BEWARE OF FALLING ANGELS

From the top of a small bridge, Lesa Marcello watched as workmen removed the last of the scaffolding from the five-hundred-year-old Church of Santa Maria dei Miracoli. The building had been wrapped in a cocoon of canvas for the past ten years while the restorers did their work, and now it stood revealed: a multicolored, early-Renaissance jewel box sheathed in panels of inlaid marble and porphyry.

Like a gem itself, the Miracoli Church was set into a tiny niche at the heart of a maze of streets so intertwined and out of the way that one often came upon it by surprise. A small canal ran along one side, serving as a reflecting pool. The Miracoli was, in short, irresistible . Even John Ruskin, who detested Renaissance architecture, had to admit that it was one of the most "refined" buildings in Venice. Small wonder that Santa Maria dei Miracoli - "St. Mary of the Miracles"- had been the church of choice for weddings as long as anyone could remember.

The restoration was financed by Save Venice, the American charity devoted to the preservation of art and architecture in Venice.

As the director of the local office, Countess Marcello had been coming to the church several times a week for some years to check on its progress. She conferred with artisans, workmen, contractors, and city officials. At times she even climbed the scaffolding to get a closer look.

As with all such projects in Venice, the restoration of the Miracoli had not been a simple matter of putting up the money and telling the restorers to go to work. Venetian bureaucrats never shared the donors' sense of urgency. They could delay a project indefinitely if they felt the slightest challenge to their authority or their expertise. Understanding this, the officers of Save Venice had wisely hired Countess Marcello to run their Venice office. They had also elected several Venetian nobles to their board of directors, including Lesa Marcello's husband, Count Girolamo Marcello.

Countess Marcello was a woman of quiet, unassuming grace and had proved exceptionally valuable to Save Venice. She knew the local superintendents personally; more than that, she knew about the rivalries within the bureaucracy and was therefore able to maneuver deftly, without treading on toes. She was practiced in the art of negotiation, Venetian style, which began with the understanding that one could accomplish more over a cup of coffee at Caffè Florian than across a desk in an office. In conversation Lesa Marcello raised issues obliquely. She compromised, and if there happened to be any impatience percolating among the officers of Save Venice, and there usually was, she never let the Venetians know about it.

"One always has to do these things privately," she said when I came to see her in her office one afternoon, "not in an official way. For example, if Save Venice pays to restore a painting, one of the art experts on its board of directors might want to come to Venice and say to the superintendent, 'You know, you shouldn't use this chemical. The superintendent will think he's being criticized, so he replies, 'But that's what we want to do.’ And then the project is stalled. I prefer to broach the subject by saying, 'I've been asked if this or that might be possible.' And then I would simply compare the two ideas rather than oppose one against the other. It's a very subtle difference, but it's important. It's our nature, our way of moving, of navigating. It's gentle, not aggressive. The superintendents are willing to discuss new ideas with other experts, but only if it's done in an evenhanded way. And, of course, only in private."

"How do you mean in private'?" I asked.

"One-to-one," she said. "If a third person is present, then it's no longer private. It's public, and the superintendent, being only human, would be embarrassed."