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The Horses of San Marco and the Quadriga of the Lord

Michael Jacoff

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Although the rich façades of San Marco are an unmistakable tribute to the glory of Venice, their captivating splendor almost conceals the rigor of their complex ideological statement. Here Michael Jacoff offers a new approach to understanding San Marco's exterior decoration by concentrating on the façades' most celebrated feature: the four life-size ancient bronze horses on the west front. Trophies commemorating Venice's conquest of Constantinople in 1204, these horses, Jacoff argues, also evoked for medieval believers the metaphor of Christ's quadriga, in which the four Evangelists are likened to four spirited steeds drawing Christ's chariot, representing His Word, through the world. The horses have, then, both a political and religious meaning, and in both respects they make a fundamental contribution to the façades' overall message.

Jacoff compares the horses to other examples of ancient sculpture put on display during the Middle Ages and explores their Roman references. He concludes that the horses would have been installed very differently were it not for their additional Christian meaning at San Marco. Seeing the horses as the Quadriga of the Lord significantly advances our understanding of San Marco's façades and of the medieval reuse of classical antiquities.

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