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*Basilica di San Marco*

An important setting in Dan Brown’s *Inferno* is the city of Venice, known for its rich displays of art and architecture. Langdon and Sienna encounter the *Ponte di Rialto* and the Doge’s Palace, two staples of Venetian architecture, but it is St. Mark’s Basilica, or the *Basilica di San Marco,* that is the most central Venetian location in Brown’s *Inferno.*

Brown chose to use the *Basilica di San Marco*, the symbolic center of Venice, as a major component of his novel. *Inferno* readers encounter important works of art that pertain to the *Basilica di San Marco* such as the *Quadriga, Pala d’Oro,* and the *Tetrarchs.* While Brown mentions these major works of art, he does not inform his readers of the true significance of the *Basilica di San Marco.*

The art and history of the *Basilica di San Marco* are key to the city of Venice. The art in *Basilica di San Marco* offers rich insights into Venetian culture and history. The basilica contains numerous works of art, including frescoes, sculptures, and mosaics that are incredibly crucial to Venice and not only symbolize the city but also document its fictitious history. The art and history of the *Basilica di San Marco* truly are the reason that it is the symbolic center of the city and could potentially explain why Brown chose to use it as such a key setting in his novel.

To fully grasp an understanding of the significance of the *Basilica di San Marco*, it is important to analyze its relationship with the history of Venice. The city of Venice was founded between the fifth century and the eighth century after the Huns and other barbaric tribes pushed many Roman people into hiding along the Adriatic Sea (*Venice,* Lonely Planet). The land that these Romans inhabited was a swampy marshland with numerous islands and was later named Venice (*Venice,* Lonely Planet). Forced into this foreign land, settlers constructed an elaborately designed city that lies on the Adriatic Sea. The surrounding geographical features of the land around Venice allowed the city to develop peacefully and without very much outside influence.

Contrary to actual historical documentation, Venetians trace the founding of the city to the precise date of March 25, 421 (*History of Venice,* Venezia). March 25, 421 is the date of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel brought the news to the Virgin Mary that she would bear a child, Jesus (*History of Venice,* Venezia). Essentially, Venetians used this fabricated history to assert themselves as superior to other cities (Abbott).

Originally, Venice accepted St. Theodore as its patron saint. However, Venetians believed that St. Theodore was not a significant enough figure to represent their great city, so Venice changed its patron saint to St. Mark (Abbott). Furthermore, Venetians “documented” the relationship between St. Mark and the city of Venice in numerous pieces of artwork (Abbott). In 1172, a column topped with a statue of the *Lion of St. Mark* was even erected to stand at the entrance to the city along the Adriatic Sea and between the Doge’s Palace and the *Basilica di San Marco* (Abbott). Venice’s attachment to St. Mark grew strong after a group of Venetian merchants removed the deceased body of St. Mark from Alexandria in 828 (Abbott).

In 829, shortly after the Venetian merchants acquired the relics of St. Mark from Alexandria and brought them to Venice, architects built the *Basilica di San Marco* (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica). The *Basilica di San Marco* was built on the Adriatic Sea and adjacent to the Doge’s Palace to honor and protect the sacred relics of St. Mark (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica). The *Basilica di San Marco* is placed at the symbolic center of the city, which highlights the extremely powerful relationship between St. Mark and the city of Venice.

The *Basilica di San Marco,* as well as serving as protection for the relics of St. Mark, served as the Doge’s personal chapel. Unfortunately, in 976, it was burned down as part of a revolt against Doge Pietro Candiano IV (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica). Much to the dismay of the Venetian people, the relics of St. Mark were lost in the fire until the relics were mysteriously discovered in 1071 (Abbott). It was in 1071 that Doge Domenico Contarini, the successor of Pietro Candiano IV, commissioned the reconstruction and redecoration of the *Basilica di San Marco* that still stands in Venice today (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica).

The current *Basilica di San Marco* was constructed by Byzantine and Italian architects and artists (*St. Mark’s Basilca,* Sacred Destinations). The construction by Byzantine architects in the late 11th century time period account for the heavy Byzantine influence on the art and architecture of the *Basilica di San Marco* (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica). The design of the building is a Greek cross plan, which is a cross with all extensions being of equal length (Abbott). In accordance with common Byzantine design, five domes sit atop the building at the intersection of the cross and on each of the four ends (*San Marco Basilica,* Encyclopedia Britannica).

While the architecture that makes up the *Basilica di San Marco* is very eye appealing, it is the art that makes the *Basilica di San Marco* so important to Venice. Throughout its existence, the *Basilica di San Marco* has gained numerous works of art. Some of the most significant works are the numerous mosaics accumulated over time. The mosaics are constructed with small, individual pieces of glass called *tesserae* (Abbott). These *tesserae* are placed at slightly different angles and depths, which causes light to reflect off each individual *tessera* differently (Abbott). Because many of the mosaics of the *Basilica di San Marco* are crafted using gold *tesserae,* the interior of the *Basilica di San Marco* has a shimmering gold appeal (Abbott).

More important than the style of the art and architecture of the *Basilica di San Marco* is its symbolic importance to the city of Venice. It was a setting for numerous ceremonies such as the Feast of the Annunciation, on which the doge would throw a gold ring into the Adriatic Sea (just outside of the *Basilica di San Marco*) to symbolize Venice’s “marriage” to the sea (Rosand, *Myths of Venice* 1, 37). Another important symbol that the art reveals is the concept of Venetian idealism represented by the art’s documentation of fictitious events (Abbott).

Along with ceremonial and historical importance, the documentation of the fabricated history of Venice is also an extremely essential part of the *Basilica di San Marco.* The *Basilica di San Marco* stands in the center of the Venice as symbol of St. Mark. The building itself symbolizes Venice’s ties to St. Mark. However, aside from the removal of the relics of St. Mark, there is actually no historical evidence that supports St. Mark connection to Venice. Thus, the building itself and the art within the *Basilica di San Marco* simply preserve the notion of the Venetian republic that St. Mark belongs to Venice.

The artwork within the *Basilica di San Marco* also preserves the Venetian notion that the city is actively connected to the Virgin Mary (Abbott). Numerous works of art inside the *Basilica di San Marco* symbolize the conjured history of Venice and its ties to the Annunciation and the Virgin Mary. Through the various pieces of art within the *Basilica di San Marco,* namely sculptures and mosaics, the basilicaacts as a museum for the Venetian people and represents Venetian superiority over other European cities.

The sculptures and mosaics that make up the *Basilica di San Marco* fall into three general categories: depictions of religious icons, accounts of actual historical events, and promotion of the superiority of the city of Venice. Therefore, the artwork not only serves as historical documentation to the Venetian people but also as a center of Venetian idealism. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Important religious icons surround the façade of the *Basilica di San Marco.* Because of Venice’s strong ties to the Annunciation, Venetian sculptors appropriately chose images of the Annunciation to decorate the outside of the structure. In the thirteenth century, sculptors created two important images, the *Virgin Orans* and the *Archangel Gabriel.* The *Virgin Orans* is a sculpture that shows the Virgin Mary with her arms raised in prayer. Close to this sculpture is the peaceful image of the *Archangel Gabriel*, who, according to the Bible, brought the news to the Virgin Mary that she would bear the son of God. Although these two sculptures were originally built as separate figures to sit upon the façade of the *Basilica di San Marco*, the juxtaposition of the two sculptures symbolizes the Annunciation (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 1, 16). It wasn’t until the 15th century that an artist made the intentional effort to symbolize the Annunciation using the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. Facing each other and both sitting under large bells outside the *Basilica di San Marco*, sculptures of the *Archangel Gabriel* and the *Virgin Annunciate* sit in unison to specifically represent the Annunciation (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 1, 16). The repetitive image of the Annunciation outside the *Basilica di San Marco* is a testament to the true value of the Virgin Mary to the city of Venice.

Another major artistic theme of the *Basilica di San Marco* is art that represents or documents actual historical events. Two very famous examples of this are the *Quadriga* and the *Tetrachs*. Both of these sculptures are essentially a piece of Venetian history. Both sculptures, which sit outside the *Basilica di San Marco*, were taken from Constantinople in 1204. The *Quadriga* is a sculpture of four bronze horses originally located at the very front of the *Basilica di San Marco*. Today, a replica of the *Quadriga* sits outside the *Basilica di San Marco* and the original is held inside for preservation. The *Tetrachs* is a sculpture or four tetrachs, or a group of rulers from the late third century. Located just outside the *Basilica di San Marco,* the image of the *Tetrachs* is used to represent unity and stability (Abbott). Not far from these two sculptures are two columns in the *Piazzeta San Marco*, which is just outside of the *Basilica di San Marco.* Constructed in 1172, both columns feature a prominent image associated with Venetian history. Atop one column sits the image of *The Lion of St. Mark*, the patron saint of Venice. St. Theodore, the original patron saint of Venice is atop the second column (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 55). This inclusion of St. Theodore demonstrates the desire of Venetians to acknowledge their past and exemplifies the unity between the past and the present.

Within the *Basilica di San Marco* is a large collection of mosaics that document historical accounts. *The Abduction of the Body of St. Mark* serves as a historical account of the removal St. Mark’s relics from Alexandria by two Venetian merchants, Buono da Malamocco and Rustica da Torcello, in 829. The mosaic, *The Reception of the Relics of St. Mark,* is located behind the altar, a place of great visual attention. This mosaic depicts the Venetian people receiving St. Mark’s relics after the relics were taken from Alexandria. Images regarding the relics of St. Mark appear in numerous other mosaics in the *Basilica di San Marco*. Two notable mosaics are *The Prayer for the Recovery of the Relics* and *The Miraculous Apparition of the Relics.* After the *Basilica di San Marco* had been rebuilt in 1071 following its destruction in 976, the Venetian people were distraught to find that the relics of St. Mark had disappeared. The *Prayer for the Recovery of the Relics* depicts a large group of Venetians praying to find the relics of St. Mark. Three days after the prayer gathering, to the joy of the Venetian people, a large stone mysteriously fell to reveal St. Mark’s relics, depicted in the mosaic of *The Miraculous Apparition of the Relics* (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 58)*.*

Perhaps the most unique artistic theme of the *Basilica di San Marco* is the artwork that promotes the city of Venice. Much of this artwork “documents” history using religious events and fictional occurrences. For centuries, these depictions of fictitious events served as documentation that allowed Venetians to advance the notion that Venice was the ultimate republic.

Numerous mosaics of the *Basilica di San Marco* were used as propaganda for Venice. The mosaic of *The Lion of St. Mark*, a winged-lion above a river, symbolizes the Venice’s dominance over the land and sea (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 50). Another important motif advances the idea that St. Mark belonged to Venice. *The Dream of St. Mark* shows St. Mark sleeping on a boat during a return trip from Aquileia. In his dream, Christ appears to St. Mark and says “*Pax tibi Marce Evangelista Meus,”* meaning “Peace be with you, Mark my Evangelist” (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 53). A similar image appears on a small portion of the *Pala d’Oro* called *The Apparition of Christ to St. Mark.* Venetians extended Christ’s message to legitimize the final resting place of the relics of St. Mark in Venice. These mosaics created the idea of *praedestinatio*, the concept that Venice was predestined to hold the relics of St. Mark and sanctioned the removal of the relics of St. Mark from Alexandria. *Praedestinatio* provided further reason to believe that Venice was a truly supreme Christian Republic (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 51).

Other images in the *Basilica di San Marco* advance Venice by promoting St. Mark himself. Jacopo Sansovino’s images of *The Baptism of Anianus*, *The Miraculous Healings of St. Mark,* and *The Martyrdom of St. Mark,* reveal St. Mark’s divinity (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 58-59).Sansovino’s *The Miracle of Rain in Apulia* depicts the fictional account of the city of Apulia being struck with drought after refusing to celebrate St. Mark. In response to the drought, “the people invoked the saint and promised that they would celebrate his feast, so Mark banished the sterility and, by sending salubrious air and need rain, provided the people with plenty” (Rosand, *The Myth of Venice,* 2, 61). *The Miracle of the Knight’s Hand* is the account of a knight who suffered a nearly severed hand during battle. Instead of listening to the advice of friends, family, and doctors, the knight simply prayed to St. Mark, who miraculously healed the knight’s hand, leaving only a small scar (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 61-64). *The Miracle of the Slave of Province* is the story of a slave who vowed to make a pilgrimage to the *Basilica di San Marco* even though his master forbade it. His master gruesomely tortured him to prevent the slave from making the pilgrimage. The slave prayed to St. Mark, who destroyed all of the instruments of torture, allowing the slave to complete his pilgrimage (Rosand, *Myths of Venice,* 2, 64). While these myths have little factual evidence to support them, many Venetians viewed the artwork as historical evidence of their occurrence. Because of the interconnection of St. Mark and Venice, the artwork further advanced the notion of Venetian superiority by reinforcing the significance of both St. Mark and Venice.

The *Basilica di San Marco*, a key setting in Brown’s *Inferno,* is key to the city of Venice. The artwork essentially serves as a museum of Venetian history and reveals much about Venice’s culture. It documents both historical events and fictional events that promote the city of Venice as the ultimate Christian Republic. The *Basilica di San Marco* functions as such a powerful preserver of Venetian ideals and history that it still remains the intellectual and cultural center of Venice today.

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1. The majority of the following information is based on David Rosand’s book, *Myths of Venice*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)