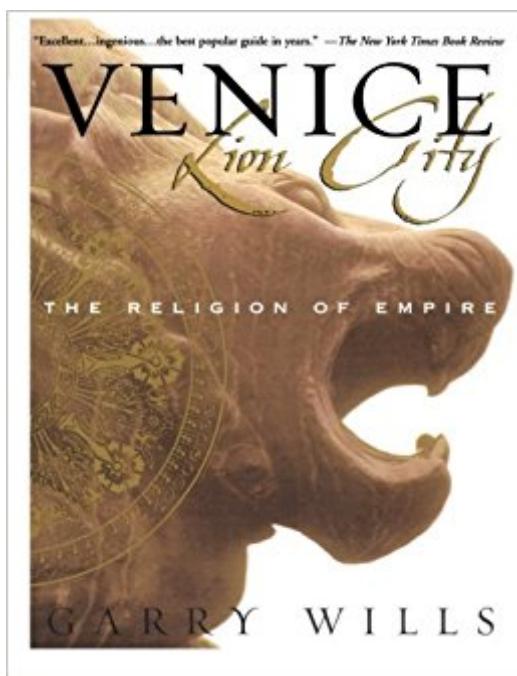


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# Venice: Lion City: The Religion Of Empire



## **Synopsis**

Garry Wills's *Venice: Lion City* is a tour de force -- a rich, colorful, and provocative history of the world's most fascinating city in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when it was at the peak of its glory. This was not the city of decadence, carnival, and nostalgia familiar to us from later centuries. It was a ruthless imperial city, with a shrewd commercial base, like ancient Athens, which it resembled in its combination of art and sea empire. *Venice: Lion City* presents a new way of relating the history of the city through its art and, in turn, illuminates the art through the city's history. It is illustrated with more than 130 works of art, 30 in full color. Garry Wills gives us a unique view of Venice's rulers, merchants, clerics, laborers, its Jews, and its women as they created a city that is the greatest art museum in the world, a city whose allure remains undiminished after centuries. Like Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches*, on the Dutch culture in the Golden Age, *Venice: Lion City* will take its place as a classic work of history and criticism.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

The tiny island city-state of Venice was, for a time, one of the greatest maritime powers the world has ever known, its influence extending far beyond the Mediterranean. Garry Wills, well known for his studies of American political history, travels far afield to explore Renaissance Venice at the height of its power. Venice, Wills writes, was "not an ideal state." Its champions would claim otherwise; they held a view of Venetian "exceptionalism," an idea that the city-state, like its classical Athenian model, was somehow destined for great things. It achieved many of them, gathering

phenomenal wealth through the monopolies of its many guilds, floating great navies that controlled the seas, and building a splendid, renowned city. Wills profiles the leaders, great families, corporations, and institutions (including what he calls a "gerontocracy" of elder statesmen) that allowed such growth, as well as women, ordinary workers, and other actors who do not often figure in histories of the period. He examines the religious beliefs and worldly wisdom that motivated and justified the Venetian impulse to achieve wealth and power, and he takes his readers on a learned tour of Venice's architectural and artistic glories--many of which survive today. No, it was not ideal, Wills concludes, "just better than most of those around it--better able to sustain, over a long period, whatever ideals it had." His account of those ideals and the city they made will appeal to a wide audience of readers. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

What Simon Schama's *An Embarrassment of Riches* did for Renaissance Holland, Wills prolific author, historian, translator and critic (John Wayne's America) tries here with Renaissance Venice. He organizes the book strictly into four "Imperial" sections: "Imperial Discipline" contains chapters on Venetian ideas of time and work while "Imperial Personnel" covers the doges, patricians, notables, "Golden Youth," women, artists, etc. Wills' intense interest in church matters comes through throughout, but most clearly in the section "Imperial Piety," which is subdivided into art-based chapters like "Venetian Annunciations" and "The Vulnerable Mary." Although extremely earnest, Wills is certainly not a specialized scholar, and he relies heavily on such academic art historians as Otto Demus and Erwin Panofsky to document the city's great art. The result is a rather dense and extremely ambitious book that does not wear its learning lightly, unlike Mary McCarthy's still-scintillating overview of the city. Lacking the style and dash of a popular historian like John Julius Norwich, whose *A History of Venice* is still a standard text, Wills often comes across as dutiful here, hardly communicating the passion he no doubt feels about his subject. His reactions to certain artworks seem haphazard, such as his confession that a painting of the Annunciation by Lorenzo Lotto made Wills think "of Jacqueline Kennedy turning to clamber out of her car when the tremendous blow fell on her in the Dallas motorcade." This book gets points for its obvious efforts to organize a sprawling history into comprehensible bites, but too many of its judgments are uncertain, and its smoothly ahistorical analogies, as above, can be distracting. 16-page color insert not seen by PW. (Sept.)Forecast: While the cognoscenti will seek out McCarthy or Norwich for more commanding views on the same material, Wills's book will be the prevailing popular history of the sinking city for the foreseeable future, sought out pre-trip by the thinking hordes who descend

yearly. Look for an initial spike on the strength of Wills's name, and steady sales thereafter. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

As all of Gary Wills books this is also very well researched with lots of footnotes to research or read further. If someone loves art and want's to know more about the symbolism and the background of it, that is the book to get. As the title says it is about Venice and its relationship to religion in its very specific way. I love Venice and would have seen and understood much more better would I have read this book in advance. Great reading!

I read Gary Wills book with great expectations in preparation for a trip to Venice in February. It provided a wealth of historical information that cannot be found in the "tour books" and yet, was an overall disappointment. The book became most tedious when it ventured into the art of Titian, Giorgione, et al. The non-color photographs were poorly produced and difficult to see, let alone enjoy, in contrast to the limited number of color plates that do appear. Greater in-depth treatment of the doges and their families would have made this a more interesting study. Perhaps I'll have a greater appreciation for the book after my return from our trip.

I loved it! I loved learning about all the aspects of this great city~Bravo~I plan to visit Italy next year!

The author brings together in an erudite way the scholarship of a variety of writers about topics in Venice. He refers constantly to works of art and architecture in the city, but he does not always illustrate them. That's annoying. A good bit of the analysis is of the kind you find in art history textbooks. The book is more interesting to skim than to read thoroughly.

I'm afraid "elventh" has it correct. This book is a great study of a specific slice of art history. I read everything Wills writes and pass along his writings to everyone I know, but not this one. For those with the patience and background, (I lack the background, but after reading it I lack less) however, it is fully worth the time.

A serious look at the inevitable travel destination by someone who obviously loves the place through its history and art. As previous reviewers have pointed out, the scholarship is sound, but the writing is stiff at times detracting from the pleasure of reading. I'm an admirer of the author's other

books--especially the political works--but I think that there are better analyses of Venice as a political and cultural entity.

Gary Wills's *VENICE: LION CITY* is a very intelligent study in cultural criticism by a popular and eminent American historian: as the book's dustcover makes clear, Simon and Schuster wants to market this as Wills' entry into Simon Schama territory. Basically, he's trying to interpret the most famous works of Venetian Renaissance art and architecture through the pervasive imperial ideology of what was an odd throwback to a Hellenistic city-state. The book works best for someone with a strong familiarity with the art of Venice already, and Wills answers some very intriguing questions along the way both on a factual level (why is the winged lion used to represent St. Mark, the city's patron? Why were Christians in earlier times so obsessed with saints' relics?) and on the interpretive level as well (why are Bellini's Madonnas so inward-looking?). But Simon and Schuster have not served this book well on many levels. It deserves a much fancier format than it is allowed, with much larger reproductions and more full-colored plates: some works Wills discusses (like Titan's "Assumption") are not reproduced at all, and a massive work like Tintoretto's "Crucifixion"--so important to Wills' argument--deserves a two-page (or fold-out) reproduction than the mere one page it receives. Also, someone needed to edit the book much more vigorously. I counted several times when Wills basically repeats an entire paragraph of interpretation from earlier in the work. This is a good book, but not for the casual reader, and it deserves in the future a much more sophisticated revision and re-issue.

this is a book for those who are knowledgeable, or want to be, about the art of venice, its history and its meaning. i grant that the paucity and the quality of visuals is a drawback; also, i would have liked a list of exact locations for the art presented in the book. and certainly, as with any book on art, a lingering visit to venice will increase the value of this book to the reader. if your goal is to understand what makes the art of venice unique, what makes it so different from the contemporary art of florence, sienna, and other italian cities, this book will inform you. it is well-written, engaging, and comprehensive, but a guidebook it is not. nor is it a history book, and it does presuppose a certain background in the subject. it's not for everyone, but well-researched and well-documented, it will be an enormous asset to anyone planning an extended stay to take in the art of la serenissima. i am online now to buy a copy to take with me there in two weeks. in my opinion, for anyone who wants to really understand what they're looking at and what it means, and appreciate it more deeply, this is the essential book to have.

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