

LA GONDOLA

Now imagine yourself back at water level. You are no longer looking at Venice from the height of the Campanile, but from its most natural point of view: that of a boat gliding slowly through a narrow canal, with the walls of the palazzi so close you could almost touch them with both hands. This boat is the gondola — but do not think of it as a tourist object. Think of it as a thousand-year-old invention, refined like a musical instrument.

The gondola was born in the Middle Ages as an everyday means of transport. Venice has no roads, only canals, and for centuries the gondola was the equivalent of a taxi, a carriage, even an ambulance. Every patrician family owned at least one, often several, and the number of gondolas in circulation was far greater than today. They were not all black: on the contrary, they were decorated, colourful, adorned with fabrics and inlays. Only in the seventeenth century did the Venetian government, weary of excessive display, impose black by law, turning a private vehicle into a collective symbol.

If you look at it carefully, you will notice immediately that it is not symmetrical. The gondola is longer on one side than on the other, by a few centimetres invisible to the untrained eye but fundamental to its movement. Since the gondolier rows from only one side, that asymmetry allows the boat to travel straight. There is no engine, no rudder: only balance, calibrated with the same precision as a violin.

And like a violin, the gondola is born in an artisan's workshop. Not in a factory, but in a *squero*, the traditional Venetian boatyard. Here the gondola is still built today in an almost ritual manner, assembling more than two hundred pieces made from different kinds of wood: oak, larch, cherry, walnut, elm. Each part has its ideal material, chosen for flexibility, strength, and response to humidity. No gondola is ever identical to another, because each is adapted to the weight and style of the gondolier who will row it.

Then there are the symbols, which are anything but decorative. The *ferro* at the bow — that elegant blade that looks like a steel comb — is not there for beauty. Its six forward-facing teeth represent the six *sestieri* of Venice, while the one that curves backward symbolises the Giudecca. The upper curve reproduces the shape of the Doge's hat. Once again, nothing is left to chance.

Even the seat upholstered in velvet, the so-called *felze*, now almost disappeared, once protected passengers from wind and prying eyes. The gondola was a place for discreet meetings, secret diplomacy, clandestine love affairs. Not just a means of transport, but a social space.

And as you glide slowly along a canal, with the water parting silently beneath the prow, you realise that the gondola does not belong to the past. It is an ancient object that has refused to modernise because it is already perfect. It needs no improvement — only to be understood. In a city suspended between water and stone, the gondola is not a symbol: it is necessity turned into poetry.