

A TOUR OF ITALY

The Attractive City of Florence. The Beautiful City of Venice. St. Mark's Church

By W. J. SANDOZ

Having left Rome with its wonderful history, its art and interesting ruins, we soon arrived at another famous city, Florence, called Firenze by the Italians. It is located on a little river called the Arno, and is picturequely enclosed by the hill of Fiesole and other foothills of the Central Apennines. What is now the city of Florence was doubtless occupied many years before the Christian era, but the Etruscan Florence was founded about 200 B. C.

Florence is one of the most attractive cities of Italy and has been considered from the middle ages until modern times as a centre of intellectual life. Including the garrison established there the population exceeds 150,000, but while for many years its mercantile industries were considerable, its present industrial activities are very limited. The Florentines, however, have ever been noted for their pre-eminence in artistic talent and for the vigour of their reasoning powers. It possesses even at this day an amazing profusion of treasures of art, imposing monuments and most delightful environments, making it a most interesting and attractive place to visit.

Florence prides itself on being the birthplace of a number of illustrious men, including Dante, the great Christian poet whose six hundredth anniversary was recently celebrated; Leonardo de Vinci, the famous painter and author of the Mona Lisa; Michael Angelo, the illustrious architect, painter and sculptor; Americus Vesputti, the navigator who first set foot on the mainland of North America; and the distinguished family of the Medici which produced popes, cardinals, queens and dukes. Statues of these and other famous Tuscans adorn the niches of the handsome Portico degli Uffizi.

Among the most important places of interest in Florence is the fine art gallery which contains many of the famous paintings and sculptures of the Italian masters. In one of the principal galleries of this large establishment is grouped five of the most celebrated pieces of sculpture that now are in existence: the Venus di Medici, the Sharpener, the Wrestlers the Apollo and the Dancing Pawn.

A visit to the palace of the Medici, an ancient castle built in the twelfth century and occupied by this illustrious family for some two hundred years, proved most interesting. Despite its age it is in a good state of repair and still contains many of the objects and furniture which were in use centuries ago. It is now a museum a small admission being charged.

The Petit Musee contains many works of art, especially of the Florentine masters, and is well worthy of a visit. Here is also located a former Palace of the King of Italy. The present King presented this palace to the State just after the conclusion of the great war, in 1917. Its furnishings are sumptuous indeed and the numerous chambers, galleries, etc., are in the exact condition as when they were used as one of the royal residences. It would be a great mistake for the tourist to fail to visit this magnificent palace, which owing to the fact that it is furnished in up-to-date style and contains many objects of extraordinary value, make it more interesting in some respects than the old palaces which were visited in other portions of Italy and in France.

Florence also possesses many fine churches, the most important of these being the famous Cathedral, erected in 1296 on the site of the earlier church of St. Reparata. The church larger than all other churches in Italy up to that time, is 555 feet long and 341 feet across the octagon, and is built of black and white marble. The construction of the cupola, completed in 1434, took fourteen years; the present facade was erected in 1875-87. The interior is impressive owing to its grand dimensions, but it is dark and almost bare of the usual

ornaments to be found in fine churches. Our party witnessed a very elaborate ceremony in the Cathedral in which many bishops and priests participated. We also attended mass at the Church of the Conception, another of the famous places of worship in Florence. Besides the celebrated "Miracle picture of the Virgin" there are here to be seen a number of other fine pictures and statues.

There is much more of great interest to write about in this attractive city, and several days were well-spent there, but we must hurry on. Leaving Florence we next visited Venice, which being built originally on numerous islands just inside the sea, presents a most unusual and interesting appearance. The Italians call it Venezia, its fifteen thousand palaces and houses chiefly built on piles and on stone foundations, stand on 117 small islands, formed by more than 150 canals and connected by 378 bridges built of stone, or iron. While there are many short streets and alleys, practically all means of communication is made through these canals by means of small boats and gondolas operated by gondoliers; only in the grand canal is it permissible to operate motor boats. The Lagoons are connected with the Adriatic Sea by four entrances, only two of which are available for large vessels.

One of the most delightful experiences of the visitor is a ride by moonlight in a gondola through the labyrinth of canals. Concerts are frequently given on the waters of the grand canal, a large boat being used for the musicians, the gondolas, with each separate party, clinging close to the larger boat while the concert is in progress. Each gondola is provided with its own light, the concert boat being decorated with lanterns. The music and singing is very enjoyable. The picturesque arrangement of the houses along the canals, the numerous bridges which connect one portion of the city with another, especially the more pretentious ones like the Bridge of Sighs, the Rialto and the Ponte della Paglia, together with the labyrinth of canals, make Venice a veritable dream-city to the visitor.

There are many places of interest in Venice, principal among which are the Piazza and Church of St. Mark, the Palace of the Doges, the Campanile, the Clock Tower, the Old Library and the Library of St. Mark, the Archaeological Museum and a number of ancient churches like the Santi Giovanni e Paolo and Santa Maria Formosa. As much as the writer would like to go into details in descriptions of all of these, he will content himself with a description of the Church of St. Mark and a brief reference to the Palace of the Doges.

The nucleus of the Church of St. Mark was a brick basilica begun in the year 830. St. Mark is the tutelary saint of Venice, the bones of this distinguished doctor of the early Church having been brought by the Venetians from Alexandria in Egypt in 829. The original church having been destroyed by fire a new church was begun about the middle of the eleventh century in the Byzantine style and decorated with the lavish and oriental magnificence that commands admiration even until this day. The church is 250 feet long and 170 feet wide and is in the form of a Greek cross, covered with Byzantine domes in the centre and at the end of each arm of the cross. The facade is on the west side and above it a gallery runs around the upper part of the church. Both the exterior and the interior of the edifice is adorned with a total of five hundred marble columns with capitals in a variety of styles. The lower parts of the walls are embellished with oriental marble, the upper portions and the vaulting being covered with mosaics on a gold ground, the whole being a magnificent artistic conception. St. Mark's was the state church of the Republic, in which the doges were crowned and in which the public authorities attended on festival days in full state, and since 1807 it has been a Cathedral, a dignity which once belonged to San Pietro di Castello.

Over the principal portal of the church are the Four Horses in gilded bronze, five feet in height. They probably once adorned the triumphal

arch of Nero and afterwards that of Trajan. Constantine sent them to adorn the imperial hippodrome at Constantinople, the Venetians having brought them to their capital as the spoils of war in 1204. In 1797 they were brought by Napoleon to Paris, but were restored to their former position by decree of the Emperor Francis.

The high altar stands beneath a canopy of verde antico, borne by four columns of rare marble with reliefs, some of which were taken from the Church of Saint Sofia at Constantinople. The Pala d'Oro, enamelled work with jewels on plates of gold and silver, forms the altar-piece. It was made at Constantinople in 1105 for the front of an altar. Under the high altar repose the relics of St. Mark, which disappeared after the fire of 976 but were miraculously recovered in 1094. Behind the high altar is a second altar with four spiral columns of alabaster, the two white ones being translucent. The mosaics in the dome represent Christ surrounded by Old Testament saints; those of the apse, Christ enthroned. The bronze doors leading to the sacristy bear magnificent reliefs. There are here many other objects of great historic and religious interest, and a number of other beautiful paintings, sculptures, etc. Magnificent Church furniture, mostly brought as the spoils of war from St. Sophia at Constantinople, Egyptian vessels in rock-crystal, works in agate and turquoise and a wealth of other treasures are here preserved. The general appearance of St. Marks is grand. Fronting the Piazza of St. Mark, it has the most

commanding position of any edifice in Venice.

The Palace of the Doges is near the Church of St. Mark and is said to have been founded by the first Doge of Venice in 814. Fire destroyed it in 976 and again in 1105, being successively rebuilt thereafter, and it was altered and repaired on several other occasions in later years. The Gothic portions of the Palace which were thoroughly restored in 1873, form an arcade in two stories, 36 columns below and 71 above, and is surmounted by a lofty brick upper story terminating in pinnacles. The relief of Venia enthroned, near the right end of the west facade, and the high reliefs over the corner-columns, are remarkable achievements in Lombard sculpture.

The richly ornamental flight of steps leading to the palace, with the colossal statues of Mars and Neptune at the top, are very interesting. On the highest landing of these steps, in the latter period of the Republic, the doges were crowned. In the Court in front of the palace are the beautiful statues of Adam and Eve, and here is also to be seen the tall column surmounted by the Lion of St. Mark, which overlooks the sea.

Much more might be written of the interesting places in Venice, its wonderful history extending over centuries and the achievements of its maritime forces during the successive governments when it was in the period of its glory, but we must desist.

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