Chapter 17

THE LAST PATRONS

– i –

FOR a full generation before the Republic finally collapsed there was a general feeling that an epoch was drawing to a close. There are countless references to this in the political speeches and literature of the time, and eventually it began to affect the patrons and picture collectors. The feeling is embodied in the activities of a number of men who turned to the past rather than the present or the future—as if anxious to give subsequent generations some impression of what Venice had been like in the great days of her independence.

Girolamo Manfrin was almost the caricature of a type of figure that has at all times depressed the conservative supporters of an old order.[1] He was a nouveau-riche business man, who through sheer unscrupulous Balzacian energy and talent achieved a high position in a society where such achievements were despised in favour of the more gracious attributes of life. Such men have always made their mark, but there are periods in history when their success appears symbolic of a whole trend. This was to be the case with Manfrin. He was born in Zara of a humble family—*in mezzo al fango, e dalla Merda nato* in the words of one of his aristocratic denigrators[2]—and he was accused of all the characteristic evils of the successful businessman—'iracondo' incivil, avaro, ingrato, /Sospettoso, infedel'. In 1769 he was granted a monopoly of the tobacco plantations in Dalmatia, where he made himself hated and soon acquired an enormous fortune, much of it through somewhat discreditable means.[3] At one stage his willingness to take bribes and his general financial trickery led to his being banished for life from Venice[4]; but this was revoked, and in 1786 we find him back again with a special permit to carry arms so as to discourage possible attempts on his life.[5] In 1787 he was in a position to buy the palace of the ancient family of Venier on the Cannaregio, as well as their country house near Treviso,[6] and by then he had already established himself as one of the most important patrons and collectors in Venice. Indeed, within five years,

[1] Most of the available material about Manfrin is still unpublished and will be referred to as occasion arises. The only general account of him and his gallery is given by G. A. Moschini, 1806, II, p. 107.

[2] Biblioteca Correr, Venice—Cod. Cicogna 2947/18: *Sonetti XVI_ossiano Satire contro il Manfrin, Impressario di Tabacchi.*

[3] See, for instance, the pamphlet *Risposta alla lettera apologettica imparciale per il Cittadino Gerolamo Manfrin*, In Venezia 1797, Anno I della Libertà Italiana (Biblioteca Marciana: 183.C.89, p. 321). From this and a mass of similar controversial material it is obvious that Manfrin made himself highly unpopular, though it is not quite clear to what extent he was actually dishonest.

[4] Archivio di Stato, Venice—*Inquisitori*, 538, p. 43—29 Genaro 1770.

[5] *ibid.*, 540, p. 6—12 Giugno 1786.

[6] Tassini: *Curiosità Veneziane*, 4th edition 1887.

when a false rumour of his death reached Bologna, the painter and dealer G. A. Armanni at once wrote to Giuseppe Maria Sasso in alarm 'because he is almost the only man in Venice who spends anything on the fine arts'.[1]

We first come across Manfrin in this connection in 1785 when the posthumous edition of Tiepolo's etchings *Varj Capriccj* was dedicated to him.[2] Two years later there followed a volume of painters' portraits[3] and thereafter he remained in the forefront of the Venetian art world until his death in 1802. The vast gallery that he built up was apparently designed to give a general view of the history of Italian (and, to some extent, Flemish) painting[4]—but it is notable that Manfrin took no account of the opinion that had long been current among scholars that art had something to offer before the sixteenth century. The Venetian pictures began with Mantegna and Bellini, and thereafter most of the great and lesser painters were included up to his own contemporaries, Francesco Guardi and Gian Domenico Tiepolo.[5]

In private, at least, Manfrin made few pretensions to connoisseurship. In a letter to Pietro Edwards, who acted as his adviser, he wrote in a strain that has become familiar through the activities of more recent collectors[6]: 'As I wish that everything should proceed as satisfactorily as possible in the choice of pictures to be included in my gallery, I naturally wanted real experts in painting, such as yourself and Sig. Gio. Battista Mingardi, to take over the responsibility of choosing, identifying and excluding pictures as they think fit, without paying any attention to the expense involved; for I only wanted pictures of the highest quality in my gallery. . . . You must have no hesitation in being ruthlessly selective—and you need have no fear that your rejection of any picture will cause you difficulties or hostility; for I entirely accept your terms never to reveal your objections to a picture, and to keep them entirely private for my own guidance.' In Manfrin's words we see all the snobbishness of the self-made millionaire; but in his insistence on a historical choice of pictures we also recognise that the gallery was to have some of the definitive status of a national institution. It was to be a tribute to the achievement of Venetian painting—at a time when it was felt that Venetian painting was virtually at an end.

[1] Seminario Patriarcale, Venice—MSS. 566—Letter of 20 July 1790.

[2] *Varj capriccj inventati, ed incisi dal celebre Gio. Battista Tiepolo, dedicati all'Ill.mo S. Girolamo Manfrin,* MDCCLXXXV.

[3] Biblioteca Correr, Venice—Stampe D.30.

[4] Moschini, 1806, II, p. 107: '. . . egli una Galleria di più camere di Quadri aperse de'più sperti pennelli, incominciando da'pittori primi ed a'giorni nostri discendendo; ed era di lui pensiero, se la morte non lo avesse troppo presto mietuto, di offerire di mano in mano tele de'diversi tempi e delle diverse scuole, perchè vi si potessero a un colpo di occhio riconoscere gli scapiti ed i vantaggi, che nelle varie età ebbe quest'arte.'

[5] The first record of Manfrin's gallery was made by Pietro Edwards, his adviser, just before the end of the eighteenth century. It exists in manuscript in the Seminario Patriarcale, Venice—MSS. 788.13. A printed catalogue, made for the sale, was published in 1856—a photographic copy of this exists in the Biblioteca Correr. A further catalogue of the pictures still remaining in the collection was published by Ab. G. Nicoletti in 1872 (Biblioteca Marciana: Misc. C. 11231). There is also a manuscript *Catalogo delle Stampe della Collezione annessa alla Galleria Manfrin,* Venezia (n.d.), in the Biblioteca Correr: Cod. Cicogna 3007/XIII.

[6] Biblioteca Correr—Epistolario Moschini—published in full in Appendix 7.

The expertise of his advisers combined with Manfrin's own wealth assembled a huge collection of over 400 pictures. Many had once been commissioned by important patrons—there was Batoni's *Triumph of Venice* painted for Marco Foscarini—and the gallery gradually came to be among the finest in Venice. It long remained one of the chief tourist attractions in the city, and among its treasures was Giorgione's *Tempesta*. Manfrin's ventures into patronage were less satisfactory. Although this was hardly his fault, in view of the lack of talented painters available, his activities in this field certainly seem characteristic of the vulgarian his enemies laughed at. He would organise competitions among the painters to produce pictures on erotic themes which he himself devised—*Joseph and Potiphar's Wife, Bathsheba bathing, Lot and his Daughters, Susanna and the Elders.*[1] But despite the enthusiasm aroused among history painters starved of commissions it is hardly this that has entitled him to the gratitude of posterity.

– ii –

The other great collector who survived the downfall of the Republic but whose name will always be linked to its history was Teodoro Correr.[2] He was born in 1750 and except for their common love of art his life and character were different in every way from those of Manfrin. His portrait, painted in early middle age (Plate 59b), shows him to have been elegant and rather withdrawn[3] and he was descended from one of the oldest of the Venetian aristocratic families. As a young man he began to show the love of learning that was to characterise his life. In 1768 he read an elaborate and rather strained paper on 'The Sacrifices of the Ancients' to a club to which he belonged: the evening ended on a more congenial note with fencing matches, and odes and sonnets by his friends on the sacrifices of Juno, Ceres and Minerva.[4] In 1776 he embarked on the traditional political career that was expected of one born in his position and within three years he was a member of the Council of Ten. But soon after this he tired of politics and to avoid further responsibilities he became an *abate*. In 1787 we find him writing to the Doge to explain that his lack of means made it impossible for him to take up his post as governor of Treviso: 'There is certainly nothing more mortifying for a citizen, Most Serene Prince, than to find himself in such circumstances that he is unable to place himself at the disposal of his fatherland. . . .'[5] He was to grow accustomed to the situation, for this was only his first of many applications, renewed with every subsequent change of régime, to escape from the duties of official life. However, there

[1] Moschini, 1806, II, p. 107 and the same author, 1810.

[2] For Correr and his collections see V. Lazari and the catalogues of the museum by G. Mariacher, 1957 (until the Renaissance), and T. Pignatti, 1960 (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

[3] By Bernardo Castelli—painted before 1795, in which year it was engraved—see Pignatti, 1960, p. 62.

[4] Biblioteca Correr—Archivio Correr $\frac{1468}{10}$ (6 a-d).

[5] *ibid.*, $\frac{1468}{10}$ (5).

is no doubt that the services which he rendered Venice in other ways were far greater than anything he could have achieved by politics at this stage in the city's history.

It is impossible to be certain when Correr began to assemble the vast collections which he later left to Venice, but it is probable that he did so when still very young.[1] Already he was looking entirely to the past and it seems unlikely that at any stage in his life he commissioned work from living artists.[2] We know that he obtained many of his pictures from the great patrician and trading families—especially the Molin, the Orsetti and the Pellegrini—and in his obsessive accumulation of objects he took ruthless advantage of the financial weaknesses of his contemporaries.[3] We also find him attending sales and public auctions.[4] His aim was to amass everything he could—books, manuscripts, prints, coins, medals and bronzes as well as pictures—which threw light on the history and cultural achievements of his city, and his palace near S. Giovanni Decollato was already a museum long before his death. Correr's contemporaries had some doubts about the sureness of his taste, and these aspersions were repeated by nineteenth-century writers.[5] But this criticism was partly due to the indifference he showed to the more orthodox views of his age. He collected works of the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries alike when neither was fashionable—and in the process he sometimes acquired masterpieces of the very highest quality, such as Antonello da Messina's *Deposition* and Cosimo Tura's *Pietà*. But it is true that he also owned a good deal of very inferior painting and it is possible to be as struck by how few in number were the great early Renaissance pictures that he picked up as by his adventurousness in buying any at all. In fact, it is almost certain that Correr was more inspired by historical curiosity than by scholarship or aesthetic appreciation.

Of eighteenth-century artists one painter completely dominates the collection—Pietro Longhi. In view of his passion for Longhi's 'documentary' scenes, it is strange that Correr should have paid no attention whatsoever to the view-painters.[6] It almost seems as if he were aware that the physical aspect of the city would remain unaltered but that the 'douceur de vivre' had gone for ever. And so he collected his twenty-odd Longhis to record the family life of the nobles and the street scenes, the stiff little ceremonies of morning chocolate and the portraits of the clergy. He was so pleased with these pictures that he obtained from the artist's son Alessandro (one of whose portraits he owned) as many drawings by Pietro Longhi as he could lay his hands on. It was no doubt this love of recording the varied aspects of Venetian life that led him

[1] Dandolo, p. 97.

[2] It is just possible, though it is unlikely, that he obtained the occasional painting direct from Pietro Longhi who died in 1782.

[3] See the hints in [Urbani de Ghelthof]: *Teodoro Correr e il suo museo*, n.d. (Biblioteca Correr: Op. P.D.18796), confirmed by papers in his archives.

[4] For instance, he almost certainly bought Zocchi's double portrait of A. M. Zanetti and the Marchese Gerini at the Sasso sale in 1803—see Haskell, *Bollettino dei Musei Civici Veneziani*, 1960, 3/4, pp. 32-7.

[5] Dandolo, p. 97.

[6] For the sake of accuracy it should be mentioned that he owned one view of Venice attributed to Canaletto, now thought to come from his studio, and one damaged view of Castel Cogolo probably by Francesco Guardi.

to buy Gian Antonio Guardi's excursions into Longhi's manner—the *Parlatorio* and the *Ridotto*, the gambling room which was closed by the government just as he was beginning his political career.[1]

The break-up of aristocratic life and collections brought about by the revolution of 1797, followed so soon by foreign occupation, was responsible for many pictures coming on to the market, and Correr obtained a great deal when the Republic had already collapsed. Once again he was careful to avoid committing himself. Under the headings of *Libertà* and *Eguaglianza* he wrote to his new democratic rulers that he was unfortunately compelled 'to resist the violent stimulus of patriotism' and seek exemption from the Civic Guard owing to general ill-health—and he enclosed certificates from his doctors and dentist to strengthen his case.[2] Safely in the background, a crotchety old bachelor, he went on buying well into the nineteenth century, unnoticed in the Venice of Byron and Bonington, and an easy prey to the more unscrupulous second-hand dealers.[3] He died at last in 1830 and left the fruits of more than half a century's avid collecting to his native city—thus worthily ending a tradition of aristocratic interest in the arts that had begun many centuries earlier.

[1] In view of all the controversy that has surrounded these pictures it is of interest that, although they were catalogued as Longhis by Lazari in 1859, in Correr's own day they were known to be by 'Guardi'—Pignatti, 1960, p. 96.

[2] Biblioteca Correr—Archivio Correr $\frac{1468}{10}$ (9a).

[3] Levi, I, p. cxix.