

The Unique Women of the Venetian Republic

Connie Spenuzza

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Diverse women throughout history are celebrated in the intimate profiles collected in The Unique Women of the Venetian Republic.

Connie Spenuzza's *The Unique Women of the Venetian Republic* is a sumptuous historical review that focuses on Venice from the fifteenth century to the 1797 invasion by Napoleon's armies, detailing the lives of women who were scholars, writers, artists, opera singers, philanthropists, and courtesans within the city's complex traditional social structure and culture.

Spenuzza notes her own enduring relationship with Venice: her initial visit was in the early 1970s and she has made subsequent trips back for decades. Her guide to Venice and her inspiration for writing the book was an elderly Italian countess she calls Nonna, or "grandmother." A guest at Nonna's palazzo, Spenuzza was impressed by her hostess's generosity, refinement, and pride in her city. Nonna also expressed discontent, however, at the lack of recognition for the achievements of Venetian women.

The book's diverse profiles are sometimes uplifting; some reveal Venice's dark side. The subjects include the seventeenth-century artist Giovanna Garzoni, whose love of nature inspired exquisite still life paintings and who enjoyed "steady work and constant success" throughout her career. The bold talents of sopranos Anna Renzi and Giulia Masotti captivated Venetian opera lovers and challenged more demure ideals of womanhood. And in 1678, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia became the first woman in the world to earn a doctorate of philosophy.

Also included are women who were thwarted by patriarchal control—like Marietta Robusti, the daughter of the Renaissance artist Tintoretto. Often called "La Tintoretta," her own skills nearly earned her a position as a painter on the Spanish royal court, but her father insisted that she remain with him in Venice. And Arcangela Tarabotti was an "involuntary nun" who wrote scathing treatises that condemned enforced celibacy and paternal domination.

The book is resplendent with lush reproductions of pertinent artwork, from portraits of the featured subjects to depictions of Venice through the centuries. Venice's history as a cosmopolitan center of trade is elaborated upon, along with the women-involved artisan crafts of lacemaking and glassmaking. But beyond the book's scholarly grounding is an undercurrent of personal reflections, with intimate but discursive deviations to cover Spenuzza's time spent in an Ecuadorian convent school, her early experiences in Venice shopping for lace and glass beads, and conversations shared over coffee in Nonna's "chilly salon."

The Unique Women of the Venetian Republic is a captivating compilation of snapshots from Italian women's history.

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