

# EGYPT ON ST. MARK'S SQUARE IN VENICE, ITALY

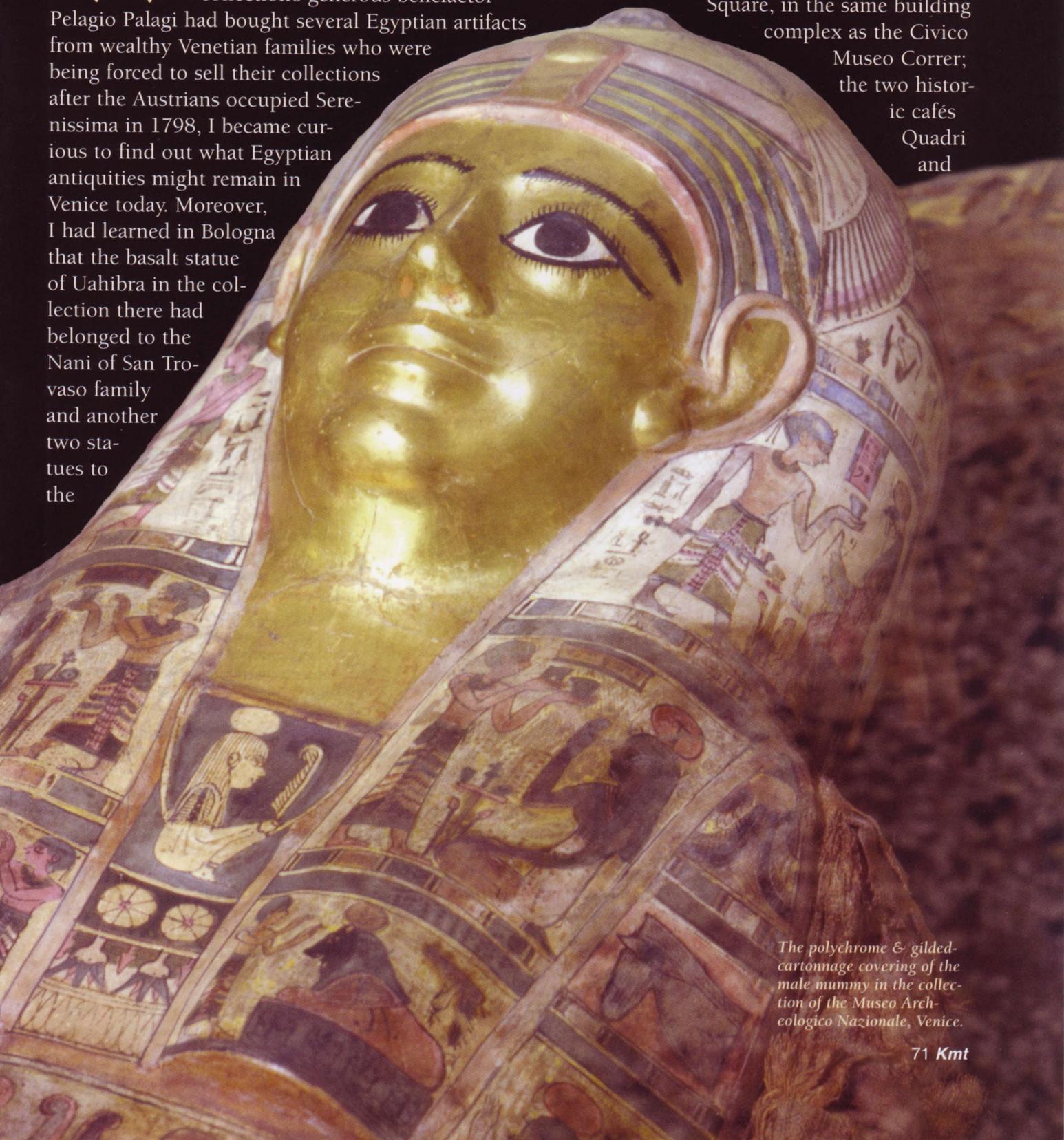
by Lucy Gordan-Rastelli

Photos courtesy of the National Archaeology Museum, Venice

When the curator of the Egyptian collection in Bologna, Italy, Dr. Daniela Picchi, told me that the collection's generous benefactor Pelagio Palagi had bought several Egyptian artifacts from wealthy Venetian families who were being forced to sell their collections after the Austrians occupied Serenissima in 1798, I became curious to find out what Egyptian antiquities might remain in Venice today. Moreover, I had learned in Bologna that the basalt statue of Uahibra in the collection there had belonged to the Nani of San Trovaso family and another two statues to the

Grimani family. The Grimani — Domenico, cardinal of Venice and Aquileia, in 1523 and his nephew, Giovanni, in 1587 — had also bequeathed the core collection of Venice's Museo Archeologico Nazionale. This has almost always been housed on St. Mark's

Square, in the same building complex as the Civico Museo Correr; the two historic cafés Quadri and



*The polychrome & gilded-cartonnage covering of the male mummy in the collection of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Venice.*



*The Venice collection's 19th Dynasty quartzite bust of a man, from a pair-statue (which included his wife, whose hand still rests on his left shoulder). Traces of the seat on which the couple sat are visible on the back of the bust.*

Florian, the Marciana (or St. Mark's) Library, founded on September 4, 1362 by the poet Petrarch. In 1596 Federico Contarini designed the layout for Grimani's bequeathed Greek and Roman statuary, all still in place today, in what used to be the Library's anteroom.

The layout of the rest of Venice's Archaeological Museum dates to the 1920s, with some changes and additions between 1949 and 1954; then again in 1961, when the ceramics, glass and gems from the Museo di S. Donato in Zara (Croatia) were acquired; and lastly in 1982, with Giancarlo Ligabue's gift of prehistoric bronzes. (The Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Piazz

za San Marco 52, is open from 9 AM-5 PM from November through March and from 9 AM to 7 PM from April to October. Closed Mondays, tel. 011-39-41-5225978, [www.artive.beniculturali.it/archeologico](http://www.artive.beniculturali.it/archeologico)).

During the Renaissance the Grimani were a prominent Venetian family, who lived in a magnificent palazzo on the Grand Canal, today the city's Appeals Court. At age 85 Domenico's father, Antonio (1436-1523), a distinguished soldier, was the oldest doge (1521-23) ever elected. Domenico was already the cardinal at the time. He had been the patriarch of Aquileia from 1498 to 1517 and from 1517 to 1520 bishop of Ceneda. Certainly, the

single finest treasure of all Domenico's collections is "The Grimani Breviary," an illuminated prayer book which is the star item of the Marciana.

Thus, like Bologna's, the donors of Venice's Egyptian collection, were native sons and major collectors of ancient art of many historical periods; but exactly which of the approximately 150 Egyptian artifacts here, if any, once belonged to these two important clerics is hazy at best. The same is true of many of the artifacts in Venice's Collection. Much more is known about the lives of several of the collections later donors — Girolamo Zulian (1730-95), Maffio Pinelli (1735-1785), Ascanio Molin (1738-1814) and Teodoro Correr (1750-1830) — than about who donated what or the antiquities' provenance in Egypt.

With the Grimani, Girolamo Zulian was the Archaeology Museum's only other benefactor before the fall of the Venetian Republic to Napoleon in 1797. A colorful and cultured aristocrat, from a very young age Zulian embarked on a distinguished political and later diplomatic career, first as Serenissima's ambassador to the Holy See in Rome (1779-83) and then to Constantinople (1783-87), where he acquired his first Egyptian objects, usually as gifts.

Zulian was a typical collector of his neoclassical times. He successfully combined his love of the ancient with a taste for the present. Acquiring both contemporary and ancient sculptures (some 170 pieces) while in Rome, he employed the young sculptor Antonio Canova — whose work he greatly admired — as both his art scout and restorer of his ancient statues, as well as of some seventy ancient Greek, Villanovan, Etruscan and Roman vases.

Soon Canova's mentor, patron and frequent host, Zulian was able to add to his collection even after he left Rome, through the continued services of the sculptor, who frequently accompanied his patron's purchases from Rome to Padua — Zulian's new home — to restore them there, thus avoiding the risk of further damage or theft during transport. With the architect Giannantonio Selva, another advisor to Zulian, Canova helped design a one-room "museum" for his patron's ancient sculptures and vases, as well as for plaster models of his own sculptures. It is ironic that the funds for Zulian's "museum" came from numerous sales he made

between 1792 and 1794 of ancient Egyptian antiquities, that had arrived in Venice from Alexandria. Zulian traded them with collectors in Rome, for he himself had little interest in ancient Egypt.

In his will Zulian left to La Serenissima thirty ancient marble sculptures; thirty bronzes; various cameos; and a few Egyptian artifacts still in his possession at his death. Of these on display today, two are cube statues, both of unknown provenance but probably from Alexandria, and considered by curator Cristina Fior to be highlights of the small Venetian collection

and perhaps its most important Egyptian pieces from a historical viewpoint. The oldest, thirty-three centimeters tall, is made of red granite from Aswan and dates to the late New Kingdom (Twentieth Dynasty); the other, forty-four centimeters tall, is made of basalt and dates to the Twenty-fifth or Twenty-sixth dynasties. The third artifact on display which was once in Zulian's collection is a Hellenistic-style head with Egyptian features, probably from Alexandria and dating to the Roman Period.

According to Dr. Fior, Zulian donated another twenty-six Egyptian artifacts: bronze votive statues of Osiris, Isis,

Bes and Amen; bronze and faience ushabtis; a heart scarab; and a limestone fragment with hieroglyphs. These are not on display.

Another highlight of Venice's collection had belonged to Maffio Pinelli, who, like Zulian, died before the Austrian occupation; but his limestone Saite-period funerary stela came to the Archaeological Museum as a purchase after his death, so Pinelli should not really be considered its "donor."

Pinelli was from a family who had the privilege of printing all the Republic's official Acts. A linguist and historian, he was first and foremost a bibliophile and put together one of Europe's most-famous private libraries, which was auctioned in London in 1789.

Besides books Pinelli also collected paintings, ancient gems, over 3,400 coins and medals, and some Egyptian sculptures. These items changed hands twice: first they went to the Museo Pisani in 1788 and then to Count Girolamo Martinengo, before being sold in 1836 and dispersed throughout Europe.

The relief of the Pinelli stela depicts the deceased on the right making an offering to Isis and Osiris. An altar with his offerings of flowers, birds, bread and little vases, separates him from the gods. A seated Osiris is wearing his Atef Crown and holds a flagellum and the *heqa*. Isis, recognizable because of her headdress stands behind Osiris, holding her was scepter. Above them is the sun-disk of the god of Edfu. Below them the three lines of hieroglyphic inscription reads: "Anubis is on his mountain. May he grant a worthy burial to Nefertumjerdes, admired by Osiris, the son of Honwejerdj, who was given birth by the lady of the house, Tardjnefertum."

Pinelli's second artifact is exhibited, but not a collection highlight. It's a damaged diorite funerary statue of a man with a complete, but almost illegible, inscription on his back.

Three artifacts on display, but not of outstanding quality, once belonged to Girolamo Ascanio Molin, more or less a contemporary of Zulian and Pinelli. They are two statues of Osiris and a small microgranite vase of unknown use. One statue, 13.5 centimeters tall, is bronze and the other, thirteen centimeters tall, is of grey basanite; both date to the Late Period. The vase is of Old Kingdom date and is the collection's oldest object.

A highlight of the Venetian collection is this late-New Kingdom (20th Dyn.) cube statue carved from Aswan red granite; of unknown provenance, but probably acquired in Alexandria; from the collection of Girolamo Zulian, a major benefactor of the Museo Archeologico Nazionale.





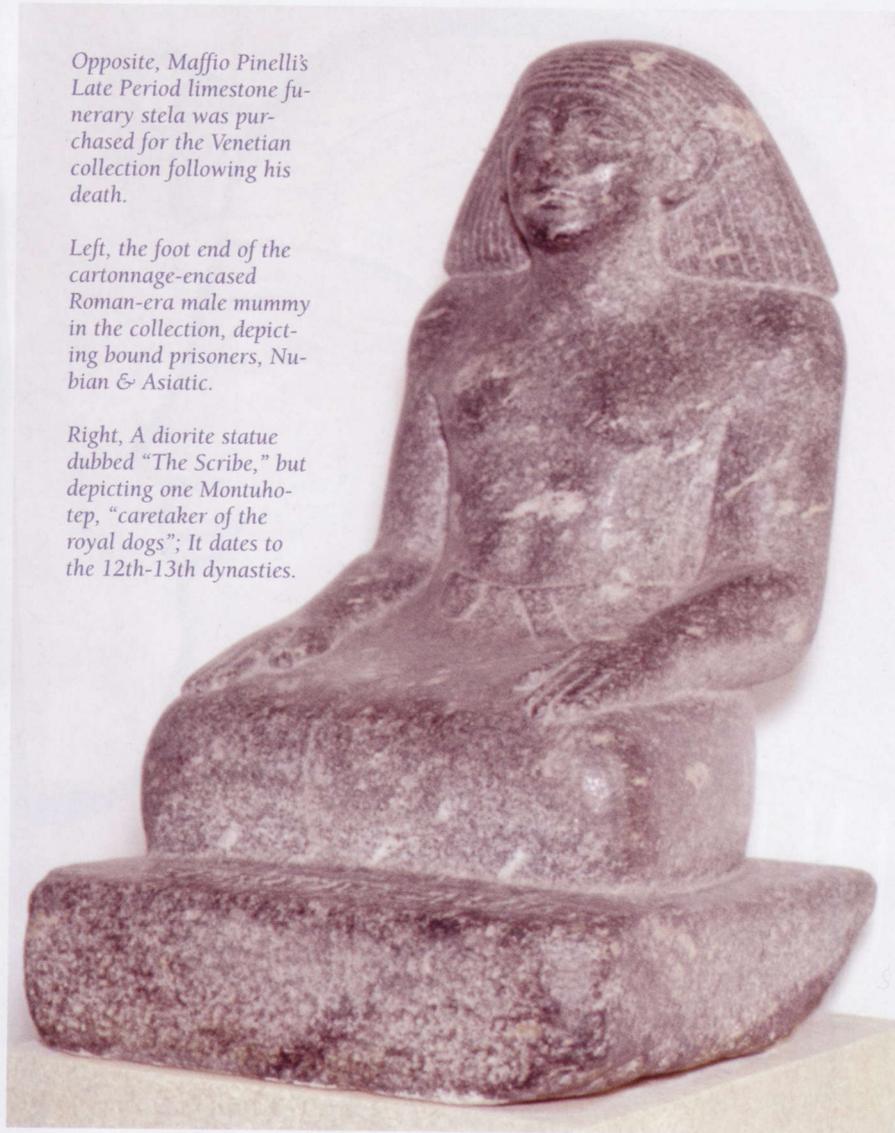
Extremely ironic is the fact that nothing is known about the donor, Salvatore Arbib, of the collection's star (only aesthetically-speaking since they date to the Roman period and their provenance is



Opposite, Maffio Pinelli's Late Period limestone funerary stela was purchased for the Venetian collection following his death.

Left, the foot end of the cartonnage-encased Roman-era male mummy in the collection, depicting bound prisoners, Nubian & Asiatic.

Right, A diorite statue dubbed "The Scribe," but depicting one Montuhotep, "caretaker of the royal dogs"; It dates to the 12th-13th dynasties.



unknown) artifacts: two nameless mummies, which Arbib donated in 1899. The female mummy, aged twenty-three to twenty-five, has no coffin, but her elaborately-woven bandages with gilded terracotta studs have confirmed her dates. Except for around his feet, the bandages of the male mummy are still completely intact (like the female mummy's, his sex was discovered by a CT-scan in 2004). Much of his body is covered in recently-restored polychromatic cartonnage, the face having a spectacular gilded mask. The well-preserved images on the bottom of his feet depict two bound prisoners-of-war: an Asiatic and a Nubian, traditional enemies of Egypt.

Of Europe's Egyptian collections that I have profiled up to now in *Kmt*, that of Venice is by far the smallest. Only about twenty of its some 150 objects — still mostly unpublished — are on display: the statuary in a windowless corridor and the funerary equipment in a small over-crowded room, which can accommodate at most six visitors. Fourteen ushabtis from different historical periods and made of different materials; small bronze votive statuettes of deities; canopic jars; and fragments of the *Book of the Dead* (found in the bandages of the female mummy) are displayed in wall cases, with the mummies in a large glass box at the room's center.

Other weaknesses of the collection are the fact that most of the artifacts date to the Roman Period and there have

been no acquisitions since Arbib's mummies. Perhaps the collection's most fascinating aspect is not on display: curator Fior believes several of the artifacts (especially the ushabtis and small bronze votives of deities) in storage could be Nineteenth Century fakes or, at best, Imperial Roman copies of Egyptian artifacts, like those commissioned by Hadrian. She and other scholars are doing extensive research on this subject, which could also make for a fascinating exhibition on the various ways to uncover fakes. For example, Fiore told me, "A few of our Venetian ushabtis, like the obelisk at the top of the Spanish Steps in Rome, have nonsensical hieroglyphic texts." The subjects of other enticing exhibitions could be of the Egyptian artifacts now in Bologna bought by Palagi but originally in Venetian collections, or a return home to Venice of Egyptian artifacts once in the possession of the Grimani, Girolamo Zulian, Maffio

Pinelli and Ascanio Molin — although they might be too dispersed to trace.

**Epilogue:** Besides Arbib's mummies, Venice is home to another mummy and mummy coffin. They were donated in 1825 to monastery/mother-house of the Mekhitarist Order, the foremost center of Armenian culture outside Armenia, founded in 1717 on island of San Lazzaro, a former leper colony, in the Venetian lagoon. Their donor was Boghus Bey, minister of Foreign Affairs in Egypt. Bey's mummy is very well preserved; some scholars even consider it the best preserved in Europe. The mummy's coffin belonged to a Prince Nehmekhet (c. 1000 BC), but ironically he is not the mummy, which dates to c. 1400 BC and is too tall to fit in the coffin!

**About the Author** Lucy Gordan-Rastelli is a journalist based in Rome. She has contributed numerous articles to the Journal.