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# Venice and Its Revered Book Connection Since 1362

After surviving the historical ups and downs of the publishing tradition, today books in Venice face their greatest threat from “acqua alta”

**Italian Hours**

by Lucy Gordan



*The facade of the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana. Courtesy of the Library's Press Office*

Feb 26 2020

*From March 9-29 additional “Acqua Alta” salvaged book art, under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture, will be on display in the windows of Milan’s prestigious book store Libreria Bocca in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II and offered for sale to the general public.*

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My article “**Armenia’ at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and in Venice**” published in *La Voce di New York* on November 6, 2018, was divided into two parts: a review of the multi-media exhibition including art, relics, fabrics and books, and a history of St. Lazarus Island in the Venetian lagoon. Since 1717 it’s been the long-revered protector/shrine of

## Armenian culture.

PRIMVS



EL SEQVENTE triúpho nõ meno mirauoglioso di primo. Impo che egli hauea le q̄tro uolubile rote tutte, & gli radii, & il meditullo defu lco achate, di cãdide uẽule uagamẽte uaricato. Ne tale certãnte gestoere Pyrrho cũ le noue Muse & A polline i medio pulsate dalla natura ipisso.

Laxide & la forma del dicto q̄le el primo, ma le tabelle erão di cyaneo Saphyro orientale, atomato de scintille doro, alla magica gratissimo, & longo acceptissimo a cupidine nella finistra mano.

Nella tabella dextra mirai exscalpto una insigne Matrõa che dui oui hauea parturito, in uno cubile regio colloca ta, di uno mirabile pallacio, Cum obstetrica sua pefacte, & multe altre matrone & astante Nymphe Degli quali uscua de uno una flammula, & delaltro ouo due spectatissimi me stelle.

\* \* \*

Illustration from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Wikipedia)

A few years earlier, in 2012 another exhibition, **“Armenia. Imprints of a Civilization”** had been held in three different museums in St. Mark’s Square: the Correr Museum, the National Archeological Museum, and in the Monumental Rooms of the *Marciana* Library. It marked the fifth centenary of the first book ever printed in Armenian.

Although remarkable, the Armenian typographer Hakob’s five titles weren’t the first books printed in Venice. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Venice grew to become the world’s major printing center. Its 100 to 150 presses (as compared with 50 in Paris, at the time Europe’s other publishing center) published books not only in Armenian, Latin and Italian, but also in Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Czech, Croatian, and Serbian because of the numerous foreign communities living in the *Serenissima*. Thus, around 5,000 of the 30,000 titles printed in Europe during the fifteenth century are Venetian. Statistics for the last five

years of the century say a third of all books printed worldwide were Venetian for a total of 2,000,000 copies. These first texts were humanistic, the very first being Cicero's *Epistolae*, printed by the German typographer Johann von Speyer in 1469.

While many of the early printers in Venice were German—Valdafer, Adam of Ambergau, Franz Renner of Heilbronn, and Nicholas of Frankfurt, to name a few— with the arrival in 1470 of the Frenchman Nicolas Jensen (1420-1480) printing was no longer a German monopoly, although Jensen had learned the trade in Germany and had come to Venice to work with Speyer.



Engraving of Aldus Manutius (Wikipedia)

Another generation went by before an Italian printer set up shop in Venice. He was **Teobaldo Mannucci** better known as Aldus Manutius (1450-1515), first and foremost a Greek and Latin scholar and previously a tutor to several prominent families near Rome. In fact, he was already 45 years old when in 1495, the Pio family provided him with the

money to open his own press in Venice. His special interest was producing Greek and Roman classics in small format for scholars like himself at low cost. He designed and cut the first complete font of the Greek alphabet as well as the first italic type, said to resemble the poet **Petrarch's** handwriting.

A five-volume set of the works of Aristotle, completed in 1498, is the most famous of all of his editions, known as “Aldines” and all bearing his mark, a dolphin and an anchor. His most famous single volume, however, is a work of fiction by the Dominican Francesco Colonna, ***Hypnerotomachia Poliphili***. Its story, an allegorical search for a lost mistress named Polia, is the first printed book with printed illustrations. In 1896 when English poet William Morris wanted to revive the book arts with his Kelmscott Press *Chaucer*, he modeled his ideal book on this masterpiece of Aldus. (See **Helen Barolini's biography: *Aldus and His Dream Book*, Italica Press, 1992**).

After Aldus's death, the press remained in the family and was managed by a son Paulus (1512-74) and then a namesake grandson, Aldus (1447-97). Today, only a small memorial plaque in Campo Sant'Agostin marks the site of their press.

Between 1500 and 1550 the printing industry continued to flourish in Venice, producing a large output of high quality works. An estimated 18,000 but possibly up to 30,000 editions (many of which are lost now) were printed in Venice during the first sixty years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, despite considerable local resistance, when **Pope Paul IV's *Index librorum prohibitorum*** was imposed in 1559, Venice's printing industry collapsed.

Aldus Manutius's italic typeface is not the only Petrarch connection to Venice. Around the corner of the same arcade as the “*Caffè Florian*” is the oldest book-lover's destination in Venice, the ***Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana*** (or *St. Mark's Library*) with its main entrance on the *Piazzetta San Marco* across from the Doge's Palace on the edge of the Grand Canal. It should have been the oldest civic library in Europe (ie. one not belonging to the Church or to a noble family) because it was Petrarch, the Italian poet and early humanist (1304-1374), who had the idea for a public library for Venice. In fact, on September 4, 1362, the Greater Council, the sovereign body of the Republic, accepted the gift of the poet's book collection, which was destined, after his death, to become the state library. However, this donation was never put into effect, and Petrarch's books were

dispersed.



*Portrait of Cardinal Bessarion (Wikipedia)*

Thus, instead, first-place went to the ***Malatesta Novello Library*** which opened in 1454, with the *Marciana*'s inauguration following some 14 years later thanks to the generosity of Greek ***Cardinal Bessarion*** (1403-72), a distinguished émigré and humanist.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Bessarion had undertaken the task of saving whatever was possible of the written records of the Hellenic world before the Turks could destroy them. In 1468 he donated to the Republic of Venice his personal library of Latin, but mostly Greek, books by classical authors: about 1,000 manuscripts and some of the very first books printed in Italy for a total of 1,024 titles, according to the first inventory. On May 14 the senate gratefully accepted the gift and plans for Venice's "public" library were drawn; ironically, using Petrarch's designs.

The chosen site, opposite the Doge's Palace, was significant: the *domus sapientiae* or house of wisdom should provide a harmonious complement to the *domus iustitiae* or house of justice. The library, later praised by Andrea Palladio as the "richest, most ornate building since antiquity," was designed in the classical style, unique for predominantly Gothic Venice, by the Tuscan architect Jacopo Sansovino.

Patriarch Bessarion's core collection remains the jewel of the *Marciana*. It's sufficient to mention his two famous *Iliad* manuscripts, *Homerus Venetus A* (c. 10<sup>th</sup> century) and *Homerus Venetus B* (11<sup>th</sup> century), the *Anthologia Planudea* (1299-1301), the 8<sup>th</sup> century Bible, the psalter of Basil 11 of the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century with the portrait of the emperor in triumph, the *Cygnegetica* attributed to poet Oppian of Apamea with lively hunting and fishing scenes (11<sup>th</sup> century) and manuscripts of many early Greek writers and scientists, some with inestimable gold, silver, and bejeweled bindings. Post-Bessarion treasures include the *Grimani Breviary*, the map collection, Marco Polo's will, and Johann and his brother Wendelin Speyer's first printed edition of Petrarch (c.1470).

Presently the *Marciana* conserves 13,000 manuscripts, 2,884 incunabula, 24,000 *cinquecentine*, 3,731 periodicals of which 1,248 are current and 900,000 books, Hours for scholars are Monday-Friday 9 AM-7 PM and Saturday 9 AM-1 PM. You can book a tour and language choice **[by clicking here.](#)**

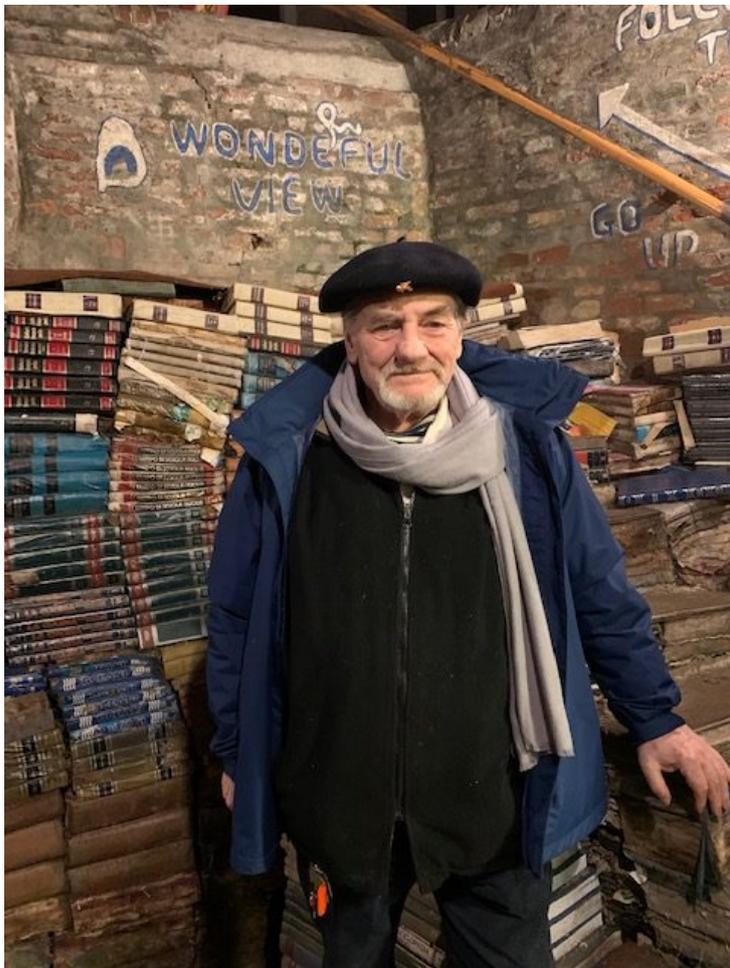
Director Dott. Stefano Campagnolo's press release about November 12<sup>th</sup>'s *acqua alta* damage to the *Marciana* recounts that, despite its nearness to *Piazza San Marco*, thanks to the genius of its architect Sansovino, the library's treasures were spared. However, the floors, doors, and wooden panels of the Manuscript Room and the Reading Room, in

addition to the electric system, were seriously damaged. The cost of repairs, now 10% completed, is estimated at 250,000 euros.



*Water damage at the Fondazione Querini Stampitalia. Fondazione's website*

The *Fondazione Querini Stampitalia* on *Campo Santa Maria Formosa* in the lowest lying of Venice's six *sestiere* or neighborhoods, wasn't so lucky. The ground floor, which houses the auditorium, locker area, bookshop and cafeteria, was completely destroyed as were the electrical system and the elevators. Luckily, the art collection with works by Bellini, Tiepolo, Longhi and Bella was not affected, but the library was submerged. For details click on [www.archnews.com](http://www.archnews.com) or [www.panoramitalia.com](http://www.panoramitalia.com). The damage is estimated at 500 million euros but it's possible to donate directly to Banca Nazionale del Lavoro, account no. (IBAN) IT 76 O 010 0502 0000 0000 0032 500, reason: Venice Flooding 12 November 2019.



*Luigi Frizzi*

Nearby at *Calle Lunga Santa Maria Formosa 517b*, tel. 041-296-0841, hours 9 AM-8PM daily, the legendary picturesque bookshop, owned by octogenarian Luigi Frizzi and appropriately named *L'Acqua Alta* because of constant flooding, has always had a unique way of always displaying its merchandise of books, maps, magazines, comics, and other ephemera; in bathtubs, basins, canoes, small boats, and even a gondola in order to keep them afloat. However, on November 12 even these floating shelves were water-logged and 12,000 volumes were reduced to mush. Luckily, Maria Vittoria Miccoli Minarelli, a Bolognese art student came to the rescue. She and two fellow students Ambre Carlados and Anna Carera at the *Istituto Europeo di Design (IED)* in Milan, persuaded Frizzi to give them 500 of these no longer saleable volumes. Once in Milan and dried, they distributed them to various artists: Dado, Cuoghi Corsello, Saggion-Paganello, to name only a few of the some 30 participants, and their fellow-students to transform them into works-of-art which were sold at silent auction at 32 auctions

([www.32auctions.com/libricontrocorrente](http://www.32auctions.com/libricontrocorrente)) from December 22-February 9 for the benefit

of the *Fondazione Querini Stampalia*.



*Entrance to “Acqua Alta” Courtesy of the owner*

From March 9-29 additional “*Acqua Alta*” salvaged book art, under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture, will be on display in the windows of Milan’s prestigious book store *Libreria Bocca* (in business since 1775) in the *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II* and offered for sale to the general public.

[Lucy Gordan](#)

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*Italian Hours*

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalistic accreditation in Italy and the Vatican, I'm culture editor of the US monthly *Inside the Vatican*; European... [\[More\]](#)

*Column*