**La Serenissima: a visit by the History of Art Group**

Under cover of darkness, we slipped into Venice by water-taxi and moored close to the Canaletto Hotel, once home to the eponymous artist. Someone said it was akin to being in a James Bond movie! On the following morning Federica, our guide, took us on a walking tour of the waterside, where we marvelled at the Rialto Bridge, tourist-thronged St. Mark’s Square with its sumptuously decorated Basilica, and the Doges’ Palace. A short distance away, through narrow calle and across more bridges, we took a welcome coffee stop near the church of Ss. Giovanni e Paolo, with its magnificent paintings by Bellini and Veronese. We spent the afternoon spent at the wonderful Ca’ d’Oro, with its superb mosaics and paintings by Mantegna (St. Sebastian) and Carpaccio (Annunciation).

The next day was blessed by warm autumn sunshine, which was ideal for our private boat tour of the lagoon islands with Viviana, our guide. At Murano, we saw an interesting demonstration of glass-blowing, before looking at the Barbarigo Altarpiece by Bellini in S. Pietro Martire and some 12th century mosaics and “dragon’s bones” in the church of Church of Santa Maria e San Donato. Burano is a chocolate box village, brightly painted and when we visited, almost deserted. (The one- day public transport strike may have been responsible for this!) The island of Torcello was a revelation (to me at least), with its wonderful basilica and 12th century mosaics. After looking at the Last Judgement scenes you could well understand the phrase ‘it put the fear of God into me’! Back in Venice, we finished up with a look inside S. Zaccaria, with its richly-decorated Choir Chapel and flooded crypt.

I have waited a long time to visit Padua, home of the Arena Chapel and its amazing fresco cycle by Giotto, one of the most important works in Western art. We were not disappointed, despite a 15-minute wait in an ‘acclimatisation chamber’ designed to protect the frescoes from tourist damage! Next door, it was said to see the bomb damage in the Eremitani Church which has robbed us of Mantegna’s fresco cycle of The Lives of St. James and St. Sebastian. Vicenza came next, “Palladio’s City”, another World Heritage Site like Venice, with its impressive Palladian villas and palaces. Our tour included the Teatro Olympico, Palladio’s final design and based on the Roman model. The stage setting, with its trompe l’oeil was very impressive. On our return to Venice we were pleased to see the early morning fog which had dogged us earlier had cleared.

Our last full day was divided between visits to the Accademia Gallery and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Venice is a city of contrasts and the day reinforced this. The Gallerie dell’Accademia contains masterpieces of generally Venetian painting up to the 18th century, generally arranged chronologically, as was our tour. Veneziano, Bosch, Bellini, Giorgione, Carpaccio, Tintoretto, Titian and Veronese are among the artists featured in this huge building. A short way along the Grand Canal is the Peggy Guggenheim Museum which is among the most important museums in Italy for European and American art of the first half of the 20th century. It features works by the likes of Max Ernst, Magritte, Kandinsky, Giacometti and Picasso. I’m not yet a convert to Modern Art, but it was fascinating to have cubism, futurism, surrealism and abstract expressionism expertly explained by our guide Carla. As an antidote, a few of us then visited S. Maria Della Salute to admire works by Titian and Veronese in the sacristy.

All too soon, our little Italian jaunt was ending and we only had a very wet morning in Venice to explore on our own. Thankfully we had missed the ‘aqua alta’ (tidal flooding) earlier. Some visited the Doge’s Palace; others went shopping (!) I went with a small group to visit the massive Frari Church which contains, amongst other works, my favourite painting - Titian’s ‘Assumption’. Close by, we visited the Scuola san Rocco, with its richly-decorated halls and magnificent cycle of paintings by Tintoretto. After a leisurely lunch we started our journey back home, enriched by the experience of Venice. Everyone seemed to enjoy the trip and I’ve already been asked ‘where will we be going next year?’ Rather than answering that question I end with a quote by the musician Nile Rodgers.

“If I could live in one city and do every single thing I do there, I would
choose Venice. You can't turn your head without seeing something amazing”

Kelvin Huff