

# THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

IMPERIAL VENICE MIGHT BE DEAD, BUT THE REPUBLIC OF THE INNER LIFE FORGES AHEAD. HERBERT MUSCHAMP REFLECTS.

Photographs by  
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spy for dead empires.

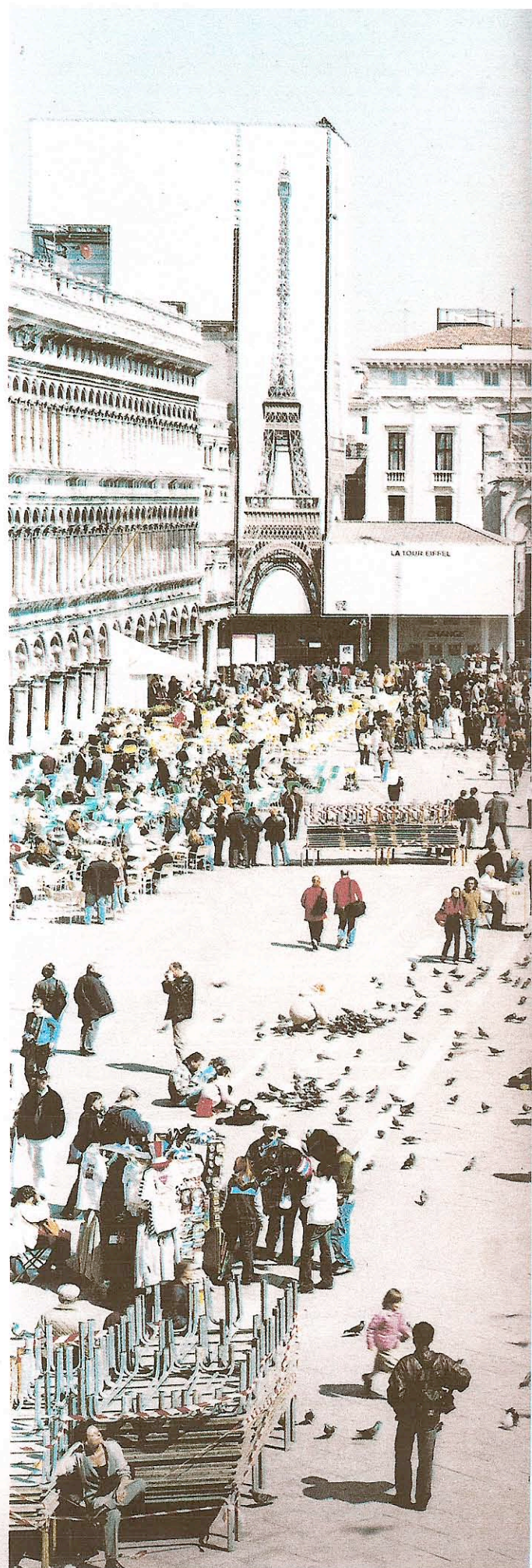
It's my way of coping with the imperial ambitions of the living. I spy for Venice, Vienna, Istanbul: any imperial city that has lost its global reach.

May I recruit you? We'll dress like American tourists, sip drinks on the terrace of the Gritti Palace and wave to passing groups of fellow agents disguised as Germans, Britons and Japanese. We'll wink knowingly at Russian impostors and counterfeit Swiss. No one will be the wiser, except possibly ourselves.

The dead imperial city is a global place unto itself, an international state of mind built and operated by the curious and doubtful: it is the republic of the inner life. Let others struggle to become a superpower. We prefer the underpower, in superunderwear. Our undercover mission is to form alliances and pacts with the poets and dreamers who have preceded us. We work for them.

Of all the great imperial cities, Venice is the most intact. Its enduring integrity is as scandalous as the fact of its existence. A swamp is not supposed to produce a

**St. Mark's place: embracing the cliché of the Venetian tourist at Piazza San Marco.**





great city, much less the most dazzling archipelago. Despite the decay of centuries, and partly because of it, Venice is remarkably unchanged from the day in 1797 when the last doge took off his hat.

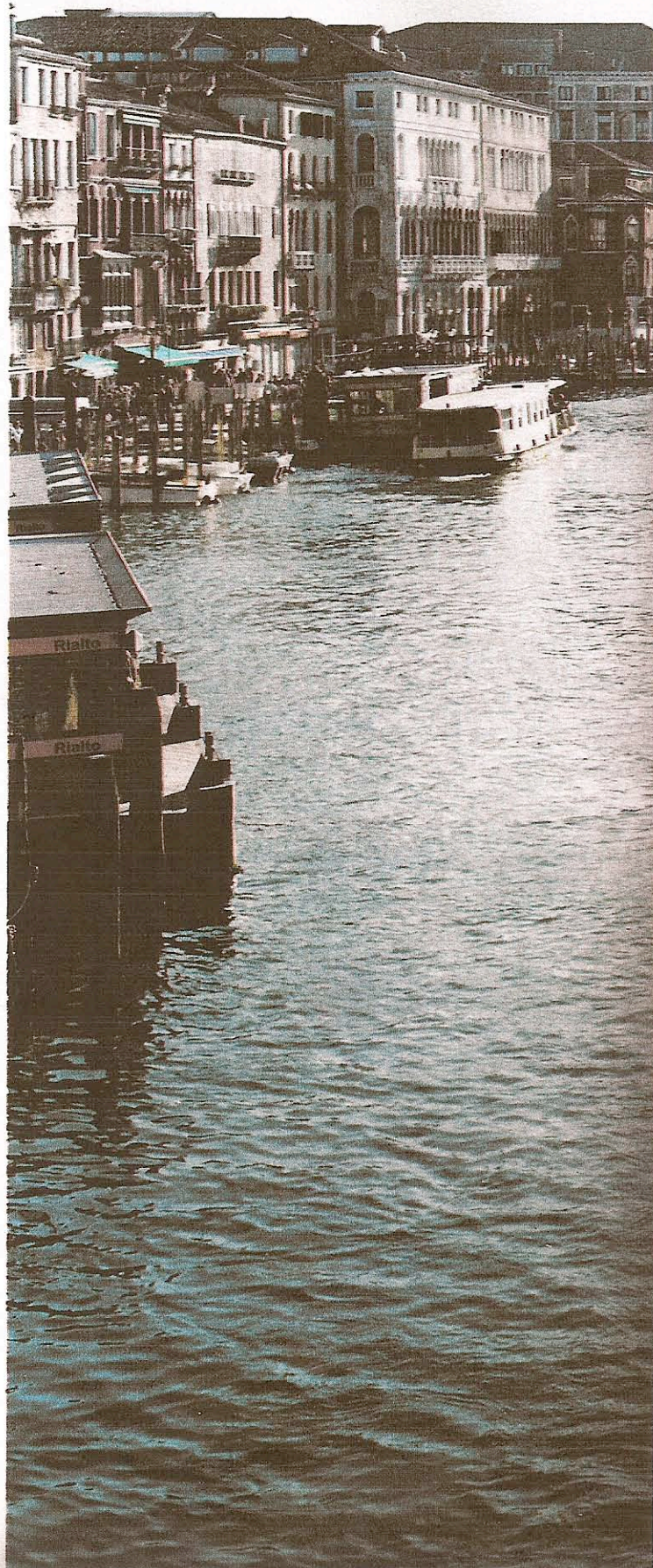
We start with Venice because Venice is our home. The information network was born there, at almost precisely the moment that Columbus stepped into the New World. That event precipitated the slow decline of Venice as a maritime power. The opening of Atlantic trade routes eventually enabled Genoa to overtake Venice as a center of international trade.

But in 1490, two years before the Italian explorer sailed into the Caribbean, something occurred in Venice that would transform the relationship of European minds to the world. Aldus Manutius founded the Aldine Press. Whether you are reading these words on the printed page or on a computer screen, your access to them is a consequence of that event. While Gutenberg is fairly credited with the invention of movable type, it was Manutius who devised the first mass-distribution system of the information age. The technology of humanism stems from him.

Smaller typefaces, reduced page sizes, longer print runs, bulk marketing to universities: such innovations produced more than books. They also produced literacy. People had to learn how to read the texts they could now afford to buy. Literacy, in turn, produced independence of mind. People of moderate means now had access to the ideas of Aristotle, Plato, Herodotus, Aristophanes and other classical authors who made up the core of Aldine's list. The Inquisition was not pleased, but the Venetians didn't care as long as the inquisitors agreed to pay for all the books they planned to burn.

But the inner life needs more than books. It also craves what psychologists call implicit learning: the attainment of insight that occurs when we're not consciously focused on an object of study. Implicit learning is contingent on context, or situation. Fleeting stimuli from the outer world gives rise to enduring perceptions from within.

The Romantics celebrated the natural environment for its power to induce insight. Quite a few of them reviled cities for presenting so many distractions that reflection becomes impossible. The truth is that certain kinds of learning benefit from the distractions that cities offer. The concept of the *flâneur*, or city wanderer, is



**Waterscape: a modern take on Canaletto's "Grand Canal From Rialto Bridge"**







