

# Women Artists and Artisans in Venice and the Veneto, 1400–1750

*Uncovering the Female Presence*

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## 5. Artists and Artisans in the Account Books of Marino Grimani, Patrician and Doge of Venice (Late Sixteenth–Early Seventeenth Centuries)

*Maria Adank*

### Abstract

The detailed account books of Doge Marino Grimani (1595–1605) reveal a wide network of contacts with artists and craftsmen, both men and women. The analysis of two of the volumes indicates continuous relationships based on mutual trust and on the doge's refined material expertise. This essay will focus on the purchases of this wealthy Venetian patrician, before and after his dogeship (1589–1605), highlighting his prominent position as a client of the city's most renowned artists and artisans. A significant difference in the numbers between male and female professionals is indicated, as well as gender placement by professional category. Marino Grimani demonstrated particular preferences for the work of certain female artisans and luxury crafts, including needlework.

**Keywords:** Venetian patrons, women's history, account books, material culture, embroidery

In an attempt to highlight the role and presence of women artists and artisans in the republic of Venice, my focus will be on a client rather than an artist: the Grimani of San Luca—a leading family of the Venetian patrician elite in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—their choices, purchases and expenditures, and the artists, artisans, and workers who revolved around them and their palazzo. The point of view of the client will help place the female presence within the broader Venetian working context, especially in the fields of crafts and the arts.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This contribution arises from my previous research, focused on the Grimani family of San Luca in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A broader perspective can be found in Adank, forthcoming.

## The Grimani of San Luca: Expenses, Ambitions, and Artistic Patronage

The Grimani family of San Luca offers a privileged setting for several reasons. Firstly because of documentation that has been preserved. Indeed, over the period from 1589 to 1604 Marino Grimani and his *quadernieri* (bookkeepers) recorded income and expenditures. These entries average about ten per day, sometimes many more. Entries range from the collection of rents for houses in the city, tithes and pecuniary penalties collected from the Istrian fief, the purchase of agricultural products for the estates on the mainland, to textiles, carpets, paintings, and furniture for the new palazzo, from transportation to the sale of a used gondola to a servant. This practice of noting down all financial dealings allows us to follow Marino day-to-day, through the phases of his family life and throughout his political career. A second book of expenses starting from the 1570s, albeit less detailed, allows a longer view.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the choices and purchases made by the Grimani of San Luca are significant because they shed light on a crucial moment in the family life. Girolamo Grimani, the father of Marino and Almorò, had in fact commissioned the palazzo to be built on the Grand Canal with the intention that it would be the tallest private building in the city, with the precise aim of consolidating the prestigious status of the new line of the Grimani family that he himself had established.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, with astonishing determination, he attempted to take his political career to the highest level. In fact, Girolamo tried to become Doge two times but failed.

Sansovino himself, when mentioning the Palazzo Grimani, dwells on the “extremely rich workmanship, carvings, foliage and other decorations almost as far down as the foundations,” also pointing out the “excessive expenditure” incurred by the Grimani.<sup>4</sup> Expenditure on furnishings for the palazzo, documented from the 1580s, confirms a marked propensity for luxury and magnificence. From the inside to the outside of the prestigious family palazzo, textiles, tapestries, chairs, tables, beds, tableware, as well as clothes and accessories for adults and children, confirm an attention to quality and considerable material expertise. Looking at the long-term expenditure, a demonstration of luxury and pomp is evident. Girolamo’s sons, in

2 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 20, “Notatorio di Marino Grimani (1589–1604),” b. 33, “Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado (1575–1605).” I will refer in particular to these two account books: the first is more detailed and contains the daily entries; the second is more concise and presents expenses over a longer term.

3 On Palazzo Grimani of San Luca, see Boschieri, 1931; Gallo, 1960; Puppi, 1971, 136–142; Davies and Hemsoll, 2004, 210–218, 275–344.

4 “Il [palazzo] Grimano, che l’eccede [palazzo Loredan] di gran lunga di stanze reali et d’ogni altra cosa, è ricchissimo di fatture, perciò che gli intagli, i fogliami et l’altre dilicature quasi fatte per fino alle fondamenta, sono con spesa eccessiva.” Sansovino, 1581, 148v–149r.

the second half of the century, could boast of a considerable and well-diversified patrimony, further confirmed due to the rich dowry that the two Morosini sisters, the only heiresses of their father's property, had brought to the Grimani brothers in 1560. During the following years, the two families, both residing in the family palazzo, were strongly united, sharing and pursuing a well-contemplated family strategy. To the eldest son, Marino, the task of investing in a political career, and to the second, Almorò, the task of ensuring male descendants to the Grimani of San Luca. Marino's accounts confirm the strategy: the affirmation of family prestige being translated into a refined material culture, a constant desire for luxury objects, displayed on the *piano nobile* of the palazzo, with the purchase of silks and valuable draperies, furnishings of excellent workmanship, expensive clothes for the sons, without neglect of the rich dowries for the young brides of the house and the lavish wedding banquets organized for the occasion in the family palazzo.<sup>5</sup>

The artistic patronage of the Grimani of San Luca fits this wider ambition, as Michel Hochmann has reconstructed in an essay in 1992. In the Palazzo Grimani di San Luca, as in the Chiesa di San Giuseppe di Castello, and in the family villas in Padua and Oriago, can be found the names of Paolo Veronese, Alessandro Vittoria, Sante Peranda, Jacopo Palma il Giovane, Jacopo Bassano, Jacopo and Domenico Tintoretto, to name only the most well-known.<sup>6</sup> While the artistic patronage demonstrates the preferences of the two generations of the Grimani of San Luca, various unpublished inventories indicate the subjects of the many paintings that enrich the spaces, bearing witness to individual tastes but also to the desire to perpetuate the memory of a highly successful political career, one that brought Doge Marino Grimani and Dogressa Morosina Morosini to the forefront of the Venetian and international scene at the end of the century.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to state from the outset that, although most of the Grimani's accounts for the period between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been preserved, no names of female artists appear in the *libri* (account books). This is not an insignificant detail: precisely because we have this vast documentation at our disposal, the absence of women's names in the conspicuous list of artists revolving around the Grimani family confirms their rarity. As Babette Bohn has shown, "the Bolognese phenomenon" in fact reminds us that the norm in the historical period under consideration was a context in which artistic work and expression was primarily a male prerogative. Venice was no exception. For Venice, when

5 On domestic furnishings in Venetian palazzi see Ajmar-Wollheim and Dennis, 2006; Brown, 2004, 53–90.

6 Hochmann, 1992.

7 An interesting inventory with item estimations dated 1619 is in ASVe, Notarile, Atti, b. 605, notaio Fabricio Beacian, cc. 401r–426v.

compared to other cities investigated by Bohn, the number of female artists per 1,000 inhabitants was decidedly low.<sup>8</sup>

Among the names of artisans found in the Grimani accounts, however, interesting elements emerge with respect to gender. In the second half of this essay, I will focus on some female names found in the libri, but first two clarifications are required.

## Revealing Female Identities: The Issue with the Sources

The first issue is the particular attention to female protagonists that characterized the couple, Marino Grimani and Morosina Morosini, at the turn of the century. The documents under investigation confirm what other studies have hypothesized: his wife's considerable wealth contributed significantly to his political advancement. As evidence, Morosina experienced rare visibility as dogaressa of Venice once Marino reached the pinnacle of his career. During the years in which the doge and dogaressa lived in the Palazzo Ducale, accounts confirm that special attention was paid to artistic talent, notably including female talent. Doge Marino Grimani individually paid for singing lessons for his wife's maids and, for one of them, Zannetta, even instrument lessons. During his dogeship, the doge bought the girl a lute, harp, and theorbo and continued to pay for private lessons.<sup>9</sup> From other sources we know that the writer Lucrezia Marinelli also had a privileged relationship with the doge and dogaressa, particularly with the latter.<sup>10</sup> In the early seventeenth century, Marinelli had already published several successful works, including her most famous, *Le nobilità, et eccellenze delle donne: et i diffetti, e mancamenti de gli huomini*. This was a strong and original position within the *querelle des femmes*, a response to the publication of a series of clearly misogynist works since the 1580s. Not only did Marinelli highlight the nobility and excellence of women, but also discussed the faults of men in contrast to Giuseppe Passi's idea of women's limitations.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite such liberality by the doge and dogaressa and their marked attention to the arts, accounts confirm that during the *dogato*, the artists that the doge turned to for paintings, portraits, and sculptures were all men.<sup>12</sup>

8 Bohn, 2021, 3–8 and table 1.

9 AVSe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 20, "Notatorio 1589–1604," to the dates 7 May, 19 November, 26 December 1598; 24 February 1603 *more veneto*; 29 April 1604. Zannetta probably inherited her musical talent from her father, as the Doge once sent him some strings for a lute.

10 Lalli, 2018, 411–412.

11 For a biographical profile of Lucrezia Marinelli see Zaja, 2008. On women's writing in Counter-Reformation Italy, see Cox, 2011. For a European perspective, Plebani, 2019.

12 Morosina kept her own account books and, starting in 1597, she collected an income of ninety ducati every six months, which Marino gave her in payment of half of the dowry of her mother Chiara. Therefore,

A second clarification concerns the nature of the source. If account books can be extraordinary tools for investigating quantitative history, for collecting prices, wages, and rents, and to reconstruct the standard of living, they can also be useful to study specific professions and better understand gender inequality and the agency of women.<sup>13</sup> When kept by women, as recent studies have shown, these writings, in the form of memoirs or record-keeping, constitute a valuable testimony to reconstruct agency.<sup>14</sup> Thanks to a small account book, we discover details about the mother of the future dogaressa, the widow Chiara Morosini. The accounts and receipts show her resourcefulness, her preoccupation with managing the family fortune before her two daughters' marriages, and also say something about her artistic patronage, for example about the connections the widow had with the Venetian painter Paolo Pino.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, however, if these sources shed valuable light on women as clients, they are less helpful in shining a light on women artisans and artists who often worked in the shadows in the workshops of their fathers, brothers, or husbands.<sup>16</sup> In the attempt to highlight women's work and give them visibility, we encounter limits typical of women's history in general, in addition to those arising from the scarcity of existing sources for the lower class, to which any female worker belonged. A class that rarely expressed itself by leaving direct evidence.<sup>17</sup>

Let us take the year 1578 as an example. When Jacopo Tintoretto went to Palazzo Grimani on the Grand Canal in the summer to deliver a large painting of a Magdalene and the two portraits of Marino Grimani and his wife Morosina for their *portego*, everyone involved was at a particularly important moment in their lives and careers. Marino was not yet *procuratore di San Marco* but was investing substantial sums to launch his political career, now that his father Girolamo had died. In that year, he had also spent many ducats on the purchase of paintings and

Morosina had considerable freedom to manage sums of money autonomously: those books, however, have been lost.

13 On account books as a source for quantitative history see Palma, 2020.

14 Casella, 2013, 2021; Galasso, 2019. For an updated focus on the category of female agency, see Howell, 2019.

15 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 3. The handwritten note is found in the Grimani archive among some loose papers and receipts, most dating from the early seventeenth century. Two other notes by the painter are in Chiara's account book, b. 29. On the painter Paolo Pin (or Pino), information is scarce: best known as an art theorist for his *Dialogo*, he also distinguished himself for several portraits and altarpieces. Biffis, 2015.

16 On the role of the family in the management of Venetian workshops, see Erbosio, 2017. Beatrice Zucca Micheletto's studies have shown for Turin how women were able to organize their own sums of money to create individual or couple economic strategies, in support of or as an alternative to their husband's business. Similar examples of entrepreneurship have been found for early modern England. Zucca Micheletto, 2011; Whittle, 2014.

17 Martelli, 2011, 350–351.



furniture to embellish the main floor of the family palazzo. It was also a special time for his wife Morosina: the portrait shows her at thirty-two years of age, at which time she already had three daughters and a single son, Andrea, who would not survive. The following year, in that *portego* where Tintoretto's three works were exhibited, a wedding banquet was held for their daughter Donata. Morosina, at the time of her portrait, was pregnant and would give birth to her last daughter within the year.

As for Tintoretto, in those years his fame was well established. These were lively years, which saw the artist engaged in religious and state commissions but also in the production of works for the Italian and European courts. A considerable amount of work increasingly led him to delegate the material execution of works to collaborators and family members. Indeed, unlike Marino's portrait, Morosina's portrait is usually attributed to Tintoretto's workshop (figs. 5.1 and 5.2). The year 1578 also saw the artist give his beloved daughter Marietta in marriage to the jeweler Marco Augusta, one of the few certain facts in her biography.<sup>18</sup> However, when Marino Grimani settled the painter's account at the end of July, it was to Tintoretto's son that the wealthy client left a three lire gratuity.<sup>19</sup> While Monica Chojnacka's studies have shown that women working in early modern Venice were much more mobile than previously thought, it is also worth bearing in mind that the presence of brothers, husbands, and fathers kept wives, sisters, and daughters more in the shadows of the workshops. Anna Bellavitis' studies on Venetian craftsmanship remind us how crucial the problem of sources is when historians attempt to uncover women's work. Women's activities, she writes, were often defined not by being, but by doing.<sup>20</sup> Particularly in tax sources, women are hidden more than men belonging to the same social class. In fact, in early modern Europe, women's employment was usually not recorded when they worked in the family workshop, while it was more frequently recorded when they exercised a salaried activity with a master craftsman, such as in the textile industry.<sup>21</sup> The Grimani's accounts reveals evidence to this effect: it was mostly *lavoranti* and *garzoni*—male apprentices and workers—who delivered the goods, returned to the customer for the settlement, and obtained a gratuity, both when the Grimani were still in the family palazzo and later in Palazzo Ducale.<sup>22</sup>

18 Mazzucco, 2009, 390–393; Mazzucco, 2014, 83–89. On apprenticeships in painters' workshops, Sapienza, 2013; Hochmann, 2017. For a European perspective, Bellavitis, 2016, 61–64, 88–143.

19 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 33, "Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado di M. Grimani," c. 248. Hochmann 1992, 44.

20 Chojnacka, 2001, 103–120. Bellavitis 2016, 21–24.

21 Bellavitis, 2016, 24–26; Erbooso, 2017, 285–300.

22 Some examples in ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 20, "Notatorio 1589–1604," 9 August 1595, 25 December 1595, 8 March 1596, 9 May 1596.



Figure 5.1 Workshop of Jacopo Tintoretto (Robusti), *Portrait of Dogressa Morosina Morosini*, 1570–1580 (dated 1578 by Michel Hochmann). Oil on canvas, 72 1/2 × 61 × 3 1/4 in. (184.15 × 154.94 × 8.26 cm.). Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, William Hood Dunwoody Fund. CC PDM. Wholly owned or licensed by the Minneapolis Institute of Art.



Figure 5.2 Jacopo Tintoretto (Robusti), *Portrait of Marino Grimani*, 1578. Oil on canvas, 57 1/2 × 46 1/2 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles. PD. [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org).

It is useful to remember that, in the face of gender inequality and an unquestioned patriarchal culture, on which there is a rich up-to-date historiography, bearing in mind well-documented particularities of gender roles in specific Venetian contexts, the issue of sources becomes significant when looking at extremes of the social scale. Sufficient documentation is preserved for Chiara Morosini and her daughters Morosina and Angela to reconstruct the crucial moments of their lives. We know the value of their dowries, of the clothes and shoes of their trousseau, the names of trusted tailors and haberdashers, the names of a number of wet nurses and confessors. We also have evidence of artistic patronage and numerous portraits of Morosina are preserved. Moreover, we know in part how these women managed their property and took over from their husbands the administration of their estates; we can read their last wills, those of their mothers, their daughters, and so on. All these elements make it possible, albeit with gaps and limitations, to reconstruct their biographical profile, to outline their actions within complex family strategies, to identify evidence as to how they understood identity, self-promotion, and agency in the patriarchal culture of their time. How much of this is missing for women such as Marietta Tintoretto and working-class women at the other end of the social scale, which emerges clearly from Echols and Ilchman's contribution in this volume.

### A Vibrant World of Workers and Professionals

Where are the women working around the Grimani of San Luca to be found? Female names are primarily found in domestic spaces. In the palazzo on the Grand Canal, Anna, the *massara* (housemaid), holds the keys to the pantry and organizes the complex work of domestic servants. We gradually meet the maids, especially the personal maids of Morosina Morosini, and the nannies. It is their names, and the expense of building a bed for one of them, that allow us to discover a new baby in the Grimani household, clues that allow us to trace children who died shortly after birth. But the world of women's work is not reduced to the usual "women's jobs."<sup>23</sup>

In 1594, a key event in the family's history, the wedding of Maria, the last daughter of Alvise Grimani of San Polo, paints an interesting picture. Before the festivities, Iseppo *balotin* (errand boy) was paid thirty-one lire to invite noble men and women from Venice for the three days of feasting and banquets. Meanwhile, Marino noted the expenses for the two chimney sweeps who cleaned the chimney pipes and that of the glazier to *conzar* (mend) the glass in the house at San Luca. The *proto* Zuanne came with masons, lime, sand, and other things for a small restoration of the first floor of the palazzo in San Luca.

23 Bellavitis, 2016, 144–187.

During the three days of festivities, it was the tailor Bortolo who dressed Maria, a man who had known and dressed her since childhood. *Mistro* Pecin styled the women's gowns and coronets for twenty lire a day. The *conzateste* (hairdresser) Paula returned to do the bride's hairstyle on the three days of the festivities, and was paid the same as the tailor and *mistro* Pecin. Another five lire were for the woman who sold the braids of real or artificial hair that enriched women's elaborate hairstyles in the sixteenth century. Battista the dancer was named together with a partner, Callegarin. In addition to the two dancers, two women who sang are also named—and it is interesting that they were paid as much as the male dancers—and some jesters who entertained the guests. But Marino also spent more than forty ducati to host a company of talented violinists from Brescia, the “virtuosi Paganini.”

In total, for Maria's wedding celebrations alone, the expenditure came to 1,809 ducati and twenty-three lire, an enormous sum. The people involved for the occasion—including the parish priest, tailor, goldsmith, the dancers, jesters, and male and female musicians, the hairdressers, haberdashers, hat makers, drapers, the *feraruol* (the craftsman who makes the cloaks), shoemakers, glassmakers, porters, chimney sweepers, bakers, confectioners, charcutiers, cooks, footmen, waiters, fruit vendors, the *bottai* (coopers)—there are more than sixty, not counting the undefined number of porters and other men and women who collaborated in various capacities.<sup>24</sup>

Whether it is the realization of longer-lasting jobs, such as the stone and masonry work in the prestigious palazzo on the Grand Canal, or a momentary task such as an elaborate hairstyle on the bride's head or a performance by female singers whose names are not even recorded, highly specialized men and women with a broad range of manual and artistic skills revolve around this rich and important Venetian family. This wedding represents a crucial moment in the family's history, socially, politically, and emotionally. A large number of artists and craftsmen contributed to its success.

Only a year later—in 1595—Marino Grimani was elected Doge of Venice. From this point, his account books are filled with details and expenses demonstrating unparalleled opulence. Many of the artisans in this new phase of family and political life are well-known: they have been accompanying the Grimani family since the 1580s, points of reference in terms of reliability and quality, luxury and art, manual skill, and the latest in market offerings.

All this abundance might indicate an excessive accumulation of goods, of uncontrolled spending. Yet this was not extravagant luxury. Marino Grimani

24 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 20, “Notatorio 1589–1604,” from 20 January to 28 February 1594, a total of six papers. The total account is found in ASVe, G&B, b. 33, “Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado di M. Grimani,” c. 342.

indeed had control over his possessions: at the end of his daughter's wedding, not only did he note down the expenses for cleaning the dirty laundry and for the women who washed the draperies in the house, but also the cost of three knives that were "stolen" and the expense of repairing a fork that had been ruined. In the hustle and bustle of people in the house, a wooden stool also disappeared, and Marino noted in the books seven lire for the loss. Although the Grimani spent thousands of ducati every year to maintain a standard of living worthy of one of the most prominent families of the Venetian patriciate, such luxury was not unassailable. Keeping servants away from the master's rooms, preventing them from associating with their children, avoiding the *popolani*, choosing a building isolated from surrounding residential and commercial spaces: signs that the father of a noble family must present his superior status, according to the standards of the time. Yet, as Daniela Frigo has noted, when put to the test, the boundaries are not so clear-cut.<sup>25</sup> The common ground between the rich Grimani of San Luca and the working class is found in the local *botteghe*, the constant bustle inside the palazzo, the passage of gondolas full of draperies and delicacies, and in the expert hands of the professionals who shaped the family luxury and helped preserve it. A space marked by a shared material expertise. And Marino Grimani had a concrete and tangible way of recognizing the quality of the work done.

### **The Art of Embroidery: The *Ricamatrici* in the Account Books**

Among the predominantly male artisans mentioned in the libri, we find some interesting female names. These are an important testimony to the vitality of the art of embroidery, in which the resourcefulness and prominence of female artisans deserve more attention.

In 1585, Tommaso Garzoni in *La Piazza universale de' tutte le professioni del mondo*, after listing the many tools that embroidery work requires and after showing various types of stitches "and a thousand other forms that express in them the art of painting," defines the art of embroidery as "more ornamental than comfortable, and more for women than men."

As has been noted for some time, an impressive number of embroidery and lace pattern books, which addressed women on the title page with the intention of guiding them in needlework, became widespread in Italy from 1527 onwards. Lotz estimated as many as 165 Italian editions during the sixteenth century, but the number is probably much higher.<sup>26</sup> Ludovico Dolce insisted on the "work of the

<sup>25</sup> Frigo, 1985, 106–107.

<sup>26</sup> Garzoni, 1585, 500. See Plebani, 2012.

hand,” convenient for noblewomen as a demonstration of virtue and acceptance of the traditional female role, of which this occupation became a symbol. If spinning was considered a poor woman’s job, sewing and embroidery was an occupation suited to the virtuous noblewomen. Francesco Tommasi in 1580 also recalls that spinning, warping, weaving, spinning silk, sewing, embroidery and the like are exercises common to all women, “but with differences and distinctions of person.”<sup>27</sup> Historiography has rightly insisted on the art of embroidery as a means of “escaping idleness” and practicing female virtues, but Tiziana Plebani has shown a much more complex picture.<sup>28</sup> In the fifteenth century, the needle was by no means alone in the hands of women: the embroiderer’s craft is attested and documented in many Italian cities and was often practiced by male professionals. It is therefore good to be cautious when making a gender division within certain professions, as the reality was more fluid than what literature proposed.<sup>29</sup> The transition of the needle between male to female hands and the reverse is to be understood within the broader framework of the transformations that took place in the field of fashion and home furnishings, in a dynamic context that increasingly differentiated fabrics and applications, proposing ever more refined and varied ornaments. A luxury market, especially in Venice, produced a growing demand that pushed the sector to reorganize, involving female labor.<sup>30</sup>

In Venice in the early sixteenth century, new trends in sewing and especially embroidery developed to satisfy the practical demands and taste of a growing number of consumers. Instead of heavy needlework in gold and color, integrated into the fabric, white, detachable and reusable embroidery was increasingly preferred, although the different techniques continued to coexist, as the sumptuary laws confirm. Embroideries are found as ornamentation on sheets, pillowcases, towels, curtains, and tablecloths; they adorn cuffs, shoulder straps, collars, ruffs, as much on men’s lightly padded jackets as on women’s corsets. They are even found in the smocks and surplices used by prelates in the vestments and ecclesiastical

27 “Et certo i lavori di mano sono necessarii non solo alle donne private, ma anchora alle principesse et alle reine: et tanto più a queste, quanto manco esse senton la gravezza delle cure famigliari ... Tornando alla mia fanciulla, sappia almeno ella cucire et reccamare bastevolmente. DOR. Lascisi pure, signor Flaminio, il lavoro della lana et del filo alle povere femine; et alle donne ricche et nobili rimangano questi due, et seguitiamo il proverbio: il quale è, che all’huomo la penna, et alla donna s’acconviene l’aco.” Dolce, 1545, 14r–v. Martelli, 2011, 315–317; Plebani, 2016, 305–308; Tommasi, 1580, 188–189.

28 Plebani, 2015. As part of private life, Brown, 2004, 112–118. See also Plebani, 2016, on the effects of the Counter-Reformation on domestic female work, especially embroidery. Plebani, 2022, 85–99, focuses in more detail on the role of embroidery books in the process of female literacy during the Renaissance. On the definition of “reading for action” and women as “pragmatic readers,” see also Richards and Schurink, 2010, 350–352.

29 Plebani, 2015, 207–209.

30 Plebani, 2015, 212. See also Ago, 2001.

supplies. The Venetian custom of adorning the room of the *puerpera* on the visits to congratulate a successful delivery is documented by a 1562 sumptuary law that, among other expenses considered to be excessive luxury, banned the exhibiting of sheets, pillowcases, *tornoletti*, “and every other item of cloth worked with gold and silver on silk.”<sup>31</sup>

Ann Rosalind Jones focused on the effects of the popularity of embroidery, and lace in particular, with the implications on social distinction, showing the contradictions between the presence of lace in Giacomo Franco’s engravings and the absence of references in the text.<sup>32</sup> As embroidery grew into an indispensable and versatile fashion accessory over time, the ways in which the art spread during the sixteenth century became varied.<sup>33</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, in his famous work on the clothes of the Venetians, Giovanni Grevembroch wrote that in the past, particularly in the art of the *punto in aria*, the Venetian noblewomen knew no rivals; he recalled that embroidery was for noble and virtuous ladies, also mentioning Cesare Vecellio’s embroidery book with its “beautiful ideas and exhibitions of cut stitches.” An accompanying watercolor shows us a noblewoman, with a small dog beside her, intent on embroidery in a domestic setting.<sup>34</sup> However, Grevembroch explains, also “the nuns with excellence of hand were imitating it all.”<sup>35</sup> (fig. 5.3) In monasteries, the need for funds led nuns to produce goods to put on the market, secular activities that—at least in theory—were subject to strict control.<sup>36</sup> Among these activities was embroidery. The nuns were supposed to work in a common space, not in their individual cells, and while they were doing their work they were required to listen to an edifying reading or practice singing together. In addition, embroidery work was only to be performed “for honest people” and the work itself had to be approved first by the mother superior.<sup>37</sup>

This was in theory. The nuns actually engaged in precious sewing, producing lace and embroidery that they sometimes used for themselves—thus contravening the rule on poverty of clothing—or that they donated to visitors such as religious and civil authorities who patronized the monastery. The expertise of some of these nuns, ironically, is conveyed to us thanks to the complaints of the prioresses.<sup>38</sup>

31 Bistort, 1969, 239–241. On the richness of Venetian household furnishings, see also Palumbo Fossati Casa, 2013.

32 Jones, 2014.

33 Davanzo Poli and Colussi, 1991, 10. Plebani, 2022.

34 Grevembroch, 1981, 3:147.

35 Grevembroch, 1981, 3:147.

36 Bellavitis 2016, 18.

37 Campagnol, 2012, 118–122.

38 Campagnol, 2012, 118–122.





Figure 5.3 Giovanni Grevembroch, "Lavoratrici di punto in aria," in "Gli abiti de' Veneziani di quasi ogni età con diligenza raccolti e dipinti nel secolo xviii," mid-18th century. MS Gradenigo-Dolfin 49.3 c. 147, Biblioteca del Museo Correr di Venezia, Venice. Courtesy of Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia—Archivio Fotografico.

Marino Grimani's accounts also give us important evidence of embroidery in the monasteries. Among the payment entries in the libri, we frequently find nuns of the monastery of Santi Rocco e Margarita embroidering *fazzoleti* (silk handkerchiefs) and underwear for the Grimani family. The nuns of Santa Chiara a Padova provided the Grimani with linen, which is not surprising since the

Grimani's eldest daughter, *suor* Beatrice, was in the monastery, which bordered one of their properties.<sup>39</sup>

It is evident, however, that the family preferred the expertise of Augustinian nuns, confirming that some of these women—at some monasteries in this order—were distinguished by the refined embroidery they produced. In 1585 when Marino Grimani began shopping months before leaving for his prestigious ambassadorship in Rome, he turned to the best of the suppliers. Over 180 different items make up the specific section of the 1585 ambassadorship, with a total bill exceeding 2,900 ducati. With the evident intention of impressing onlookers with the luxury of his travel outfit, Marino carefully selected each single item of clothing and accessory. Again, it was the nuns of the monastery of Santi Rocco e Margherita who embroidered for him, confirming that competence in production at the monastery was evident to the eye of a discerning customer who could distinguish between embroidery for everyday garments and embroidery to adorn fine ceremonial robes.<sup>40</sup>

Work executed by nuns is also found in Morosina Morosini's lengthy post-mortem inventory of 1614. Some devotional objects in fabric are noted, namely a rosary made of silk and ormesin in a painted wooden box with silk animals; a rather complex object made of fabric, depicting a cloth San Carlo kneeling before an altar with a Christ and gold and silver ornaments is also listed. Of the many objects in the inventory, these are the only ones for which the notary recognized the hand that had made them, specifying that they had been "made by nuns." From the same inventory we also have confirmation that the noblewomen of the Grimani house embroidered and sewed at home, as was expected of virtuous women of their rank.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, places for embroidery are not only the home and monastery. In the list of expenses for the embassy in 1585, for example, an embroiderer appears in the accounts from the well-known Bartolomeo Bontempelli dal Calice. His workshop, in late sixteenth-century Venice, was recognized for luxury fabrics and garments. In the account a female *ricamatrice* (embroiderer) is clearly mentioned, though unnamed, to whom Marino Grimani paid forty lire for the embroidery on his *dogaline* purchased for the trip to Rome. If in Bontempelli's workshop Marino Grimani had bought fine fabrics, such as green *tabi*, black velvets, and gold and silver threads, the embroideries—not specified for which garments—were carried out by a *ricamatrice* to whom Bontempelli commissioned the work and who was paid separately. To put this sum into context, fifty lire was the salary Grimani paid monthly to his gondolier and personal servant, the highest pay among his domestic

39 Some examples in ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 33, "Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado di M. Grimani," c. 96; b. 20, "Notatorio 1589–1604," 19 June 1589, 7 July 1589, 10 July 1592, 27 March 1593, 23 May 1598.

40 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 33, "Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado di M. Grimani," cc. 339–341.

41 ASVe, Notarile, Testamenti, b. 1251, Notaio Giulio Ziliol, protocollo di atti, cc. 46v–47v, 52v–61v.



Figure 5.4 Italian manufacture, Ecclesiastical ornament (possibly for dalmatic), late 16th–early 17th century. Single-body velvet embroidered in gold and silver thread stitch, 55 × 55 cm. Centro Studi di Storia del Tessuto, del Costume e del Profumo, Inv. 327, Palazzo Mocenigo, Venice. Courtesy of Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia—Archivio Fotografico.

staff. Given the reputation for excellence of Bontempelli's workshop, we can imagine the skill and refinement of the work carried out by this unnamed female artisan.<sup>42</sup>

Another mention, this time named, was Maria *recamadora* of San Tomà. The artisan appears several times in Marino's books, although it has not yet been possible to trace further biographical elements. Accounts show that she was in charge of other embroiderers and that Marino Grimani, shortly after his election to the *dogato*, commissioned her to make a "velvet curtain embroidered in gold" for furnishings in

42 Some biographical information on Bontempelli in Tucci, 1971. See for example, ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 33, "Notatorio 1589–1604," 9 June 1591.





Figure 5.5 Detail of Figure 5.4.

the Palazzo Ducale.<sup>43</sup> This was an elaborate door curtain, a popular piece of furnishing in early modern Europe, which was intended to magnify the effect of an entrance; it was often embellished with coats of arms and decorations in gold and silver. The visual effect of such embroidery with gold and silver threads on fine velvets can be seen in paintings and fragments that are still preserved in museums (figs. 5.4 and 5.5).

Marino Grimani, recently appointed Doge, while resident in the ducal palace invested a considerable sum in furnishings. He was so pleased with the velvet door curtain the artisan Maria created that he added four lire of *beverazo* as a gratuity to the female artisans who worked with Maria. While the precarious nature of textiles and the rarity of their preservation prevent us today from fully grasping

43 ASVe, Grimani e Barbarigo, b. 33, "Libro delle spese e Salariadi del Dogado di M. Grimani," cc. 248, 339, 348.

the overall effect, we can only imagine the effect of grandeur that the door curtain in the room in Palazzo Ducale presented to contemporaries.

The practice of giving a gratuity, moreover, is found infrequently in Marino Grimani's books. Despite the fact that the Venetian patrician regularly paid the professionals he called on, and that he had a close relationship of trust with some of them for years, there were only a few artisans who were rewarded with a gratuity, a concrete sign of his recognizing the excellence of their work.

In the libri of the patrician and later Doge Marino Grimani, there are hundreds of names of workers and artisans who contributed to giving shape to the luxury displayed by the family and the State, and to maintaining it over time. What emerges is a map of excellence showing the vitality of the world of Venetian craftsmanship, a rich market with varied skills where wealthy clients with a refined taste for beauty obtained works of the highest quality. For their own self-promotion, to consolidate family prestige, and to distinguish themselves within their peer group, the luxury of the Grimani created a shared language, a constant and lasting dialogue between members of this elite family and the best Venetian artisans.

The rare female names that are found outside domestic walls stand out all the more if they collected the money themselves, as in the case of Maria, the embroiderer from San Tomà. In many other cases, the name *ricamatrice* is noted but the account is in the name of a man, and he collects the rich client's money and pays the embroiderer. In contrast to a trend that generally concealed women's work, the art of embroidery brings some of these women out of the shadows. It is true that noblewomen embroidered at home, a virtuous pastime appropriate to their status, but valuable embroideries were commissioned from monasteries on the occasion of an important business trip. The ambitious Grimani left nothing to chance when determined to impress onlookers with every detail of his appearance. Finally, a valuable and visible piece of furnishing in Palazzo Ducale had been entirely embroidered by women: Maria had interacted directly with the client, her work had been paid for directly, and the Doge had recognized the exceptional quality of the work with a gratuity for the female coworkers.

A visual indication of a direct relationship between client and female artisans can also be recognized on the frontispiece of one of the many sixteenth-century embroidery books. In one of the four illustrations in Giovanni Tagliente's book, an embroiderer is seated, absorbed in her work, while another woman, probably the manager of the business, talks to a man, a merchant or a client. While in other illustrations the protagonists are all women, the embroidery work that the woman depicted is holding is at the center of the conversation, and the two interlocutors, a female artisan and a man, converse as equals. These books are working tools, in which women emerge as "pragmatic readers," even if the possible gain was cautiously concealed on the cover page, instead emphasizing female virtues. (figs. 5.6 and 5.7)

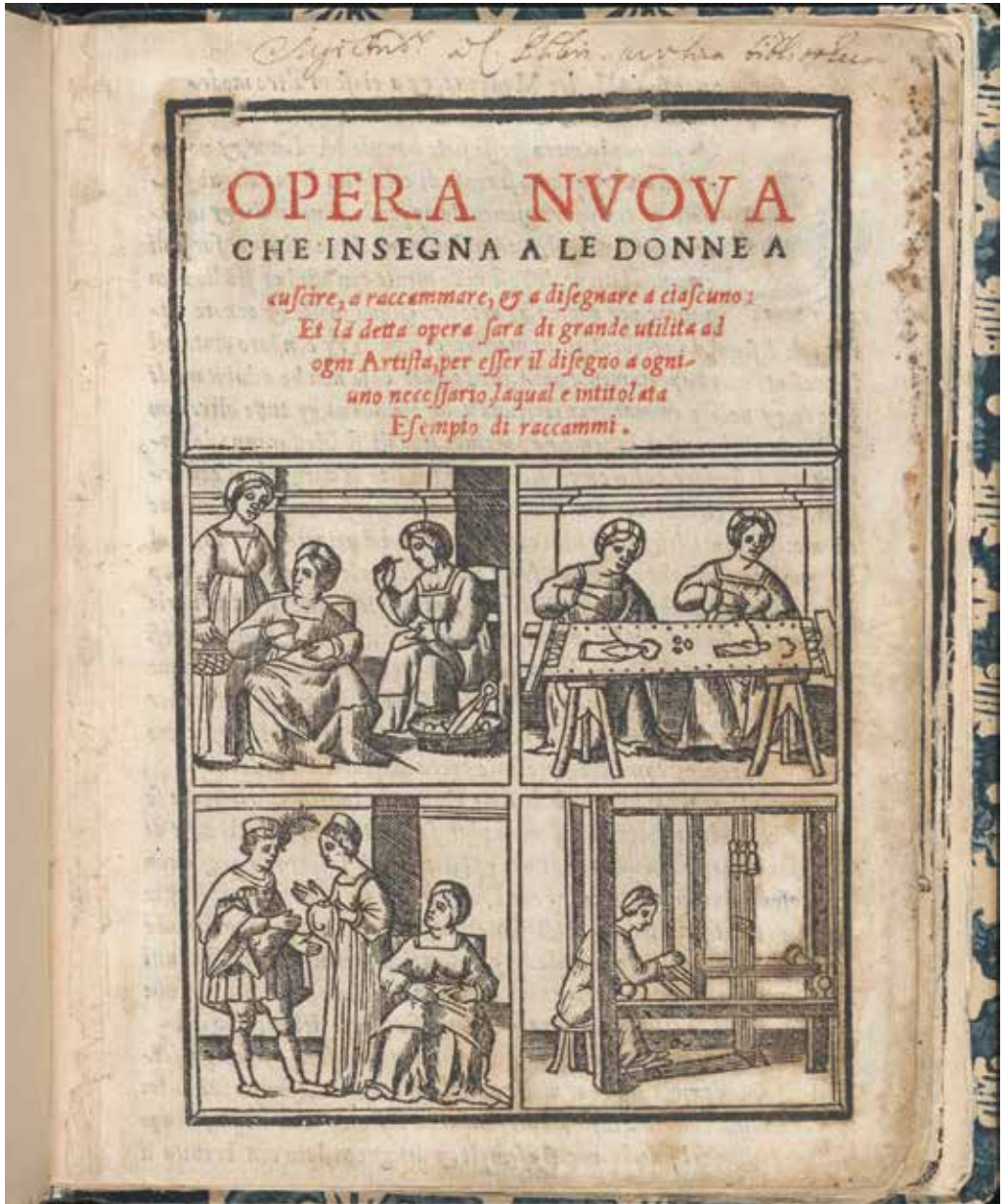


Figure 5.6 Giovanni Antonio Tagliente, Front cover, *Opera nuova che insegna alle donne a cusire, a raccommare & a disegnar a ciascuno, et la ditta opera sara di molta utilita ad ogni artista, per esser il disegno ad ognuno necessario, la qual e intitolata esempio di raccommi*, Venice, 1530. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1935 [35.75.3 (1-55)]. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1935 [35.75.3(1-55)], New York, OA-PD CCO 1.0 Universal.





Figure 5.7 Detail of Figure 5.6.

In conclusion, Marino Grimani's account books show that outside the domestic environment, the names of women—whether artisans or artists—are few. Not a single painter, not even a seamstress. The artisans who collect orders, deliver the finished works, and receive the money are practically all men. This type of source hides the many female hands that we know moved behind the scenes, in the workshops and home laboratories. Nevertheless, the trusted embroiderers who emerge here shed light on the varied and vibrant world of embroidery and give visibility to enterprising women, craftswomen of great skill.

A final word goes to Morosina Morosini, wife and later widow of Doge Grimani. A local tradition, repeated by several scholars, posits that the art of embroidery was spread in schools opened and protected by a number of dogaresse, including Morosina Morosini Grimani herself. According to Giuseppe Marino Urbani de

Gheltof, who wrote on Venetian lace in 1876, Dogaressa Morosini Grimani set up a workshop in contrada S. Fosca with as many as 130 lacemakers, headed by *maestra* Catterina Gardin. According to Urbani de Gheltof, the dogaressa would provide the lacemakers with a workshop and the necessary tools, keeping some of the products for her own use and offering others to ladies and princesses. Upon the death of the dogaressa, the laboratory would have closed down; however, according to the author, her activity would have favored the development of the art of lacemaking on the island of Burano over time.<sup>44</sup> In her numerous and precise contributions, Doretta Davanzo Poli cited Urbani de Gheltof's information, clarifying, however, that there was a lack of archival proof for such a claim to be taken seriously, although it was presented as being precise. Several scholars have since quoted Davanzo Poli, reporting facts sometimes as certain and sometimes with doubt.<sup>45</sup> However, the in-depth study of the Grimani, especially the documentation of accounts and expenses, points in an opposite direction. It has already been proven that Urbani de Gheltof was a falsifier of documents, not a historian, who submitted completely invented facts and details to gain credibility and popularity.<sup>46</sup> In fact, according to the archival documentation, what Morosina did during her widowhood was to manage complex accounts, take care of extensive landed estates, and exercise jurisdiction in her fiefdom in Istria. Confirmation can be found in the purchase of *armari* (cupboards) by the widow Morosina for the benefit of her heirs. She bought three of them, made of fir wood. A detailed inventory compiled separately gives evidence of the precision with which, assisted by her trusted bookkeeper, Morosina managed the Istrian castle, the lands in Ravenna and in Polesine, correspondence, her own accounts, and everything related to her deceased consort's estate. Family activities leave an administrative trace among the papers in these cupboards. Evidence to any activities relating to a lace-making laboratory founded by the dogaressa should be included, but nothing of the kind exists.<sup>47</sup>

The idea that emerges is that it was rather part of nineteenth-century taste to attribute to a rich and influential dogaressa the patronage of an art, that of embroidery, which in the late sixteenth century was steeped in feminine virtues. Grimani's accounts, on the contrary, do confirm how varied and vibrant the art of embroidery was in Venice. If noblewomen, young and old, embroidered at home as was expected of them, the art of embroidery was the means by which reclusive nuns succeeded in

44 Urbani de Gheltof, 1876, 20–21.

45 Davanzo Poli and Colussi, 1991, 10.

46 Gava, 2001. Urbani de Gheltof, 1896, 20–21. Despite the fact that it is now confirmed that Urbani de Gheltof was a falsifier, this statement about Morosina has been taken up again and again, sometimes with doubt, sometimes as a fact. Pallucchini, 1994, 987; Davanzo Poli, 1998, 10–11; Jones, 2014, 403.

47 ASVe, Grimani di San Luca ora San Tomà, GSL, b. 11, f. 1, "Successione di Morosina Morosini moglie di Marino Grimani Doge, testamento 16 giugno 1612," cc. 17r–24r.



creating items of the highest quality that they then sold to demanding and refined clients such as Marino Grimani. And finally, the libri bring to light several Venetian female artisans who made a profession of the art of embroidery, allowing them to come out of the shadows and to interact with men as equals with competence and skill.

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### Archival Abbreviation

ASVe = Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Venice

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