

## The Visual Media Center

# The Art and Architecture of Renaissance Venice

The idea for the Art and Architecture of Renaissance Venice Web site began several years ago when Professor David Rosand suggested that we think about a digital project revolving around Jacopo de' Barbari's bird's eye *View of Venice*, a monumental woodblock print dated 1500, and a work that is not only unique for its time but also represents the height of printing and publishing technology in the Italian Renaissance. Following this thread of technological ingenuity from Jacopo's day down to our own set the stage for our approach to the design of the project. We started by asking ourselves, "What would Jacopo de' Barbari do if he were working in a digital studio?" Even a quick look at his print reveals that Jacopo was a stickler for detail, one of the most important qualities a Web designer can possess, with an unerring eye for precision, an unyielding ability to persevere and a surfeit of creativity—all characteristics shared by the Visual Media Center's Web-site designer, Juliet Chou. We also felt a certain affinity with the Renaissance printmaker because we sensed that if he were alive today, he would be spending his days before a computer screen just as we do, eagerly anticipating the latest software developments that would offer new possibilities for imaginative designs and complaining often, and loudly, that his computer was already obsolete, even if only a year or two old.

Of course, Jacopo could go only so far with the tools available to him. Today, with the development of digital technology, we are able to burst through the two-dimensional space of Jacopo's print to carry the students from an aerial view hovering above the rooftops right down into a single room in one of the famous buildings of the period, the Scuola Grande di San Marco. This building, once the meeting place of a charitable confraternity composed of Venetian citizens, is one of the outstanding architectural monuments of the late fifteenth century and once housed some of the most important paintings of the period. As happened so often, the paintings were removed and dispersed to museums, all but destroying the decoration of an important room, replete with civic and religious themes characteristic of the period. However, with the opportunities provided by digital technology, we have recreated the meeting room as a computer-generated model and returned the paintings to their original setting, at least in a virtual space. In this way, users of the site are encouraged to think about the original context for works of art,

something completely lost in a museum, and consider how the works of art were intended to be seen and understood by the artists and patrons responsible for the work.

The project was fortunate from the start because the Cleveland Museum of Art owns one of the finest editions of Jacopo's print and Jane Glaubinger, the curator of prints, graciously granted us permission to use their version as the basis for our Web site. A campaign by the Italian government to produce aerial photographs and a Geographic Information System (GIS) program for Venice provided the modern images of the city, including the aerial views and the line drawings of each building's ground plan. From these layers, embracing the Renaissance and the modern cities, we were able to design a program that allows users to navigate across space and time to explore one of the quintessential Italian urban settings, a unique place that has been attracting scholars, students, and tourists for hundreds of years.

For the staff of the Visual Media Center, working with Professor Rosand has been a delightful and rewarding experience. He has brought to the project his unrivaled knowledge of Venetian Renaissance art and has shared our enthusiasm for the migration of art historical teaching and research to the digital environment where so many unexpected surprises occur as we merge new media with historical content.

We look forward to continuing our Venetian journey.