

**Conservation Work at Santa Maria Assunta on Torcello Leads to Discovery Of 9<sup>th</sup>-Century Fresco Fragments, the Oldest in Venice and the Venetian Lagoon**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**(VENICE, ITALY and NEW YORK CITY, JULY 24, 2020)**—The American non-profit organization Save Venice announces startling discoveries made during conservation work it has funded at the Basilica di Santa Maria Assunta on the Island of Torcello in collaboration with the Catholic Diocese of Venice and Ca' Foscari, University of Venice. Fresco fragments from the 9<sup>th</sup> century—never before seen or studied—have been uncovered, confirming an elaborate Carolingian decorative cycle in the church prior to the extensive and world-famous 11<sup>th</sup>-century Byzantine mosaics.

**“Save Venice’s conservation treatments often lead to discoveries that change our understanding of the history of Venetian art,” said Save Venice Chairman, Frederick Ilchman. “But this remarkable find from more than 1000 years ago pulls back the curtain of time. We are proud of our participation in this restoration and grateful to the handful of very generous donors that make the conservation work possible. We look forward to finding additional sponsors in anticipation of our 50th anniversary in 2021, allowing us to continue on Torcello and in dozens of other Venetian sites.”**

The frescoes, covered by a layer of rubble since the Middle Ages, are no longer visible from the nave of the church and are preserved high on the walls, towards the roof and above the vaults. They represent a fundamental element for the reconstruction of the artistic history not only of the church of Torcello, but for the entire early Middle Ages in Venice and the northern Adriatic.

The building history of Santa Maria Assunta is complex, as a substantial 9th-century structure was built upon a smaller church of 7th-century origin, which in turn appears to have been constructed on the foundation of a 3rd-century Roman *domus* (house). In the 11th century, the church was enlarged and the walls were raised and embellished with mosaics. Renovations in the mid-19th century and again in the 1930s further altered the ecclesiastic space which includes the remains of the adjacent 7th-century baptistery and the intact 11th-century bell tower.

These newly discovered fresco fragments include a vivid representation of Mary and a handmaid; a second pictorial panel, probably related to a parallel cycle, once depicted Saint Martin. The fragmentary images of the saints are accompanied by painted captions with early medieval lettering. Together they allow us to imagine extensive fresco decoration in the church before it was covered with 11<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics.

Save Venice’s current campaign for Torcello was launched in 2019 in anticipation of the organization’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021. The project is exceptional, as it will resolve both structural concerns of the church’s interior and exterior walls and preserve its decorative apparatus, in particular the 11<sup>th</sup>-century mosaics. This urgent conservation work is possible thanks to lead sponsors Jon and Barbara Landau who have funded the treatment of the *Madonna Hodegetria* mosaic of the central apse; principal funders Howard and Roberta Ahmanson, VISA, the Manitou Fund through Nora McNeely Hurley Silo, GRoW@Annenberg, and Tina Walls; and supporters Casey Kohlberg through The Camalotte Foundation and Molly and David Borthwick.

Following the exceptional high tides of November and December 2019, in partnership with the Embassy of Italy in Washington D.C., Save Venice provided additional support for relief efforts in Santa Maria Assunta through the Immediate Response Fund.

**The Italian Ambassador, His Excellency Armando Varricchio noted, “I am particularly pleased about this recent discovery shedding new light into the history of the Serenissima. The restoration work carried out by Save Venice was indeed outstanding. I am proud that this work has been supported by the #AmericaLovesVenice campaign launched last year by the Embassy and Save Venice in cooperation with the Italian diplomatic and consular network in the US. These findings tell us the story of a city with deep roots in the past, that throughout the centuries has always looked at the future, as it does today, yearning for the opportunities of tomorrow.”**



**SAVE VENICE**  
CONSERVING ART, CELEBRATING HISTORY.

**ABOUT SAVE VENICE**

Save Venice is dedicated to preserving the artistic heritage of Venice, Italy. Founded in response to the exceptional floods of 1966 and incorporated in 1971, Save Venice has since worked tirelessly to preserve, protect, and promote the art and culture of Venice, enabling the conservation of more than 1000 works of art. Headquartered in New York City, Save Venice maintains a full-time office in Venice. In 2015, Save Venice established the Rosand Library & Study Center in Venice, creating a nexus for the research of Venetian art, history, and conservation. Save Venice also provides grants for fellowships, exhibitions, and publications to advance Venetian scholarship and conservation. As new external environmental challenges arise, Save Venice and its family of experts anticipate multiple preservation protocols to assure the sustainability of its work.

**PRESS CONTACT: Director, Venice Office, Melissa Conn**

[venice@savevenice.org](mailto:venice@savevenice.org)

+39 347 7850763

[savevenice.org](http://savevenice.org)