The beauty of Venice is an axiom. We can no more deny it than we can deny that Venice is on the Adriatic Sea and has canals. We all know that Saint Mark is the patron saint of the city and that there are representations of him and his symbolic lion everywhere. There are, however, other patrons of Venice who are never mentioned as such but who must have had great importance for the Venetians of the fifteenth century: the angels. There are angels crowning the façade of San Marco; angels inside and outside of churches, palaces, and houses; angels in pairs kneeling in adoration or holding scrolls or canopies; half figures of angels isolated or nestled among foliage in an altarpiece or other monuments. One of these celestial messengers, sad-eyed, wings spread, left Venice sometime in the nineteenth century and after a long stay in the British Isles came to the New World for the Metropolitan Museum.

We have no evidence of the Venetian origin of the beautiful relief shown in Figure 1 beyond the fact that it is said to have been bought there by an English collector. This would not have been an isolated case, as there were dealers in Venice in the last century who were well known for their ability to sell Venetian sculptures for export abroad. To this probability we shall add certain characteristics of style that place the piece in the Venetian school of the third decade of the fifteenth century.

There are not many Venetian sculptures of that century outside of Italy and very few even in Venice that can be compared in quality with the Museum piece. This marble relief, just over two feet high, represents an angel in frontal position with wings and arms spread on either side and hands resting on acanthus leaves. Leaves like these are almost a signature for late Gothic Venetian sculpture. The figure ends just below the hands, and there is no reason to believe it was ever complete. Quite possibly, however, it formed part of a larger composition, probably an altarpiece or a funerary monument, and was on the right of the ensemble. The head turns slightly to the left and the marble slab ends on the contour of the angel’s left wing, while on the other side it goes beyond the right wing as if it were going to join another slab. Remains of cement all around and on the back show clearly that the relief was attached solidly to other pieces and probably to a wall. It could not have decorated the façade of a palace or church, for the marble shows no effects of weather.

The acanthus leaves on which the hands rest, and which are hardly noticeable at first sight, are probably part of some foliage from which the figure of the angel emerged like the half figures of prophets on the façade of San Marco and many other sculptures in Venice and the area under Venetian influence.

One’s attention is primarily attracted to the angel’s head, carved almost completely in the round, because of the serene beauty it emanates. The soft and abundant curls, richly carved with the help of the drill, rise over the ears and float back in the way characteristic of angels, both in painting and in sculpture, of the Gothic International style. The small forehead under the curls and the straight nose, broken at the tip and restored, have the quiet beauty of classic statues. The eyebrows form a very soft arch that curves down to the nose and up at the temples. The eyes, much elongated and rather flat, are outlined with an incised line; another line marks the upper lid, which is unrealistically narrow and curves up to join the eyebrow at the temple. Iris and pupil are also incised, the latter being a small cavity. The face is too flat under the eyes and has a tendency to widen toward the
lower jaw. The mouth, however, shows an exquisite sensitiveness in the curves of the soft, half-parted lips. The expression is rather meditative, almost sad: this would be in favor of the theory that the angel was once part of a funerary monument, but it cannot be taken as conclusive.

The way the mantle is wrapped about the body, with one end turning around the neck and falling in a cascade of rounded folds, is quite characteristic of the works of Jacobello and Pierpaolo dalle Masegne, sculptors active in Venice in the last decade of the fourteenth century. Nevertheless, the origin of this style of drapery is complex, because the Dalle Masegne themselves were influenced by the art of northern countries as well as by other Italian artists, among them Nino Pisano. These draperies are also close to works of the early fifteenth century Florentine school, mainly those of Lorenzo Ghiberti.

All these influences are possible and understandable within the complexity of the Venetian school of the period.

Before the fifteenth century Venice had been for centuries under a strong Eastern influence, because of a close relationship with the Byzant-
tine Empire. Only slowly and almost painfully did the “bride of the Adriatic” begin to take part like the other Italian cities in the political and the artistic movements of Western civilization. These special circumstances explain the great artistic distance between Florence, already experiencing the Renaissance in the fourteenth century, and Venice, which remained Oriental, Byzantine, and medieval almost until that most glorious period of its artistic life, the sixteenth century, in which Titian was the main figure.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century there was not in Venice a school of sculpture comparable with that of Florence or even Milan. Most of the artists came from other regions, mainly Lombardy. Sculptors who had been working at the cathedral of Milan went to work at San Marco and other Venetian monuments; sculptors who had been working in Venice went to Milan. This exchange of artists extended to other cities: Bologna, Padua, and Verona. Sculptors went from one commission to another, without ever settling down to form a school.

Since we believe the style of the angel relief can only be explained by a combination of Florentine and Venetian trends, we have to seek its
creator among all the sculptors who worked in Venice in the early fifteenth century and who had relationships with Florentine art.

There were two who worked at the cathedral of Florence at the beginning of the fifteenth century, were in close contact with figures as important as Ghiberti and Donatello, and went to Venice about the same time. One of them, Niccolò di Pietro Lamberti, was to have a strong influence on Venetian sculpture, and of him we shall see more. The other, Nanni di Bartolo, called Rosso, went to Venice in 1424 and later worked in other northern towns. The main sculpture of his Florentine period, the prophet Abdias made for the Campanile and now at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, shows a very promising artist under the influence of Donatello, with whom he sometimes collaborated. His documented works after he left Florence, however, are far from being on the same level. The beautiful group representing the Judgment of Solomon, on the angle of the Ducal Palace to the right of the Porta della Carta in Venice, has been attributed to Nanni di Bartolo by Paoletti1 because of its similarity to two works generally accepted as his, the Brenzoni monument in San Fermo Maggiore in Verona, and the monument of the Beato Pacifico at Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari in Venice. Venturi in his Storia2 attributed to Nanni the Judgment group and this attribution has been recently considered tenable by Pope-Hennessy.3 The Judgment of Solomon could have been Rosso's first work after he left Florence in 1424, when he was still much influenced by the teachings of Donatello. We do not believe that Nanni di Bartolo's style can be connected in any way with the style of our relief.

Around 1394 the brothers Dalle Masegne were working at the iconostasis of San Marco. Twenty-two years later Niccolò di Pietro Lamberti, who had gone to Venice with his son and assistant Pietro di Niccolò Lamberti, was working at San Marco. Lamberti the father had learned in Florence all he could learn, but he was basically retardataire; that is to say, he worked in an earlier style. He had full command of technique but was too conservative and unimaginative to understand the innovations of a genius like Donatello. He had to choose between being the lesser in a group of masters or acting himself as head of a lesser group. He chose the latter, and Venice was the right place for him. The influence of the Dalle Masegne had not been strong enough to create a real school, and Niccolò Lamberti had the advantage of his Florentine training, his highly polished technique, and his consistency of style—all of them good qualities—to enable him to transmit a certain unity and finality to the sculpture of a region like the Venetian one, which at the time was almost a training camp for sculptors of other regions.

The extent of Niccolò's participation in San Marco seems quite clear, above all from Fiocco's careful and brilliant study of the Lamberti.4 Fiocco considers entirely Niccolò's work the statue of Saint Mark crowning the main façade and the Virtues and saints in tabernacles in the same façade. These sculptures do not show the preciousness of works from Niccolò's Florentine period, for example the Saint Mark now at the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Florence, but they are excellent illustrations of the kind of work he could produce when he was on his own. Certain minor sculptures, for example the busts of prophets on the façade of San Marco that have already been mentioned in connection with the Museum's angel, seem to be the work of assistants who followed closely Niccolò's style.

The role of Pietro Lamberti, first as his father's assistant and later alone or with collaborators is obscure, and has been the cause of one of the bitterest battles in art history. The intervention of the Lamberti is not mentioned in early books on Venice such as Sansovino's Venetia5 or Corner's work on the Venetian churches.6 Nothing was published about their contact with Venice until Paoletti's valuable study of the architecture and sculpture of the city of canals appeared at the end of the nineteenth century. Paoletti was the first to publish the documents and to give a sensible picture of the problem; his work still stands as the most reliable source for the study both of the sculpture and the architecture of Venice.7

Fiocco has tried to demonstrate that Pietro Lamberti was a real master, a genius on the level of the best in Florence, and he has ascribed to him all the works that show a first-class hand.8 His approach, however, is too passionate and partial, and quite frequently inconsistent because he selected the works by their high quality.
Fig. 2. Altarpiece in the Mascoli Chapel in San Marco, Venice

rather than their affinities in style. Pietro, according to him, would have had to be one of the most versatile artists of all time.

As opposed to the theory of Pietro the genius, Fogolari in 1930 brought forth the theory of Bartolomeo Bon the genius and Pietro the worthless. He attacked Fiocco's point of view, in many instances unjustly, and attributed all the important works to the genuinely Venetian sculptor Bartolomeo Bon. He denied Pietro's authorship even of the best sculptures in monuments where he is known to have worked with collaborators. Fiocco answered Fogolari's attack without changing his previous attributions, and other scholars took one side or the other.

Both Fiocco and Fogolari overlooked Planiscig's approach to the problem. The Austrian scholar was more objective, though not entirely convincing either. His theory has recently been adopted in great part by Pope-Hennessy, who has studied the whole problem with great impartiality. Planiscig decided that neither Pietro Lambertì nor Bartolomeo Bon had ever reached greatness, and for their names he substituted another, which so far has not been identified with any actual artist. To the Mascoli Master, so named from the altarpiece at the Mascoli Chapel in San Marco (Figure 2), Planiscig attributed other works, among them the most beautiful Venetian sculpture of that period: the lunette representing the enthroned Madonna and Child and two adoring angels (Figure 3) which is at the door of the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari.

Turning now to our point of departure, the angel at the Metropolitan Museum, we have seen in it a connection with the version of Florentine art imported into Venice by Niccolò Lambertì. We also see a close relationship with the kneeling angels in the antependium of the Mascoli Chapel and with those of the Cornaro tympanum at Santa Maria dei Frari. In style and craftsmanship the Metropolitan angel is by no means inferior to the other two, but it is difficult to believe that all three reliefs are by the same master. There are similarities and differences which link and separate these three beautiful sculptures.

The wings of all the angels are identical in shape, and the same simplified design has been used to render the feathers. The profiles, with straight noses and small chins, are similar; so is
the floating hair, though the curls of the Metropolitan angel seem freer and more convincing. The draperies in the Mascoli antependium are quite different from those in the other two pieces; we could say that they are less Ghibertesque. The figures in the Frari tympanum have very much better studied. As the position of the hands of the Metropolitan angel is so static, any convincing comparison with the other hands would be difficult, but in shape they seem closer to those in the Frari lunette. The eyes, both in the Cornaro and the Mascoli reliefs, are very softly

full cheeks; the Mascoli angels have cheeks less full, and those of the Metropolitan angel are quite flat. The way the Mascoli angels hold the censer is quite clumsy, as if they were holding a light veil or a cup of tea instead of a heavy object. On the contrary, the hands in the Cornaro lunette are softly articulated and their postures carved and less elongated than those of the Metropolitan angel; they do not show the sharp outlines that we see in our piece, but those could have been incised at a later date.

After all these comparisons, we are forced to conclude that the Metropolitan Museum angel must have been carved by an artist who prob-

Fig. 3. Madonna and Child with angels from the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, Venice
ably worked at San Marco close to Niccolò Lamberti. If we accept the so-called Mascoli Master as the author of the tympanum of the Cornaro Chapel and of the altarpiece and antependium at the Mascoli Chapel, we could consider our angel also his work. If, on the other hand, the existence of that master does not seem entirely convincing, we must conclude that the three reliefs came from the same atelier though not from a single artist.

Because his name has been involved in the controversy outlined above, we cannot conclude this discussion without mentioning Bartolomeo Bon, the only sculptor in Venice in the first half of the fifteenth century who was born there and worked in his native city to the end of his life. Documents as early as 1392 mention him as working with his father Giovanni. Bartolomeo had a very long artistic career, and probably many assistants and followers. He left enough undisputed works to define his artistic personality, even though in others the extent of his participation is not clear. His style has very little to do with the Florentine school. A strong and typically Venetian conservatism shows in some of his works, for example the Madonna della Misericordia now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which goes back to Byzantine prototypes curiously mixed with entirely local elements.

There are in The Cloisters’ collection two corbels (Figures 4, 5), each carved with the busts of two angels, that are related to Bartolomeo’s work. In spite of their floating hair and draperies with curving folds, these are quite different in feeling from the Metropolitan angel. There is nothing classic or Florentine about them and they show a naturalism and expressiveness that we never find in works close to Niccolò Lamberti. Judging by their style, these corbels are certainly north Italian and probably Venetian. The faces of the angels, with large round cheeks, small eyes, and childish expressions, have something in common with a pair of angels holding a scroll, from the door of the old Scuola della Misericordia in Venice; the latter are accepted as the work of Bartolomeo Bon. The corbels are also related to another work of his, the large heads at the corners of the wellhead in the Ca d’Oro. It is impossible to say whether the corbels had an architectural function in some demolished church or were part of some sculptural monument. The position of the angels is almost identical in each corbel, but reversed, as if they were meant to be on the two sides of an arch, a door, or some religious or funerary representation. They could be the work of some artist within the Bon circle,
and they probably date no earlier than 1440 or 1445.

Only the date of the Metropolitan Museum angel now remains to be considered. By 1428 Niccolò Lamberti was already out of Venice, and by 1435 his son Pietro was dead. If we consider our angel close to the sculptures of San Marco done in Niccolò's time and under his influence, a date close to 1425 and no later than 1430 seems probable. The Mascoli altarpiece was certainly finished and in place when the chapel was dedicated in 1430. The tympanum at the Frari can date from any time after 1422, the year in which the Cornaro Chapel was begun. The closeness of these two reliefs and the Metropolitan angel in style and date is a remarkable coincidence within a school and period where conclusions are to be drawn with great difficulty.

NOTES
5. Francesco Sansovino, Venetia citta nobilissima e singolare, Venice, 1663.
6. Flaminio Corner, Notizie storiche delle Chiese e Monasteri di Venezia e di Torcello, Padua, 1758.
7. Paoletti, op. cit.

The only works signed by Pietro or sufficiently documented to be attributed to him are the monument of the doge Tommaso Mocenigo in SS Giovanni e Paolo, Venice, executed in 1423; and the Fulgosio monument at the Santo in Padua, on which he worked with a collaborator. When he died in 1435 he was commissioned to work at the Ca d'Oro, but there is no evidence that he left any sculptures there.
11. Leo Planiscig, Venezianische Bildhauer der Renaissance, Vienna, 1921.