



THE “SCUOLA GRANDE DI SAN ROCCO”

The Scuola di San Rocco, or School of St. Roch, the patron saint of plague victims, began in 1478 as a Scuola dei Battuti and after various vicissitudes it built its first independent headquarters near the Frari at the end of the century. These consisted of the small building to the right of the church, today known as Scoletta or “small school”, and the church dedicated to St. Roch for the proper preservation of his body, which the Scuola had acquired in 1485.

The deep veneration for this saint, whom people called upon during the frequent, terrible plague epidemics, visiting his tomb and imploring him to heal them, and at the same time leaving abundant alms, caused the Scuola to grow rapidly, so that during the 16th century it became the richest of the Venetian confraternities.

In 1789 it received the title of “Arch-confraternity” from Pope Pius VI, and it was the only one of the old Great Scuole which survived the fall of the Republic. All the others were in fact suppressed by Napoleonic decree in 1806. For our Scuola the order was revoked, although on that occasion it did lose most of its assets, which consisted of huge sums of capital deposited in state coffers, houses, shops and land. It did however keep, and it still has, the ownership of the buildings of the Scuola, the church and the Scoletta.

Today the brotherhood, with its over 300 male and female members, is still active, and substantially still continues the same charitable works as of old, as well as looking after its notable artistic heritage.



LA SCUOLA GRANDE DI SAN ROCCO in Venezia

THE “SCUOLE” OF VENICE

In the second half of the 13th century, numerous lay confraternities were set up central northern Italy. They met in the name of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or a patron saint, for religious worship or mutual aid purposes. In Venice, these confraternities were called Scuole. Their members came from the middle classes, i.e. the non-mercantile class of citizens who resided in the town and worked in the trades and professions, in many cases with great economic benefits. Being excluded from the oligarchic government of the Republic, they could in this way nonetheless play a prestigious role in Venetian society. Noblemen could be members only if they renounced any position in the government.

Until the Republic fell, the Scuole played an important part in the religious life and charitable works of the town, organising what amounted to a fully-fledged welfare system, which was initially for members only, but was then extended to the whole population.

At the beginning of the 15th century there were various types of Scuole in Venice: the Scuole of the arts and crafts which protected the interests of the different categories of workers and regulated their activity; the national Scuole which grouped the members of each foreign community in the town; the devotional Scuole with their specific religious connotations, including the Scuole dei Battuti (English “Beaten Ones”), who practised public self-flagellation as an act of penitence. This subdivision was officially confirmed in 1467. The devotional, artisans’ and national Scuole, formed a broader group of small Scuole; the Scuole dei Battuti took on a dominant role and became the Great Scuole, of which there were six at the end of the 16th century.