antiquarian expert, and author of various erudite texts, whom Molin approached through the aforementioned Giustinian Recanati. For a significant part of his career (not without its shadows), the clergyman served as an active intermediary and consultant to the senator, especially in the field of "Primitives" and Venetian antiquities.³² A similar role was fulfilled by the merchant Giovanni Maria Sasso (c. 1735–1803), author of an unfinished history of the local art school from its origins, who brought Molin closer to the study of mediaeval painting and to the purchase of panels connected to this historical period.³³ The same interest was also cultivated in Veneto at the time by Giovanni De Lazara, Pietro Brandolese (1754–1809), Bartolomeo Gamba, Giannantonio Moschini (1773–1840), Leopoldo Cicognara (1767–1834), Jacopo Morelli (1745–1819), Pietro Edwards and the aforementioned Obizzi, to name but a few, who were all in direct contact with Girolamo Ascanio.³⁴

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that a large part of Molin's collecting career took place in rather turbulent and unstable years for Venice. In fact, the socio-political upheavals that shook the *Serenissima* and the related military events had significant repercussions on the art and antiquarian markets as well. If, on the one hand, the dismemberment of the collections of the ruined prominent patrician families caused a massive inflow of pieces into the exchange networks,³⁵ on the other hand, factors such as the presence of armed contingents, the pressing poverty of the nobility and the limitations of movement imposed by raids and damaged communication routes came to freeze certain market segments between the late 1790s and early 1810s. Collectors still in possession of liquidity were induced to orientate their purchases towards those materials that were more readily available,³⁶ thus directing their taste and influencing the physiognomy of their collections. Events in fact often persuaded foreign dealers to stay away from the *Serenissima*, at least in those periods when the events of the war were at their harshest, precluding many possibilities for connoisseurs of the lagoons. It is clear from Girolamo Ascanio Molin's letters how the deficiency of Roman numismatic artefacts, to which he had persistently devoted great attention, contributed in large part in the very first years of the new century to shifting his focus to the finds from excavations on the Venetian mainland.³⁷ Here, transport was less costly and problematic. The requirement for brief journeys to finalize an exchange certainly decreased risk factors (thefts were apparently almost

³¹ Germano and Nocca, eds., *La collezione Borgia*.

³² Lanzi, *Lettere a Mauro Boni*, 47–49.

³³ Orso, "Giovanni Maria Sasso;" Borean, ed., *Lettere artistiche*; Borean, "L'eredità di Giovanni Maria Sasso."

³⁴ Tormen, "Dipinti 'sull'asse,'" 29–30.

³⁵ Cecchini, "Attorno al mercato," 166–67.

³⁶ C.A. 1001e/195, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, BCP. On the situation of the city in these years, see, for example, letters no. 73, 105, 129, 131, 132, Ms. It. X, 195 (= 6689), Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (BNM).

³⁷ C.A. 1001d/118, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, BCP. On the search for materials on the mainland, see also letter no. 124, Ms. It. X, 195 (= 6689), BNM.

the order of the day), as did the option of utilizing reliable people for transportation rather than the now compromised public mail service.³⁸

On the other hand, the dismantling of many churches and monasteries subsequent to the Napoleonic decrees led to the movement of the numerous medieval panels that had embellished these buildings for centuries, particularly after 1809.³⁹ Entering the market at a time when there was still little fascination with “dark” periods, as we have seen, these pieces had exceptionally low valuations (often also due to their poor state of preservation), which attracted the attention of amateurs increasingly interested in the reconstruction of the city’s past and its artistic manifestations.⁴⁰ Their massive presence in Venice—often also linked to episodes of polyptych dismemberment or falsification—may have contributed to their purchase by far-sighted buyers such as Girolamo Ascanio Molin, Teodoro Correr and Tommaso Obizzi *in primis*.⁴¹

Furthermore, we should not disregard the impact that the dynamics of self-definition and self-representation set by the old aristocratic elite in conjunction with the rise of the New Regime had on collecting activity. The collapse of the *Serenissima* and the concomitant establishment of foreign powers brought drastic



4. Bartolomeo Bon, *Head of Doge Francesco Foscari*, Palazzo Ducale, Venice (© Archivio Fotografico - Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia)

³⁸ There are several letters in which Molin complains of having lost small objects sent by post and in which he declares his intention to use only trusted persons in transit from Venice. See for example, letter to Tommaso Obizzi, Venice, June 16, 1796, C.A. 1001a/28, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, BCP; letters no. 36, 38, 41, Ms. It. X, 195 (= 6689), BNM.

³⁹ Spiazzi, “Dipinti demaniali di Venezia,” 69–127, in particular 70.

⁴⁰ Exemplary in this regard are the estimates produced by Pietro Edwards on the “Primitive” panels donated by Molin to the Accademia di Belle Arti. Despite their high quality, Edwards judged they were of little economic value (they mostly ranged from twenty to thirty lire, with some exceptions, which were valued between sixty and one hundred lire). See Legato Molin: Catalogo dei beni compresi nelle facoltà del fu N. H. Sig. E. Girolamo Ascanio Molin a favore della I. R. Accademia di Belle Arti in Venezia, giusto al di lui Testamento 24 febbraio 1813, folder 117/I, Gallerie dell’Accademia, Doni e lasciti (1815–1900), 2/2, Archivio Storico del Polo Museale del Veneto (ASPMV); Inventario di Venezia: Eredità del fu G. A. Molin, Giusti del Giardino, Molin, ASVr.

⁴¹ Exemplary is the case of a *Saint Catherine* (Gallerie dell’Accademia, inv. no. 179) and a *Saint Barbara* (Correr Museum, Cl. I no. 155) by Giusto d’Alemagna, today exhibited in the Correr Museum. Parts of a dismembered polyptych, the two panels were sold to Molin and Correr respectively with a false attribution to Tommaso da Modena, in order to maximise profit. See Caburlotto, *Girolamo Ascanio Molin*, 374–76. On the forgery of signatures in the paintings of the “Primitives”, see De Marchi, *Falsi Primitivi*, 105–06.

changes not only to government structures and legislation but also to the value system on which society was based. Deprived of its prerogatives and bewildered by a reality often perceived as foreign, oppressive and degraded, the patriciate was thus forced to confront its own history and reassess its relationship with the past.⁴² Various elements reveal how the end of the Old Regime called into question the bond that Venice had cultivated with antiquity since the Renaissance, giving a new direction to studies and taste. Strong political and identity connotations then began to characterise above all the antiquarian research of the more conservative patriciate, who worked to defend its memory in an anti-Napoleonic function, namely to construct a strong and coherent identity to oppose the invader.⁴³ This was an attempt that resulted in the collection of precise types of objects and the publication of booklets to valorise these pieces in their specificity, certainly prodromal to a process of historicising the city's experience.⁴⁴ In the light of these considerations, we should certainly read the interest of Molin and his circle (which can be assimilated to a cénacle in the strict sense of the word) in *instrumenta*, excavated materials from the Venetian mainland and "Primitives", which appeared in their eyes as irreplaceable testimonies to Venice's golden past (even daily life) and the existence of a common collective history.⁴⁵ The rearrangement of the water entrance to Palazzo Molin, carried out by Girolamo Ascanio by 1806, is probative of the anti-French ideology that underpinned the erudite studies of such cénacles. Indeed, it does not appear to be a coincidence that the senator chose to place a series of ancient bas-reliefs and modern busts at the main entrance, on which a group of doge portraits—first and foremost the head of Doge Foscari detached in 1797 from the Porta della Carta in the Doge's Palace (fig. 4)—stood out.⁴⁶

The Bequest to the City of Venice

The education of the new generations in the history of Venice and, at the same time, in the arts, was the main reason behind Girolamo Ascanio's decision to donate a large part of the family collections

⁴² On the vicissitudes of the patriciate in the context of the end of the Republic, see Davis, *The decline*; Derosas, "Dal patriziato alla nobiltà;" Del Negro, "La memoria dei vinti;" Derosas, "Aspetti economici;" Hunecke, *Il patriziato veneziano*; Dal Cin, *Il mondo nuovo*.

⁴³ Candeago, "Erudizione antiquaria."

⁴⁴ Guarnieri Ottoni, *Dissertazione*. The text, published after the author's death at Molin's behest, discussed the possible route of the road that crossed a large part of the territories later subjected to the *Serenissima*, starting from an ancient inscription reported by canon Lucio Doglioni (1730–1803) in the church of Santa Maria in Cesiomaggiore and later in the Tauro collection in Centenere (Belluno). The introduction to the second edition, which remained handwritten (Corrispondenza, Giusti del Giardino, Molin, ASVr), emphasised the importance of these "remarkable monuments" with a view to reconstructing the past of the *Serenissima* and above all to rediscovering the identity that was now felt to have been lost.

⁴⁵ It is possible—although not verifiable in the current state of research—that this strong interest in city history also originated from the (direct or epistolary) contact with the numerous academies that, during that time, were increasingly devoting themselves to a reliable reconstruction of their own past, free of false beliefs and based on reliable documents, as in the case of the Accademia degli Operosi or Accademia dei Risorti in Capodistria, see Žitko, "Carlijevo delovanje;" Seražin, "Plemiško javno umetnostno naročništvo." Although devoid of politicising connotations, the search for the "vero storico" promoted by these societies probably encouraged Molin and his circle towards an "objective" and direct approach to sources, almost unanimously considered indispensable to fully valorise the testimonies of the past. It will be worth investigating this topic in more detail, starting with the papers and documents produced by the academies to which the patrician and his friends were affiliated.

⁴⁶ Letters no. 202–05, C.A. 1001e, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, BCP. On the acquisition of Doge Foscari's head, see C.A. 1001e/148 and C.A. 1001f/153, Raccolta manoscritti autografi, BCP.

to the city after his death. In fact, in February 1813, the former senator, drawing up his will, established a bequest in favour of some of Venice's main cultural institutions (Accademia di Belle Arti (Academy of Fine Arts), Biblioteca Reale di San Marco (Royal Library of Saint Mark) and Liceo Santa Caterina (Lyceum of Saint Catherine)) with the explicit request that the works he owned be made available to the public and especially to young scholars of the arts to facilitate a solid education.⁴⁷ In assessing events, we should certainly not underestimate the nobleman's desire to indissolubly bind the name of the Molin family to the city, in accordance with a practice rooted in the *Serenissima* since the 16th century. But Girolamo Ascanio surely put the educational purpose first, which meant that he was even willing to set aside his differences with the foreign authority to which these institutions referred. This choice was also facilitated by his deep friendship with figures such as Pietro Edwards, Jacopo Morelli and Antonio Maria Traversi (1765–1842), who were respectively leading members of the Accademia di Belle Arti, the Biblioteca Reale di San Marco and the Liceo Santa Caterina.

However, Molin's project did not have the desired results, at least in the short term. Once the collections entered the city's museums (between August 1816 and August 1819), they were in fact largely relegated to storage and excluded from any form of study in order to satisfy the exhibition requirements of the moment. A fate common to many other bequests of the time. Consider, for example, the paintings that were assigned to the Accademia: with the exception of the "Primitive" panels or those by a few 16th-century masters, the Molin's pieces were ill-suited for inclusion in the rooms, thought to give students a very broad overview of the different Italian and foreign schools. Created mostly by the most popular Venetian painters and often of poor quality—19th century museum guides reveal—they were discarded in favour of paintings belonging to areas less represented in the Veneto region, to other genres considered "minor" or to works of greater value.⁴⁸ In the case of antiquities, volumes and graphics, a complex legal diatribe regarding the ownership of the bequest also proved counterproductive in this sense. For approximately thirteen years (1873–1880), ownership was disputed between the Biblioteca Reale di San Marco and the newly founded Correr Museum, with consequent continual changes of location.⁴⁹ It would be necessary to wait until the most recent layouts to see the situation partially change,⁵⁰ without, however, ever achieving the degree of accessibility desired by Molin.

⁴⁷ Pietro Occioni, no. 1985, box 289, Notarile, II serie, ASV (the document was published and transcribed by Linda Borean, in Borean, ed., *Il collezionismo*, 363–66). More than 20,000 items were bequeathed, including 9,570 coins and medals, 4,000 volumes, 3,835 prints, 408 drawings, 292 bronzes, 136 maps, 118 paintings, 97 cameos, 89 terracottas, 73 marbles, 36 ivories, 29 pieces of antique glass and 122 assorted objects. Furthermore, the complete natural history cabinet was added. See Legato Molin: Rilevazione oggetti affidati alla Biblioteca di S. Marco. Oggetti in marmo, metallo ed altre materie. Cammei e pietre incise, Archivio della Direzione, Biblioteca del Museo Correr (BMC); Legato Molin: Rilevazione oggetti affidati alla Biblioteca di S. Marco. Stampe, incisioni. Disegni a penna, ad acquerello ed a colori, Archivio della Direzione, BMC; Legato Molin: Rilevazione oggetti affidati alla Biblioteca di S. Marco. Numismatica, Archivio della Direzione, BMC; Legato Molin: Catalogo dei beni compresi nelle facoltà del fu N. H. Sig. E. Girolamo Ascanio Molin a favore della I. R. Accademia di Belle Arti in Venezia, giusto al di lui Testamento 24 febbraio 1813, folder 117/I, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Doni e lasciti (1815–1900), 2/2, ASPMV.

⁴⁸ *Guida per la R. Accademia*.

⁴⁹ Gambier, *Girolamo Ascanio Molin*, 93–94.

⁵⁰ Zanutto, *Guida per l'Imp. Reg. Accademia*; Moschini Marconi, *Opere d'arte dei secoli XV e XVI, XXVI*; Manieri Elia, "Note sulla storia," 14–15.

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Zbirka Molin med starim in novim režimom

Povzetek

Avtorica se v članku osredotoča na beneškega senatorja Girolama Ascania Molina (1738–1814), ki je na prelomu iz 18. v 19. stoletje postal ugleden zbiralec zaradi enciklopedično zbrane zbirke več kot štirideset tisoč starih in sodobnih predmetov, ki odsevajo doslej še neraziskan in nekontekstualiziran interes, ki za to obdobje ni bil značilen. Z upoštevanjem tiskanih in rokopisnih virov – gre za neobjavljene dokumente iz družinskih arhivov, notarske fonde in zbirke pisem – sledi razvoju zbirke tako, da evidentira posledice, ki sta jih imela padec Beneške republike in vzpostavitev novega režima na podedovano zbirko, ki se je v družini prenašala iz roda v rod. Namen članka je pokazati, kako se je okus beneškega plemiča spremenil pod vplivom političnih, družbenih in kulturnih sprememb, ki so se zgodile okoli leta 1797, saj se je njegov zbirateljski okus premaknil v sfero predmetov, ki so najbolje pričali o zlati dobi Benetk: predmeti iz vsakdanjega življenja, najdbe z beneškega podeželja in "ljudsko slikarstvo". Gre za primer poskusa obsežnejše in prezrte gradnje kolektivne identitete s strani konservativnega in izobraženega beneškega plemstva kot odgovor na dezorientacijo, nastalo zaradi novega/francoskega režima, ki so ga dojemali kot tujega in zatiralskega. Hkrati sta v članku raziskana prisotnost senatorja Molina na umetnostnem trgu, in umetnostni trg sam, ki se je občasno ohladil zaradi oborožene vojske, vse večje revščine nekdanjega plemstva in omejitev gibanja zaradi roparskih napadov in poškodovanih poti. Članek se konča z razmislekom, ali so vsi naštetih dejavniki spodbudili prenos Molinove in drugih zbirk v mesto, in to kljub spreminjajočemu se položaju med donatorjem in oblastmi. To odločitev so lastniki zbirk sprejeli z namenom, da bodo prihodnje generacije meščanov poučili o beneški zgodovini in umetnosti, vendar pa Molinova donacija ni prinesla želenih rezultatov, saj so bila umetniška dela iz njegove zapuščine po njegovi smrti predstavljena v muzejsko hrambo in niso bila dostopna javnosti.