Founded in the seventh century and built upon more than 100 islets in a lagoon off the northeast coast of the Italian peninsula, Venice grew to be one of the largest cities in Europe and the capital of a great trading empire whose reach extended far into the eastern Mediterranean. Venice initially had strong political ties to Byzantium, and in the tenth and eleventh centuries Venetian merchants obtained the trading privileges from the Byzantine emperors that gave them a distinct advantage over their rivals from other western European cities. The fact that Venetian gold ducat had currency throughout the Near East is an indication of the ubiquity and importance of Venetian merchants there. As Byzantium gradually gave way to Islamic caliphates from the eighth century onward, meeting its ultimate demise in 1453 at the hands of the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II, Venetians increasingly came into contact with Muslims and their ideas, culture, and way of life. As a result, Venice became Christian Europe’s most important interface with the Muslim civilizations of the Near East (The Reception of the Venetian Ambassadors in Damascus, 1511; Musée du Louvre, Paris).

The artistic consequences of the dynamic relationship that Venice forged with its Islamic trading partners, especially the Mamluks of Egypt and Syria, the Ottomans of Turkey, and the Safavids of Iran, were felt over nearly a thousand-year period. The same merchant galleys that carried spices, soap, cotton, and industrial supplies...
from the bazaars of the Islamic Near East to the markets of Venice also brought with them luxurious carpets, velvets, silks, glass, porcelain, gilded bookbindings, illustrated manuscripts, and inlaid metalwork (Mahmud al-Kurdi, Salver, late 15th century; Musée du Louvre, Paris). Not surprisingly, these and other portable works of Islamic art, which were often superior in quality to what was available in Europe, made an indelible impression upon artistic taste and production in Venice. From the medieval to the Baroque eras, Venetians acquired Islamic art and adapted and imitated its techniques (Ewer, early 16th century; Musée du Louvre, Paris). In turn, albeit to a lesser extent, the arts of Venice became of interest to the Islamic world.

The chronological framework of these essays is provided by the year 828, when two Venetian merchants stole Saint Mark's relics from Alexandria (then part of the Muslim world) and brought them to their home city, and the year 1797, when the Venetian Republic fell to the French conqueror Napoleon Bonaparte.

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