Byzantine art made ‘history’? the Pala d’Oro and the Pala Feriale in Dandolo’s Venice

My paper examines the fourteenth-century renewal of the altar area of the basilica of San Marco, Venice, with specific focus on the changes made to the pala d’oro (the majestic Byzantine altarpiece that embellished the altar since the twelfth century), and on the visual interactions between the Byzantine artwork and Paolo Veneziano’s pala feriale, the newly-commissioned painted altarpiece that covered the pala d’oro on non-festive days.

As I will suggest, the makeover of the high altar of San Marco specifically addressed issues of temporality and historicity. At one level, this artistic renovation transformed the high altar of San Marco generally, and the Byzantine pala d’oro more specifically, into sites of historical remembrance. Commemorating selected moments and actors from the Venetian past, and providing material proof that those events had actually happened, the high altar of San Marco was made to articulate ideas of institutional stability and continuity at times of heightened tensions. At another level, the artistic makeover turned the altar area into a multimedia visual recapitulation of the economy of Christian salvation. Placing the pala d’oro at the heart of a complex eschatological program that couched history in terms of eternity, this campaign also illuminates the dual meaning of Byzantine art in Trecento Venice, as the ‘stuff of history’ and a locus of transcendence.

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Stefania’s recent publications concern the nexus between aesthetics and politics, with specific focus on artistic interactions, political conflict, and public memory in the medieval Mediterranean. Her current monograph project explores these issues through the interpretative lens of crisis, and in relation to the visual arts of Venice in the fourteenth century. Stefania also has a long-standing interest in questions of materiality, visibility and sacred presence; and in the conceptualizations and artistic applications of light and transparency, which she has addressed in a suite of essays on the aesthetics and meanings of rock crystal.