

I Cavalli di San Marco ***(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy)***

Melora Cann

Meet the artists: Some artists such as the ancient Greek artists, Phidias (reliefs on the Parthenon) and Alexander of Antioch (Venus de Milo) are known, most remain anonymous.

Meet the subject: The Horses of Saint Mark in Venice, Italy

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I Cavalli di San Marco

(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)



The original Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice, Italy

I Cavalli di San Marco

(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)



Replicas now grace the front of the Cathedral of Saint Mark in the main square in Venice, Italy.

I Cavalli di San Marco

(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)

Meet the artists:

While some artists such as the ancient Greek artists, Phidias (reliefs on the Parthenon) and Alexander of Antioch (Venus de Milo) are known, most remain anonymous, including the artist who created the four horses now perched on St. Marks. Was the artist Greek or Roman?

Meet the subject:

These gorgeous equine athletes form a realistic group of four free-standing figures, yet each is posed so that it reacts to the others in stance and head posture. You can almost hear them stomping and snorting. The grouping of four gold plated bronze horses is the only example of four-in-hand to have survived from the distant past. St. Mark's museum conducted a carbon 14 analysis of the horses which has verified a production date of the early 2nd century B.C. Since by the second century B.C. Rome was rising in power and absorbing Greek culture, importing its art (and artists!), no one can clearly state whether the horses are the work of Greek or Roman artists. Contemporary work exists that is Greek in origin such as the Winged Victory and the Venus de Milo, both now to be seen in the Louvre in Paris.

The Horses of Saint Mark may have originally come from the Hippodrome (horse racetrack) of Constantinople, where chariot racing occurred. After the sack of Constantinople (which was the Christian capitol of the Eastern Holy Roman Empire, also called the Byzantine Empire) in 1204, Venetian crusaders took them as loot. By 1254 the horses had been placed on the façade of St Mark's Basilica where they remained for nearly 600 years. For conservation and restoration, the original bronze horses have been placed in a museum within St Mark's while replicas now occupy their position on the loggia.

Curious fact:

All four horse heads were cut off by the Venetian looters in order to fit them onto the galleys for shipping back to Venice. Now collars, crafted after the fact, hide where the heads were reattached.

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(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)



Contemporary Winged Victory of Samothrace or The Winged Nike, c.200-190 B.C

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(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)



Contemporary Alexandros of Antioch's Aphrodite, also known as the "Venus de Milo," 130-100 B.C

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(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)



'The Parthenon Frieze,' by Phidias, c. 443-437 B.C.

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(The Horses of Saint Mark's Basilica, Venice, Italy) (continued)

More info-bites:

- In 1797, Napoleon Bonaparte removed the horses, and built the triumphal Arc du Carousel just to display them in Paris.
- The Duke of Wellington sent the horses back to Venice after he defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

How the ancient artists did it:

The bronze statues were produced with the lost-wax casting technique. The Greeks used, among others, a technique called lost-wax casting, where a hollow clay form was made by first making a wax mold, covering it with clay, and then heating it to melt the wax. Molten bronze would be poured into the empty space where the wax had been.

Want to hear and see more?

How the horses were stolen – multiple times! From the National Endowment for the Arts, see “Plunder, war, and the Horses of San Marco” (8 minutes on YouTube)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1H7u3jVQ0zg>

Visit YouTube and see a short ‘360’ video (3 minutes) - walk up high with the replica horses on the front of the cathedral of Saint Mark's ...in the rain! Use your mouse (or fingertip) to grab the screen and shift the view, rather like on google-earth. Looking down into the piazza, notice the low linked platforms – those are part of the elevated temporary ‘walkways’ that are put out when the piazza floods with lagoon waters during ‘Aqua Alta’ (high water!)

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWIBW9OgALI>