CONCLUSION

BETWEEN 1623 and 1797 the political decline of Rome and Venice, the two most vital centres of Italian Baroque art, was almost continuous. In both cities, architects, sculptors and painters of the first rank were employed by those in authority—in Rome the constantly changing upholders of a theocratic absolutism, in Venice the old and new families that composed a rigid oligarchic aristocracy—to impress themselves and foreigners alike with illusions of power which had little basis in reality. The achievements of Bernini, Pietro da Cortona and Tiepolo are there to prove with what conviction and genius great artists can serve great patrons however unpromising the cause. Nor can it be denied (though many have tried to do so) that these achievements, and others of a similar nature, represent the finest Italian contribution to the art of the period; and the significance of this is brought to light if we compare the situation with that of foreign artists. There are no Italian equivalents to Velasquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer, Louis Le Nain, Georges de la Tour, Poussin, Watteau or Chardin—all painters who expressed a private and individual outlook that is far removed from the 'public' masterpieces of the greatest Italians.

This may be due only to the fortuitous distribution of talent, but there are so many cases in Italian art during these two centuries where a fresh and original approach to life becomes buried under the pressing claims of society that the temptation to seek an answer other than the last resort of 'national character' becomes irresistible: one thinks of the *bamboccianti* who hover for a few years on the brink of a new, dignified 'realism', only to fall into picturesque sentimentality; of Salvator Rosa, so bold to exploit his gifted temperament in the cause of artistic conformity; of Crespi, just able to carry along with him an eccentric Medici prince, but never quite prepared to throw over his 'humour' and raise genre painting to a more noble status; of Canaletto, who turned so soon from gazing with steady penetration at the backwaters of his native city to stereotyping shorthand versions of the familiar views to tourists; of Padre Lodoli, the 'scourge of society', who was yet honoured with an official government post and whose explosive writings were never even published.

Modern Italian historians have noted, and bitterly resented, the same kind of conformity in the writers of the time. Until detailed investigation has been made of the contrasting conditions elsewhere it will be difficult to account for it, but such an investigation is not likely to reflect harshly on the Italian patrons. Where else in Europe can we find men more cultivated and more liberal? Was Philip IV more tolerant or better educated than Urban VIII and his nephews? Richelieu than Cassiano dal Pozzo? the Régent, Crozat or Mme Geoffrin than Grand Prince Ferdinand or Francesco Algarotti?

It is perhaps precisely in the broad culture and tolerance of Italian patrons that the

answer should be sought. Like 'advanced' parents of the most humane opinions, who apply no direct pressure to their children, yet whose views are all too paralysingly communicated to them, the aristocracy, traditional and upstart, of Baroque Italy, may have stifled revolt through the very self-assurance of their inherited values. None of the artists mentioned above was deflected from his path by specific pressures; at no period in Italy did an orthodox Academy or a dominating religious organisation impose its artistic doctrines. Unorthodoxy was killed with kindness.

Such an attitude had its advantages as well as its drawbacks. If it is true that we miss a certain type of individual and withdrawn artist in Italy (Domenico Fetti is surely the most beautiful exception), it is also true that the general level of painting in Rome, Bologna, Naples and Venice—to name only a few of the most important centres—was certainly higher than in almost any other town in Europe. The opportunities and encouragement given to architects, painters and sculptors have rarely, if ever, been equalled, and the debt of gratitude we owe to the liberal patrons of the time can be seen not only in Italy but in every art gallery of the world.

Yet the price to be paid was a high one. Artists so closely tied to the patronage of a particular society could not adapt themselves to new conditions when the foundations of that society collapsed. The 'bourgeois' painting of England and France had no real roots in Italy, and the attempts made by bodies such as the Academy at Parma to promote a more modern and 'enlightened' type of art met with little success. Whereas in France and England painting took on a new and more glorious lease of life with the decline of the Church and the feudal aristocracy, the fall of Venice signified no less than the humiliating expiry of Italian art.