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## Status anxiety in Venetian baroque interiors

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Annika Tillmann, *Adel Verpflichtet. Die Rhetorik bildkünstlerischer Innenausstattungen. Venezianische Adelspaläste um 1700 im Kontext von Statuskonkurrenz* (Hamburg: Verlag dr. Kovač, 2014, 512 p., ill. on CD-Rom, index)

Between 1646 and 1718, it became possible for families from Venice itself, its *Terraferma* and even beyond it to obtain a noble title, and through this, gain influence on Venetian politics through its *Maggior Consiglio*, or Great Senate. It required the extravagant sum of 100.000 *scudi* to acquire this aristocratic position, and in three consecutive rounds, more than 120 families entered the ranks of those inscribed in the *Libro d'Oro*. However, these new nobles were considered second-rate by the established families, and this evoked a quest for status through various strategies, or so one can assume on the basis of Pierre Bourdieu's theory. One of these strategies must have been the interior embellishment of noble homes, and this study therefore focuses on decorative schemes and arrangements, and their specific social meanings in the period between 1680 and 1730. As can be gauged from the slightly shifted dates with respect to the opening of the ranks of nobility, the book implies a time-lapse between the social elevation and the execution of these pictorial cycles, probably because these decorations took time to complete.

In order to unravel this issue, Annika Tillmann approaches her material by means of a tripartite rhetorical structure, namely *inventio* (which is here translated as the iconographical message), *dispositio* (meaning the arrangement of these themes within a room or as part

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Queen Zenobia addressing her soldiers (oil on canvas, 1725/1730, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo; Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC)

of a sequence of spaces) and *elocutio* (here taken as equalling decorative opulence). Tillmann assumes that decorative arrangements in Venetian palaces followed an analogous structure in signalling status to the contemporary beholder. Each of these three aspects is systematically discussed with a number of examples from palaces of both new and old aristocratic families as case studies. These range from the established families of the Barbaro, the Pesaro and the Corner, to those of parvenu's like the Manin, Sandi, Zenobio and Widmann. Extensive descriptions are given of the themes chosen to represent these families' status in painted cycles with antique, mythological and biblical themes, and the way these were arranged within the public spaces of the *androne* (the ground-floor hall), the *scalone* (the main stairwell), the *portego* (the first-floor central hall, also traditionally the main reception area), the *salone* (festive hall on the first floor, and an architectural invention of the late *seicento*) and *camere* (the more private rooms).

It turns out that the decorations in palaces of the new nobility did not markedly differ from those of the old nobility with respect to their *dispositio* and the *elocutio*. This does not surprise, as these issues did not have a significant value of their own, but only in relation to what Tillmann subsumes under the heading of *inventio*, the iconographic messages of the decoration. Essentially, it can be stated that the arrangement of themes over the spaces of a private home can construe a particular message, but it is simply impossible to experiment

with the sequence of scenes in a narrative or argumentative structure without rendering it incomprehensible for the beholder. So, it was predominantly in the choice of certain themes – or, rather, leaving them out – through which the new nobility could or was forced to distinguish themselves from the more established nobility in Venice. This meant that while the combination of portraits and ancient history was preferred by the old nobility – which can be found for example in the Dolfin family palace – to underline their lineage, the new noble families could of course not apply such iconography as they lacked noble (let alone mythical) ancestors. On the other hand, the new nobles seem to have preferred allegorical representations of their contribution to the Venetian state, as it ‘explained’ their new position as a result of moral and/or military support in its war against the Turks, and not as a mere financial arrangement by means of which the family gained a higher status.

A fact that fundamentally complicates this study and its approach is that there is a rather lacunose situation with respect to the historical material; for one thing, many palaces have been submitted to later changes in both interior disposition and in their pictorial embellishment, and moreover, certain parts of the decoration, especially those executed in stucco and fresco, severely suffered from humidity. In some cases the interior itself has been preserved, but in other cases, it needed to be reconstructed on the basis of contemporary inventories – which often did not discuss the fixed parts of the decoration but only the movable elements. Although this unevenness in source material is to be expected in a historical study, it complicates and even undermines the quest for a systematic approach as propagated by Tillmann. In this book this lacunose situation with respect to the sources results in a systematic structure that only suggests, but does not provide, an objective interpretation of the facts as there is a fundamental inequality of information.

Furthermore, the separation between the levels *inventio*, *dispositio* and *elocutio* is an artificial one. Traditional art historical research can and will tackle issues of iconography in relation to location and opulence, especially with regard to aristocratic interiors.<sup>1</sup> In the present systematic approach, the discussion of the cases is divided up over three chapters, which in fact hinders a clear understanding of the complexity of meaning in each of these interiors, and it results in quite a few repetitions in the text. This separation of elements that are intricately related and even interdependent also results, in some cases, in erroneous or at least questionable interpretations. This is clear for example in the discussion of Tiepolo’s paintings for the Zenobio *sala*. Five paintings, now dispersed over four museums in Washington, Milan, Madrid and Turin, depict ‘Queen Zenobia before Emperor Aurelian’, the ‘Triumph of Aurelian’, ‘The allocution of Zenobia’ and two royal hunting scenes; these once belonged to a cycle executed by Giambattista Tiepolo in 1736. Here, Tillmann does acknowledge that the choice for Zenobia was related to the name of the family, but according to her it did not – as in the case of established noble families – represent an explicit claim of ancient family lin-

1 See, for example: S. Walker and F. Hammond, eds, *Life and the arts in the Baroque palaces of Rome. Ambiente Barocco* (New Haven-London, 1999); P. Cavazzini, *Palazzo Lancelotti ai Coronari. Cantiere di Agostino Tassi* (Rome, 1998).

age (100-101).<sup>2</sup> The fact that the characters in Tiepolo's paintings are clad in modern dress and not in ancient costume is seen by Tillmann as an indication that dynastic claims were not at stake here, but in doing so, she ignores the artistic changes taking place in the late *Seicento*, and that the choice for contemporary dress might even *heighten* the claim of ancient lineage instead of diminishing it.

Moreover, the quest for a systematic approach also leads to the discussion of a plethora of cases, where a choice for the more relevant or significant ones might have rendered this study more accessible to the reader. The space gained in this way might have made it possible to insert the necessary images in the printed version, instead of providing them on a CD-rom. On the other hand, there is a strange omission with respect to the chronology between a family's elevation to the nobility and the decoration of their palace – which might have been an important element in explaining particular choices. As is mentioned by Tillmann, some families indeed had no money left after the acquisition of their title, and thus were only able at a later stage to have their homes decorated to express their – not-so-new – social status, and this undoubtedly had an impact on the choice and disposition of themes.

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What also remains out of sight in the present study is the impact of these changes on the old nobility in Venice. In some cases, Tillmann does refer to the changes also appearing in the interiors of their palaces, and that an evolution in iconography and the use of spaces might also have occurred there. For example, the first *salone* – which was a spatial form found on the mainland but not in Venice, where until the late seventeenth century the *portego* was the traditional space for entertainment – was introduced in Palazzo Barbaro, in 1694 – and thus in a palace that belonged to the old nobility (205). Moreover, it should be presumed that or at least asked whether the aggregation of new families to the rank of nobility had an impact on the decoration of palaces of the old nobility. The issue of admitting new members to their ranks resulted in a fierce debate and a changed self-awareness of the old nobility;<sup>3</sup> this might very well have expressed itself in the themes and subjects chosen for their representative rooms. Taking this into serious account would have resulted in a more dynamic concept of status anxiety in Venice around 1700.

Thus, this book documents once more that art is intimately related to, or even inseparable from, prestige, and it proves that the differences in applying it by different groups only resulted in quite subtle variations. In itself, the systematic approach of the book is laudable, but it results in a text that actually challenges the reader's endurance. It also adopts a rather static image of art as vehicle in the quest for status, whereas we know – thanks to Bourdieu – that especially the traditional upper classes tend to struggle to maintain their social position, and they also use art in that very context.

2 See, also: G. Knox, 'Giambattista Tiepolo. Queen Zenobia and Ca' Zenobio: "una delle prime sue fatture"', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXI (1979) 409-418.

3 D. Raines, *L'invention du mythe aristocratique. L'image de soi du patriciat vénétien au temps de la Sérénissime* (Venice, 2006) 631ff.



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