Chapter 14

FRANCESCO ALGAROTTI

IT has always been acknowledged that among the Venetian art patrons of the eighteenth century Francesco Algarotti holds a leading position: not so much for his own collection of paintings (which was never as striking as that of Consul Smith), or for those he commissioned for the royal gallery at Dresden (which were few in number as far as living artists were concerned); but chiefly for his clearly expressed artistic tastes and for his very close contacts with the leading painters of the day, especially the two greatest—Tiepolo and Canaletto. Moreover, Algarotti conveniently sums up all the confused tendencies in Venetian art patronage that have so far been recorded. He was a bourgeois, but the intimate friend of princes and patricians; he toyed with 'enlightened' theories, but was closely tied to the old order; he was a Venetian patriot of sorts, though rarely in Venice, and he was in touch with all the most advanced European ideas. Above all the very weaknesses of his reasoning power and temperament made him unable to choose between the opposing tensions which he tried so hard to reconcile. His was an exceptionally receptive character, open to all the new experiences that were coming to the fore in Europe, and in evaluating his influence on the painters of the day it is therefore important to investigate what were his artistic ideas at various stages in his life, and also when exactly he came into contact with the painters of Venice.

Francesco Algarotti (Plate 48d) was born in Venice in 1712, the second son of a rich merchant.[1] He was educated for a year in Rome, and in 1726, after the death of his father, in Bologna, where he studied principally the natural sciences and mathematics, in which he was always to be interested. He kept up the contacts he made with the scholarly world of Bologna until the end of his life, and remained in constant correspondence with Eustachio Manfredi, the Zanotti brothers and others whom he met during his student days.[2] His other strong attachment was with his elder brother Bonomo, himself a man of great taste, whose influence on the more mercurial and spectacular Francesco was certainly considerable though difficult to evaluate. It was to Bonomo that Francesco wrote from half the great courts of Europe; it was Bonomo who bought many of the pictures that made up their joint collection; it was Bonomo

[1] The literature on Algarotti is vast. Six years after his death appeared Michelessi's *Memorie* and in 1791 this was included in the first volume of the seventeen-volume edition of Algarotti's works published by Carlo Palese in Venice to which reference is constantly made in this chapter. There is also a short and rare Latin life by T. G. Farsetti dedicated to Francesco's brother Bonomo who died in 1776. The only complete modern life is by Ida Treat. His aesthetics have been examined by Annamaria Gabrielli, 1938, pp. 155-69, and 1939, pp. 24-31, and there is a stimulating article on him by Aurelio Lepre, 1959, pp. 80-99. Other references are noticed as they occur.

[2] For the Bologna of this period and Algarotti's relationships there see Bosdari, 1928, pp. 157-222.

who helped to put into practice most of Francesco's ambitious plans and who in turn kept him regularly informed of the social and artistic gossip of Italy.

After leaving Bologna Algarotti returned to the Veneto for a short time. He travelled between Venice, Padua, Vicenza and Verona, and it is now that we first hear of his interest in the arts. The taste he expresses is conventional enough, and in no way differs from that of the majority of cultivated dilettantes of the day. Admiration for Veronese and Guido Reni—the two painters he specially singles out for praise—was the natural result of his Venetian and Bolognese upbringing; while his passionate enthusiasm for the works of Palladio was characteristic of the early stages of neo-classicism in the Veneto: 'I go again and again to look at the divine works of Palladio without ever growing tired of them', he wrote from Vicenza in August 1732. His later career was to show him paying far more than mere lip service to the divine Palladio, and he helped to spread the cult for the architect to Prussia. Towards the end of 1733 he went to Florence, where he stayed three months. He admired Cellini's *Perseus* and the doors of the Baptistery; found Raphael's *St John the Baptist* disappointing after the *S. Cecilia* in Bologna; talked of the excitement of discovering the Titians in the Grand Ducal collections; and above all he was overwhelmed by the greatness of Fra Bartolommeo, of whom he now heard for the first time.[1]

In February 1734 he moved on to Rome. In letters to his brother and to Francesco Zanotti he describes the impact of the city. 'These magnificent ruins', he writes,[2] 'are more beautiful than any modern building in perfect condition,' and in his dogmatic reverence for antiquity he compares St Peter's unfavourably with the Pantheon. He claims that in taking up this attitude he is running against current taste, but in fact the revolt against the Baroque was already well under way when he arrived in Rome and in any case Algarotti was never to be much of a rebel. More interesting is his judgement on pictures which, he says, has been severely shaken by what he has seen.[3] Carracci, especially in the Galleria Farnese, and Domenichino have totally replaced in his esteem such Bolognese masters of the late Baroque as Monti or Torelli. It is notable too that he equates Baroque art and literature—Bernini and Borromini with Fulvio Testi and Marino—in a way that was later to become a commonplace of criticism. Very soon after his arrival he met Giovanni Bottari, with whom he began a lifelong correspondence. Bottari was one of a group of scholars and antiquarians in Rome who disapproved of contemporary art on theoretical grounds and who, for a full generation before Winckelmann and Mengs, were preparing the way for neo-classicism. This then was Algarotti's first approach to painting. It was made through scholars, often guilty of the greatest pedantry, rather than through artists and collectors, who were later to liberalise his views. On this, his only visit to Rome, made at the age of 22, Algarotti appears in fact to have had little if any contact with living artists. He remained less than

[1] See his letters to F. M. Zanotti between 1732 and 1734 published in *Opere*, XI and XII.

[2] Letter of 22 February 1734 to his brother Bonomo in Treviso, Archivio Comunale, MSS. 1256.

[3] See letters to F. M. and Eustachio Zanotti and Antonio Conti from Rome between February and June 1734 published in *Opere*, X and XII.

a year and in November he left for Paris.[1] There he resided for some time, during which he met Pierre Crozat, Maupertuis and Voltaire, with whom he stayed at Cirey. Both in Paris and in London, where he next went, his good looks and charm dazzled society, and as always he took full advantage of these gifts. With some cynicism he played off the advances of Lord Hervey and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, both of whom were enraptured by him.[2] After another short visit to Voltaire he returned to Italy at the very end of 1736 and stayed for about a year between Venice and Milan, where he published the work that brought him immediate fame, *Newtonianismo per le Dame*. It was the first of a long series of books and articles which were to constitute Algarotti's most important contribution to Italian culture—the translation into easy and attractive forms of some of the more complex and enlightened ideas of European thinkers. It was for this reason that the book proved impossible to publish in Venice and was not altogether well received.[3] Immediately after its appearance in December 1737 Algarotti left Italy, not to return till May 1743 except for a diplomatic mission to Turin early in 1741. During the interval he travelled in France, England and Russia, before settling in the court of one of his most enthusiastic admirers, Frederick the Great, who made him a Count in December 1740. But the two men quarrelled, and in 1742 he was in Dresden, working for Augustus, Elector of Saxony. In May 1743 he payed a visit to Venice to buy pictures for the King, and he remained there until 1745. He then returned to Prussia for eight more years. He was back in Venice from 1753 to 1756, after which (except for a short visit of less than a month in 1760) he lived in Bologna, Florence and Pisa until his death in 1764.

Thus, after leaving Venice at the age of 20, he only returned to his native city for three relatively short visits—most of 1737; 1743-5; 1753-6. Only during these years was he in direct contact with the Venetian artists whose champion, patron and critic he professed himself. Yet on all three occasions Tiepolo and Canaletto were at work in the city, while during his later years of ill-health he bombarded them with letters and wrote theoretical treatises which played a notable part in changing the climate of opinion within which they worked.

We must now look at his views in somewhat greater detail during these three periods of his life. We left him in 1734 converted by the ancient monuments of Rome and the frescoes of the Carracci and Domenichino. Was anything likely to modify this classical taste during the two years he then spent in England and France? Unfortunately he gives us little information on this point, and it is only indirectly that we hear of his meetings with Crozat.[4] But the effect of French rococo painting which he came across in Paris, and still more in Berlin, must have been powerful on a man of his temperament,

[1] Among the large collection of letters from Algarotti to his brother Bonomo in the Archivio Comunale in Treviso are a number from Paris between November 1734 and January 1736.

[2] Halsband.

[3] Albrizzi's *Novelle della Repubblica delle Lettere* said, for instance (12 April 1738): 'avvertiremo, che certe espressioni e sentimenti qui sparsi, deono esser letti con una somma circospezione, principalmente dalla Gioventù Cristiana.'

[4] Through a letter from G. P. Zanotti of 12 February 1735 published in *Opere*, XI, p. 213.

and there are many indications that he turned for inspiration to artists who were appreciated more in the north of Europe than in his native city. Thus in Berlin in 1741 he was to write of a portrait being painted of him that it was 'd'una forza tra il Rembrandt e il Giorgione bello bellissimo'.[1] However, during his visit to Venice in 1737 there is no evidence that he had any particular contact with living artists beyond looking carefully at their works. He was still only a young man of 25; his *Newtonianismo* had not yet been published; and though he had already made friends with Voltaire and been a social success in London and Paris, he was not very rich, he was not well known in Venice and he had not yet formed any of those powerful associations which were later to prove such a feature of his career and to be so very useful to him.

It is in 1742 that he first assumes real importance as a figure in the international art world, and from now on we are well informed about his activities as patron and critic. In that year, in Dresden, he drew up a plan for extending and completing the spectacular art gallery which was being formed by Augustus of Saxony.[2] His proposals are remarkably interesting. In the first place they reveal that scholarly approach to art which was to remain characteristic of him and his century. Until now art galleries had usually been built up according to the collector's personal tastes. Algarotti rejects this conception and substitutes for it the outlook of the historian. He wants the gallery to reflect the whole history of painting and to include the finest representatives of all schools. It is evident that such an approach inevitably led (though not in Algarotti himself) to what we can call 'the first rediscovery of the primitives'—in other words those collections of the works of early-Italian artists which were built up in the eighteenth century not because they corresponded to any real change in taste (as was to be the case with the Romantics somewhat later) but because they were looked upon as valuable evidence and as precursors of the Renaissance. We have seen that Padre Lodoli owned just such a collection.[3] Algarotti was in fact following in the footsteps of historians such as Muratori, but he was among the first to apply their principles to the collecting of art on a large scale.

This approach must be borne in mind when we consider what is to us the most interesting part of his scheme, though this is not how it appeared to his royal master: the commissioning of a number of works by living artists. For here too he was in advance of much critical opinion in his day. Though he still insisted on giving the subjects in great detail to the artists concerned and was always to stress the importance of contacts between the literary man and the painter, he showed far greater awareness than most patrons of their different styles, and these differences determined his approach. Patrons had always recognised that certain artists specialised in particular subjects and had regulated their commissions accordingly: a picture which could include many animals was suitable for Castiglione, while landscape was an essential ingredient of any picture ordered from Claude. But Algarotti's appraisal of the different Venetian artists was far more subtle and sensitive, and went very much deeper. He tried to base his

[1] To his brother Bonomo, 5 September 1741—Treviso, MSS. 1256.
[2] *Opere*, VIII, pp. 351–88.
[3] See Chapter 12.

choice of subjects largely on stylistic considerations. Thus Tiepolo, Pittoni and Piazzetta were all 'history painters': but Algarotti chose very different subjects for them, because Piazzetta was 'a great draughtsman and a good colourist, but has little elegance of form or expression'; while Pittoni was 'distinguished for painting the vestments of priests . . . and gladly decorates his compositions with architecture'; and Tiepolo was 'a spirited *pittore di macchia*'; and so on with all the others. How far the subjects chosen really corresponded to the particular talents of the painters concerned, or how far we today would endorse Algarotti's analysis of those talents, is not really the question: the very fact that he was prepared to go thus far shows us that he looked at paintings with unusual sensitivity and that he had none of the bullying approach with which other patrons of the day were sometimes charged. Indeed, this openness to experience is one of his most attractive characteristics, but it makes it difficult to gauge the strength of his influence on individual painters.

His undogmatic and liberal views can be seen in the choice of artists he proposes for the gallery. It is true that only 'history painters' were included and this led to Zuccarelli being given a subject such as *The Hunt of Meleager and Atalanta* 'or something else, either sad or cheerful, in which the story corresponds to the mood of the landscape where it takes place', and to Pannini being required to paint ancient Romans among his *vedute*, while Canaletto was ignored altogether. Yet within the limits of the 'history picture' Algarotti was wide ranging, and this was no doubt due to the influence exerted by his foreign travels, far out of reach of the scholars and pedants of Italy. For instance, despite rather a scornful aside, he included Boucher among the artists to be given 'soggetti graziosi e leggeri', along with Balestra and Donato Creti—one of the very rare occasions in the eighteenth century when French and Italian artists were required to co-operate in a single venture. He found subjects for Francesco de Mura and Solimena among the Neapolitans; Ercole Lelli and Donato Creti in Bologna; the four Venetians already mentioned and Jacopo Amigoni; and in Rome, only Mancini besides the rather special case of Pannini. Nothing could show more clearly his detachment from Roman values. The other surprising omission is Crespi, whom he was later to single out for special praise.[1]

It is worth emphasising once more that Algarotti drew up this ideal list after he had been away from Venice, Bologna and Rome for nearly five years, and that consequently many of his comments must have been based on what he had heard at second hand from correspondents and travellers or at best on what he had seen in foreign collections. But very soon after making these proposals he came to Venice to try and put them into effect. Despite Augustus's far greater enthusiasm for old masters, Algarotti's plans for promoting modern art were to some extent successful. Amigoni, Piazzetta, Pittoni, Tiepolo and Zuccarelli painted the pictures that he chose for them, but unfortunately all have been lost.[2] We can, however, see the effect of his patronage in a painting

[1] In the *Saggio sopra la Pittura*—see *Opere*, III, p. 125.

[2] See L. Ferrari, 1900, pp. 150-4, and Algarotti's letter to Mariette of 13 February 1751 published in *Opere*, VIII, pp. 15-40; also Posse, 1931.

by Tiepolo which did not form part of the original series, but which was ordered by him for the King on his own initiative. The episode of *The Banquet of Cleopatra* gives us our first indication as to the nature of the relations between Algarotti and Tiepolo,[1] for we have seen that there is no evidence that the two men had been in contact at all during his previous stay in Venice in 1737.[2] When he drew up his projects for the royal gallery he referred to Tiepolo as 'pittore di macchia e spiritoso' but did not suggest that he was in any way remarkable. However, within a few days of his arrival in Venice he was in touch with the artist and asking his advice about the pictures to be bought for the Dresden gallery. Tiepolo was by now unanimously recognised as being the greatest painter in Venice, as he had been to perceptive critics for a number of years. But Algarotti's own position had considerably changed since his last visit. The brilliant young dilettante of 25 now found himself on an official mission to buy pictures for the greatest of European collectors. It was therefore natural enough that he should at once get in touch with Tiepolo even if he had never known him before. The two men took to each other at once, and in October Tiepolo wrote Algarotti an exceedingly friendly letter from the Villa Cordellina, which he was then decorating, saying how much he would enjoy having a discussion with him about painting.[3] It was a few months after this, in January 1744, that Algarotti mentioned for the first time to Count Brühl in Dresden that he was planning to send a large picture by Tiepolo that had already been begun for another patron. The picture was *The Banquet of Cleopatra* and the original patron was almost certainly Consul Smith, who for some reason (probably financial) had agreed to waive his claims.

Two very similar versions of the composition can with some certainty be related to this double commission. The first is the small *modello* (now in the Musée Cognacq-Jay in Paris) which shows what were Tiepolo's original intentions (Plate 61a); the second is the large picture itself which is in Melbourne (Plate 61b). Both are painted with dazzling brilliance in light, rich and subtle colours; yet between them there are a number of highly significant differences. In the sketch we see in the distance a small, but nobly pedimented, entrance into an Italian garden, with cypresses rising high above the walls as Tiepolo so frequently painted them. The banquet, in fact, takes place in the open, and though it is fully as sumptuous as required by the story, there is about it an air almost of informality and eager, delightful casualness. In the second version all this changes. The scene is now powerfully enclosed by a huge loggia from the balcony of which the crowds look down. The garden has disappeared, and so too has most of the blue, cloud-streaked sky. We are definitely in some great capital. Cleopatra's gesture is correspondingly more imperious, more theatrical; her servants more awestruck and

[1] For the complicated history of this picture see especially Levey, 1955, pp. 193-203, and Haskell, 1958, pp. 212-3.

[2] Despite Morassi's claim (1955, p. 21) that by 1743 'the friendship between them was of long standing'. It is in fact just possible that they may have met in Milan in 1737 when Tiepolo was painting in the Palazzo Clerici and Algarotti preparing the publication of his *Newtonianismo*, but there is no real evidence of any contact before 1743.

[3] Letter of 26 October 1743 published by G. Fogolari, 1942, p. 34.

more disciplined. In the completed version everything has been done to emphasise the classical nature of the scene. Recession into the picture is abandoned in favour of clear, parallel planes. Rigid verticals and horizontals divide up the spectacle. The curved arch has gone, and the columns rise to the very top of the canvas and are cut off by the frame. The sleek greyhound, which in the sketch faced into the picture and presented its tail to the spectator, now sits parellel to the horizontal lines of the floor paving, a tame pet rather than a curious interloper. A jug embossed with a mask has been replaced by a simple Greek wine vase, such as the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum will soon introduce into painting and decoration all over Europe. The feathers on Mark Antony's helmet, shimmering in the light breeze, have been discarded to make way for the eagle. In the niches of the colonnade are two antique statues of Isis and Serapis; in the sketch there had only been one, and that half-concealed by a hanging jug.

Small changes, perhaps, but all pointing so decisively in one direction that we can attribute them unhesitatingly to the mind of Algarotti. 'I am bringing with me an engraving of the original *modello* so that His Majesty can see how greatly the imagination of the author has enriched and improved the composition', he wrote to Brühl, and he singled out for special praise some of the features that have been mentioned. The 'reality' of the architecture and its 'historical accuracy' win his particular approval, as do its perspective and grandeur. Above all he admired its 'pictorial scholarship' which was now making its first appearance in Venice after being considered for so long the exclusive prerogative of the Roman school. The idea of Tiepolo as an 'accurate' painter comparable to Poussin (as Algarotti claimed) may well surprise us: and yet this was certainly a more classical picture than any that he had hitherto painted, or, indeed, that had been painted by anyone in Venice since the end of the Renaissance. And we must remember that, quite apart from Algarotti's personal convictions, he had every reason to encourage this aspect of Tiepolo's art and to stress it in his dealings with Augustus. The King had not been very eager about commissioning contemporary artists; he was much more anxious to increase his collection of old masters. In this first and crucial example of a favourite modern painter that Algarotti was sending him on his own initiative it was therefore doubly important to emphasise the link with the great tradition of Italian painting: to show Tiepolo as a latter-day Veronese, if anything rather more concerned with accuracy than the High Renaissance master had been.

Algarotti commissioned two other pictures from Tiepolo at this time, both of which he sent to Augustus's all-powerful minister, Count Brühl.[1] He himself chose the subjects—'les Beaux Arts amenez par Mecène au Trone d'Auguste . . . et l'empire de Flore qui change en endroits delicieux les lieux les plus sauvages'—to flatter the artistic pretensions of the minister, and he emphasised this aim by making Tiepolo insert into the picture two of Brühl's most treasured possessions: the hanging gardens and the Neptune fountain by Lorenzo Mattielli from his town and country houses. As in *The*

[1] For the two pictures ordered by Algarotti for Brühl—the *Maecenas* is in the Hermitage and the *Flora* in the De Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco—see Levey, in *Burlington Magazine*, 1957, pp. 89-91. An engraving by Leonardis of the *Maecenas* is reproduced as Plate 68b.

Banquet of Cleopatra Algarotti laid great stress on the classicism and accuracy of the two scenes, going to particular trouble in his choice of antique sculpture and correct uniforms.[1]

At about the same time as he ordered these pictures for his important patrons in Saxony, Algarotti commissioned a picture by Tiepolo for himself—the *Bath of Diana*.[2] In this painting the artist shows altogether different preoccupations: it is a relaxed, sensual scene of naked nymphs in the style which Boucher had made fashionable in Paris, and it is quite exceptional among his works, clearly reflecting Algarotti's eclectic, cosmopolitan tastes, which like those of so many people at the time veered widely between the 'public' and the 'private'. In general, however, his classical bias is clear: it is more difficult to assess the influence of his views on colour. He was particularly keen that Newton's discoveries in optics, which he had propagated some years earlier, should be studied by artists, and there can be little doubt that he must have discussed them with Tiepolo and that he must certainly have encouraged the artist to lighten his palette.[3] But after some theoretical discussion of the problems involved Algarotti himself admits that the real answers are to be found in the works of the great colourists such as Giorgione and Titian; the new scientific knowledge is valuable more because it provides a theoretical justification for existing practice than because it makes for new departures.

Algarotti's influence on Tiepolo at this stage was thus considerable, and it has always been agreed by art historians that the early 'forties marked the peak of the artist's classical phase. But just as great was Tiepolo's influence on Algarotti: an influence observable both in the drawings and etchings of oriental heads that he produced for his amusement during these years,[4] and—much more importantly—in the development of his critical ideas. For this was Algarotti's first real contact with a practising artist of genius, and it inevitably modified some of his more theoretical and preconceived notions. In fact, we find in his comments on Tiepolo a first indication of that dilemma that was more and more going to perplex admirers of Venetian painting as the century advanced. For despite Algarotti's attempts to praise the artist as 'learned' in the spirit of Raphael or Poussin, he was at least as much attracted by another aspect of Tiepolo's art: his brio and his fantasy. Later he was to sum up Tiepolo as 'a painter of the most fertile imagination, who has managed to combine the manner of Paolo with that of Castiglione, Salvator Rosa and the most fanciful (*bizzari*) painters, the whole treated with delightful colours and an incredible freedom of brushstrokes'.[5] Algarotti was constantly trying to reconcile this vision of Tiepolo with the demands of neo-classical

[1] Knox, p. 16.

[2] For this picture, and the relations between the two men generally, see the important article by Levey in *Burlington Magazine*, 1960, pp. 250–7.

[3] Algarotti's ideas on the subject are discussed in his *Saggio sopra la Pittura* (*Opere*, III, pp. 111–21) and in a letter to Eustachio Zanotti of 13 May 1756 (*Opere*, VIII, pp. 48–52) in which he implies that the 'fantasia' that artists should paint on white grounds rather than on the more usual reddish brown has only just occurred to him. The suggestion that these ideas were especially important for Tiepolo has been made by Watson, 1955, p. 214.

[4] Rava, 1913, pp. 58–61.

[5] In the *Saggio sopra l'Accademia di Francia che è in Roma* (*Opere*, III, p. 296).

'correctness', though both writer and artist died before a really critical stage in the controversy had been reached. This clash between two sets of values crystallised Algarotti's own personal dilemma as well as that of his century. As a Venetian who never renounced his Venetian heritage and who understood and loved what had made Venetian painting great, he was able to recognise these characteristic qualities in the most gifted of his contemporaries. Yet as an internationalist, in touch with scholars and princes, he must have realised equally clearly the way the wind was blowing and the shortcomings of Tiepolo measured by the new standards that were everywhere being talked about. It was this conflicting attitude that led him always to admire Tiepolo as the greatest artist of the day and yet to try and induce him to 'moderate somewhat his blazing poetic fantasy'.[1]

Although the pictures that Algarotti commissioned for the King have been lost, the impact that he made on this visit to Venice can be noted in other works painted during or soon after his stay in the city. For Piazzetta, as for Tiepolo, the period marked an important (though, in his case, isolated) phase in his career. The commission from Algarotti to paint *Caesar and the Corsairs of Cilicia* for Augustus came after his most successful ventures into genre and pastoral painting. Large-scale 'historical' pictures of classical themes were completely foreign to his genius, but Algarotti's commission was followed by two further paintings of the same kind; and these (together with the lost picture) make up the only such classical works in Piazzetta's *œuvre*.[2] In fact, Algarotti seems to have had no special admiration for Piazzetta: he only owned one small painting by him, though the first edition of the *Newtonianismo* had one of his most sophisticated Parisian-style illustrations as frontispiece.

During this stay in Venice Algarotti was adding to the family collection of pictures which had been formed by his father and greatly increased by his brother.[3] He kept preliminary sketches or replicas of many of the canvases, new and old, that he sent to Dresden; and often when he acquired some work which was not suitable for the royal collection he kept it for himself. His pictures were thus obtained in a somewhat casual way, and as often as not they were given away or sold when a suitable client became available. And so, although he eventually built up the collection to nearly 200 paintings and a large number of drawings, it is impossible to gauge anything very precise about his tastes or the extent of his commissions from the inventory as we have it. Certainly Tiepolo stands out among all his contemporaries with some 13 paintings and 116 drawings. This is as we would expect; on the other hand there is no evidence that Algarotti made contact with Canaletto during this visit to Venice. None of the Canalettos in Dresden seems to have reached the gallery through his agency, nor did Algarotti write that he had any intention of sending any. Canaletto at this stage was still intensively

[1] According to Michelessi (see *Opere*, I, p. lxii).

[2] *Mucius Scaevola at the Altar* and *The Death of Darius*—in the Palazzo Barbaro Curtis and Cà Rezzonico in Venice. According to Pallucchini (1956, p. 41) both were painted just after the Algarotti commission.

[3] For Algarotti's collection see [G. A. Selva] and for the Tiepolos in it Levey, in *Burlington Magazine*, 1960, pp. 250–7.

employed by Consul Smith, and a year or two earlier Bonomo had written that he took several years to finish paintings, so pressed was he by commissions.[1]

In 1746, after about two and a half years in Venice, except for one short break, Algarotti left Italy and did not return there until 1753. He went at first to Dresden, but very soon afterwards left for Berlin and spent most of the next seven years between there and Potsdam. During this time, however, he kept in touch with artistic affairs in Italy, for more than ever he was acting as adviser to Frederick the Great and his courtiers who had ambitious plans for turning Berlin into a great centre of the arts. Algarotti's attempts to promote Italian (and especially Venetian) art abroad were prompted by a number of motives. Patriotism certainly played its part and when he obtained a commision for the sculptor Giovanni Marchiori to produce some figures for a church in Berlin, he wrote to Bonomo to urge him on 'for the honour of Italy: for here the general opinion is—hors de Paris point de salut'.[2] He also did everything possible to encourage foreign artists to study in Italy, providing letters of introduction, for instance, for the French sculptor Bouchardon and the German painter Rode who was to be much influenced by Tiepolo.[3] But he was also very well aware of the fact that his own prestige gained with every successful coup. All his life he was somewhat excessively anxious to give expensive presents to the right people: as early as 1738 he was planning to get hold of a Veronese for Walpole[4] and in his will, drawn up in 1764, he left two pictures to the elder Pitt—a gesture that aroused sarcastic comments from Diderot.[5] And undoubtedly he saw opportunities for financial gain.[6] He was always writing to Bonomo asking him to look through their collection and send suitable examples to be disposed of abroad; and he kept fully in touch with the Venetian art market and looked out for pictures that he thought might appeal to his new patrons. All these mixed motives can be traced in his purchases for Dresden and in his various proposals to Frederick the Great.

He had been struck by the neo-Palladianism that he had seen in England some years earlier and he set about trying to obtain illustrations to convince Frederick of its merits. He wrote for the plans of Lord Burlington's house at Chiswick as well as for original drawings of Palladio.[7] He also wrote to acquaintances in Italy asking them to supply

[1] Letter from Bonomo dated 28 January 1740/1 in Treviso, MSS. 1256: 'Il Canaletto poi oltre che pretenderebbe un assai considerabil Prezzo per farli, pressato da più Commissioni dimanderebbe qualche anno di tempo per compirli.'

[2] *ibid.*, letters of 11 April, 20 May, 7 June, 5 November 1749.

[3] *ibid.*, letters of 25 October 1750 and 23 April 1752.

[4] *ibid.*, letter to Bonomo from Carcassonne of 2 July 1738: 'Se il prezzo [of the Veronese] non fosse che mediocre, io sarei d'opinione di comperarlo per farne un regalo al Cavalier Walpole in Inghilterra, che potrebbe facilitare l'esecuzione di qualche idea.'

[5] Quoted by Treat, p. 209: 'Ce que je trouve de plus beau et de plus glorieux c'est qu'il a pu laisser par son testament une marque de souvenir au roi de Prusse et une autre à M. Guillaume Pitt. C'est annoncer au public qu'il a été honoré de l'amitié de deux grands hommes, et je trouve plus de vanité à cela qu'à son épitaphe, quoi qu'en disent les pédants.'

[6] Letters of December 1742 in Treviso, MSS. 1256.

[7] See letters to Frederick the Great of 4 August and 13 December 1751 in *Opere*, XV, pp. 153-5.

him with prints of the palaces, churches and country houses of Genoa.[1] Nor did he stop commissioning pictures, though he now turned more and more to Rome which he evidently thought was more suitable than Venice as an exemplar for his royal friend and master[2]—despite the fact that he had never returned since his short visit in 1734. He suggested that Batoni (whose *Triumph of Venice* he had seen in Marco Foscarini's palace) should paint a *Cleopatra* which could be transferred to mosaic and would be just right for the King.[3] For himself he commissioned Pannini to paint an *Interior of the Pantheon* which he asked Bonomo to keep for him in his rooms and possibly to exhibit.[4] He had much admired Pannini when he had seen paintings by him in Dr Mead's collection in London, but by now he found his colour 'languid compared to that of our Canaletto', and thought that the artist was only at his best as a painter of interiors.[5]

At the end of 1753 Algarotti left Germany and arrived in Venice at the beginning of the next year. He was now no longer in an official position as he had been ten years earlier but he obviously remained in close touch with painters, and he probably continued collecting on a fairly extensive scale for himself. He saw for the first time and deeply admired Tiepolo's fresco of *The Reception of Henri III of France* for the villa of the Contarini at Mira, and he obtained the *modello* of it.[6] In general, however, he turned more and more to architectural painting and views during this last decade of his life. It was now that he got in touch with Canaletto from whom he commissioned a view of a section of the Grand Canal as Palladio might have designed it.[7] In particular, the Rialto was to be shown according to Palladio's scheme and adjoining it was to be the same architect's Palazzo Chiericati in Vicenza. On the other side of the Canal he wanted the Palazzo della Ragione also in Vicenza. Like most of Algarotti's ideas this was not a new one. Architectural *capricci* of the kind had long been familiar in Rome where Pannini had made a speciality of them; moreover Canaletto himself had often indulged in the same sort of fancy. Nor was the tribute to Palladio an innovation, for Consul Smith had already launched his Palladian programme some years earlier and this had included Palladio's plans for the Rialto.[8] Nevertheless Algarotti was the first to draw up a theoretical scheme for such a commission, and as his letters, with their description of

[1] See letter to Girolamo Curli of 20 November 1751 published by A. Neri, 1885.

[2] In 1748 he wrote from Potsdam to the Abate Scarselli asking for details about all the leading Italian painters, sculptors and architects in Rome—*Opere*, XIII, p. 207.

[3] Letter from Potsdam of 13 March 1751 in *Opere*, XIII, p. 217.

[4] Letter to Bonomo from Berlin of 13 August 1750 published by Campori, 1866, p. 201.

[5] Letter from Berlin dated 21 November 1750 in Treviso, MSS. 1256. Fantuzzi (I, p. xxxiii) says that the painter Andrea Lazzarini painted a *Cincinnatus summoned from the Plough* and *The Capture of Syracuse with the Death of Archimedes* for Frederick the Great and that Algarotti read some unpublished observations on painting by this Marchigian artist and used them in his own work. However, a later reference in letters from Lazzarini (II, pp. 174-81) and the contents of Algarotti's inventory suggest that the pictures were painted for him and not the King.

[6] For the dating before 1750 of these frescoes see Levey, in *Burlington Magazine*, 1960, p. 257, and Byam Shaw, *ibid.*, 1960, pp. 529-30.

[7] Letter to Prospero Pesci of 28 September 1759 in *Opere*, VIII, pp. 89-100. A version of Canaletto's picture—if not the original itself—is in the Parma gallery.

[8] See Chapter 11.

the work were soon published, the idea gained ground that he was responsible for this type of painting. The explanation of the picture given by Algarotti is of great interest in showing his attitude to Palladian architecture and is highly characteristic of his whole outlook. It is an essentially 'frivolous' attitude with none of the reforming passion that inspired Winckelmann and the neo-classical theorists. Indeed Algarotti went out of his way to point out that too much regularity was undesirable and that the Strada Balbi and the Strada Nuova of Genoa were not as 'picturesque' as the Corso in Rome or the Grand Canal in Venice.[1] He had always judged landscape and architectural paintings from this picturesque point of view. In Berlin, in 1741, he had already employed a Flemish artist 'who does not have the dry finish characteristic of the Flemish, but rather the dash and brio of the Italians' to paint subjects chosen by himself—'fine ruins of ancient cities, aqueducts, bridges and other buildings, with figures and soldiers dressed in the Roman manner'.[2] Now, back in Italy, he devoted the last years of his life more and more to similar fantasies, though he also paid considerable attention to the structure of the classical buildings which he required to be inserted in his pictures. In Bologna, to which he moved in 1756, he came across two artists, Prospero Pesci and Mauro Tesi, whom he employed to give expression to his ideas, often directing them to paint pictures from his own rough sketches.[3] The principle behind these is nearly always the same. The main element was to be some 'classical' building, either real or reconstructed, and, by drawing on his fine library of archaeological books, Algarotti was often able to give instructions as to its appearance down to the most minute details. This was then to be set off by a fanciful background which would act as a deliberate foil to the pedantic accuracy of the building. Again and again Algarotti insists on the 'picturesque' element. 'This sketch', he writes to Pesci,[4] 'is an attempt to give you the same sort of help that a composer does when he provides Caffariello with the bare elements of an aria. You yourself will know how to vary and break up the tones, passing from one to another, now smoothly and now abruptly; and you will introduce all the charms and attractions' of art.' For these reasons he recommends studying Flemish painters such as Teniers and Wouwermans, as well as Vernet and Pannini. Thus 'we will have combined the nobility of Italian draughtsmanship with the taste and flavour of the Flemish.'[5] This combination between didacticism and the picturesque is very similar in conception to the parallel creations of Piranesi in Rome which Algarotti greatly admired.[6]

But Algarotti fully realised that there were limits to the picturesque invention which he could expect from essentially architectural painters such as Tesi and Pesci,

[1] Blainville, I, p. 492, disliked this mixture but admitted that 'some people' found it attractive.

[2] Letter from Berlin dated 5 September 1741 in Treviso, MSS. 1256: 'Faccio lavorare ora ad un Fiammingo che è stabilito qui da moltissimi anni alcuni paesi, che riescono maravigliosi. La esecuzione è sua, e non à quella secca finitezza degli Fiamminghi, ma più tosto l'estro e il brio italiano. [I pens]ieri son miei ricchi di belle rovine di Città antiche di [ac]quedotti ponti e d'altri con figure e soldati alla Romana.'

[3] Apart from the many letters published in the *Opere* see MSS. at Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale, MSS. Hercolani 207, and above all the introduction to the *Raccolta di disegni originali di Mauro Tesi.*

[4] *Opere*, VIII, p. 95.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 100.

[6] *ibid.*, pp. 104, 109, 111.

and to supplement their efforts he asked his favourite Tiepolo to insert figures into their backgrounds.[1] Working within a classical framework devised by Algarotti himself and his executants, the great Venetian artist's fantasy would thus be limited and yet would add that very life and variety which Algarotti craved for. He writes enthusiastically of a landscape 'derived from Titian' and a boat and white horse 'worthy of Wouwermans' which Tiepolo had added to Pesci's dry architectural setting.[2]

Algarotti's commissions to Tiepolo were now mainly confined to small-scale works of this kind—figures to be added in architectural paintings by others and copies after Veronese. He was in no position to order the great pictures that he had delighted to commission when he himself had been in the service of ambitious patrons. Nor was Tiepolo able to fulfil even these modest requirements. Overwhelmingly in demand and compelled to go to Spain, he was fighting against time, and Algarotti's requests had to be sacrificed. Meanwhile Algarotti himself, increasingly stricken with ill-health, had to rely almost exclusively on Mauro Tesi.

Indeed, with Tesi and his wife he established extremely intimate relations. He became godfather to their daughter and took the artist with him throughout central Italy to make copies of the works he especially admired. He employed him also to copy landscapes by Dietrich and to engrave vignettes for the edition which he was preparing of his collected works. In 1764 it was Tesi whom he summoned to decorate the very room in Pisa where he lay dying.

During these final years Algarotti produced a number of theoretical works in which he tried to formulate his views on the arts.[3] They add little to the more casual expressions to be found in his letters, commissions and projects. There are the same confusions and contradictions which weaken his position as a theorist but which must have made him an enormously more sympathetic and helpful critic to artists than most men who have written about painting. By now, it is true, he had moved somewhat further in the direction of neo-classicism with his categorical statement that drawing is of greater importance than colour, his insistence on the necessity of Greek sculpture for study, his idealistic theory of art, his rigid hierarchy of values. But even when Algarotti was not in direct touch with painters and was adopting a purely theoretical approach, he was careful not to commit himself too far. Every point he makes is at once qualified: too much study of sculpture may lead to dryness, too much severity is harmful.

In every work he commissioned Algarotti demanded from the artist a reconciliation between two contrasting styles of painting—the Roman and the Venetian, the learned and the fantastic, the classical and the picturesque. He was, in fact, always trying to effect a synthesis between the two styles that were just beginning to clash in a

[1] Baudi di Vesme, 1912, pp. 309-29.
[2] *Opere*, VIII, p. 101.
[3] For a general discussion of these see Annamaria Gabbrielli, 1938 and 1939.
[4] For a general discussion of these see Annamaria Gabbrielli, 1938 and 1939.

battle only to be resolved after his death. Algarotti played with all the stage props of early neo-classicism, but his heart remained with an older, less austere tradition. That is why he found in Tiepolo the ideal painter and why he reported the Venetian artist's admiration of antiquity with such satisfaction, while conversely he was so keen to encourage the painterly qualities of such an essentially architectural artist as Mauro Tesi.

Such an undecided attitude makes him a fairly representative figure of this early stage of neo-classicism. But there is no doubt that his personal temperament also was at least partly responsible for the vacillating nature of many of his views. All his contemporaries agreed that his most pronounced characteristic was the desire to please—at the cost, if need be, of being 'all things to all men'.[1] His uncertainties found expression in many fields, and his sexual tastes seem to have been as unstable as his artistic views.[2] Like many people in this psychological condition he found it impossibly difficult to commit himself. This undoubtedly accounts for that element of flabbiness which has so often been criticised in his writings. 'Algarotti', wrote the dogmatic Comte de Caylus,[3] 'sont [*sic*] de ces gens qui ont vécu et qui ne laissent rien après eux.' But he found more responsive readers in a world more sympathetic to him—that of the artist—and he would have been delighted to know that more than thirty years after his death John Constable whiled away the long winter evenings by studying his works.[4] Thus *Algarottus non omnis*—the proud adaptation of Horace's *Non omnis moriar* which was inscribed on the monument erected to his memory by Frederick the Great—proved truer than might have been anticipated (Plate 60).

[1] For the contempt with which many people treated Algarotti see the comments of Girolamo Zanetti in 1743 (published 1885) and the words of Gaspare Patriarchi in 1758 (published by L. Melchiori, p. 22): 'Veramente sa egli le arti tutte delle corti; e loda indistintamente ogni cosa e ogni persona, per essere lodato egli per cortesia.'

[2] Algarotti's homosexual tendencies have been discussed by Halsband. On the other hand when Giambattista Biffi came to Venice in 1773 nine years after Algarotti's death he wrote (see p. 328, note 5): 'Povero Algarotti amava con ardore una donna, che tuttora vive quì abbenchè inferma. Cecilia Emo vedova Morosini allora, adesso Contessa Zenobio è il nome suo.'

[3] In a letter to Paciaudi, edited by Charles Nisard, II, p. 27.

[4] C. R. Leslie: *Memoirs of the Life of John Constable*, London 1951, p. 7.

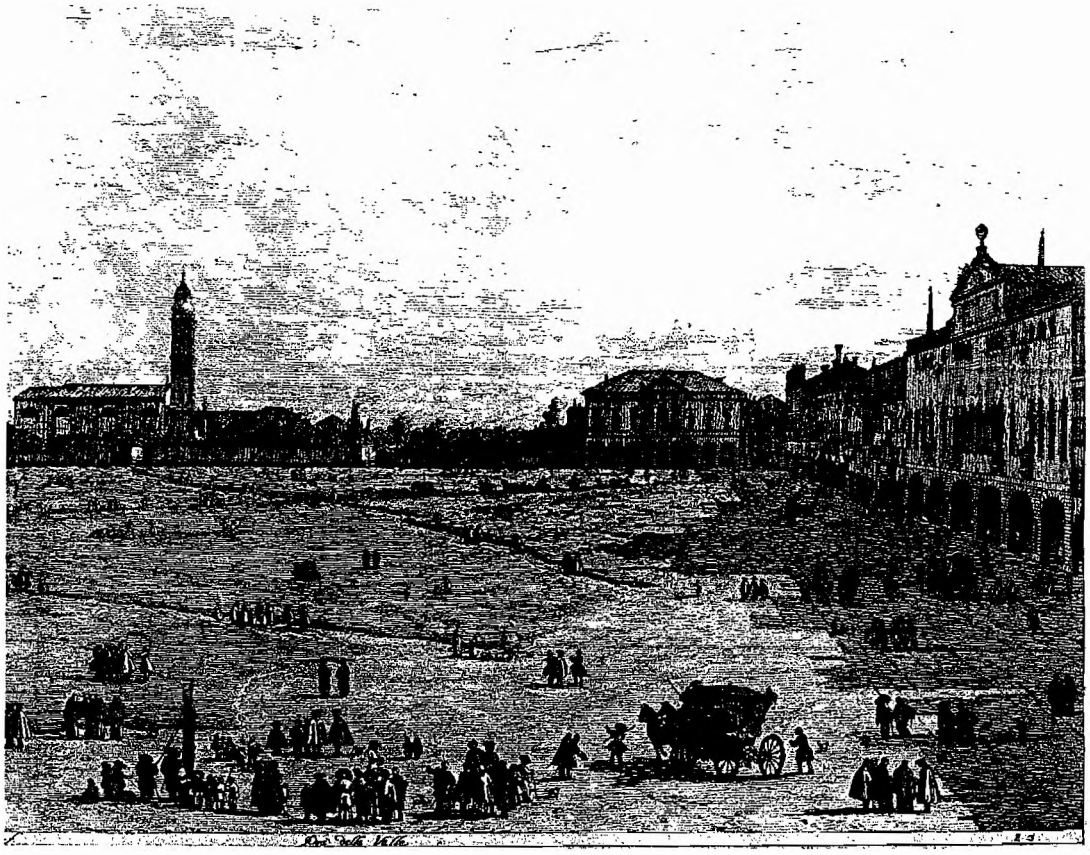
TIEPOLO'S CHANGES TO THE BANQUET OF ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA UNDER THE IMPACT OF ALGAROTTI Plate 61

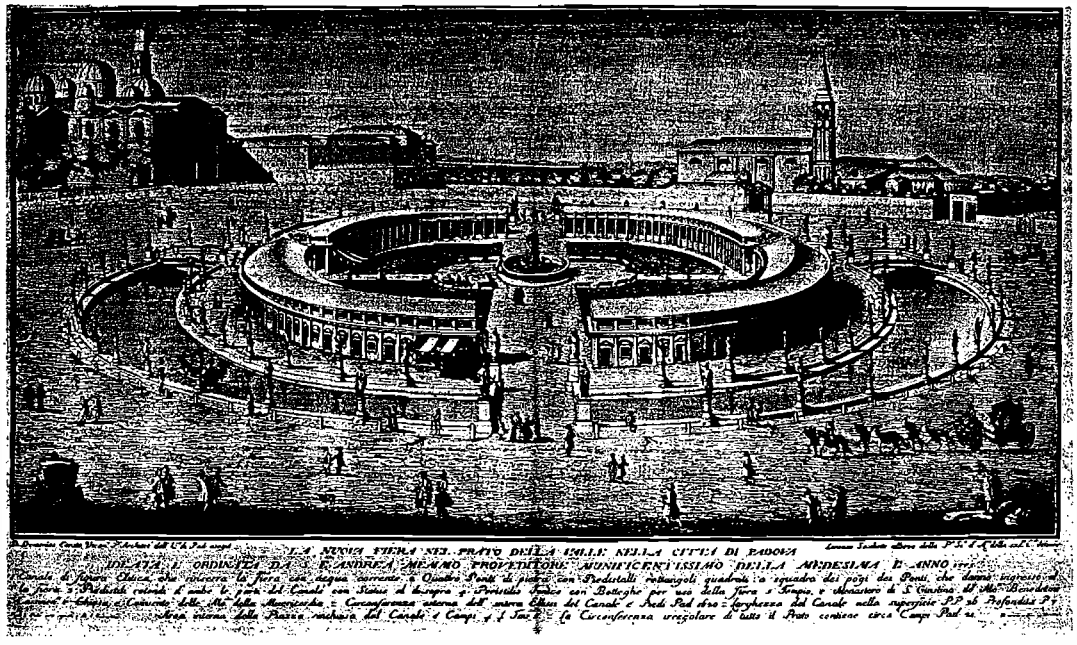
a. Early version

b. Final version

CANALETTO: The Prà della Valle in Padua

DOMENICO CERATO: Project for the r





FRANCESCO GUARDI: View of John Strange's villa at Paese near Treviso