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Editor in Chief:
Giampaolo Piroli

The First Italian English Digital Daily in the US

English Editor: Grace
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The Borso d'Este Bible on Exhibit at the Library of the Italian Senate in Rome

Because of its uniqueness and beauty, it has been nicknamed "The Mona Lisa of Books." On display till January 16



Italian Hours
Lucy Gordan



Exhibition Logo. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Estense in Modena

🕒 Time: 3 mins read

As part of Italy's Jubilee 2025 celebrations, on display until January 16 at the Library of the Italian Senate is *La Bibbia di Borso d'Este: ET VIDIT DEUS QUOD ESSET BONUM*". Its subtitle is the recurring phrase in the first chapter of Genesis, expressing God's satisfaction after each day of His creations.

This seldom-exhibited Bible was the brainchild of Borso D'Este (1413-1471), Duke of Modena and Reggio, best known for his patronage of the arts as propaganda to promote his political ambitions. The 1,200 magnificently illuminated parchment pages of The Bible's two volumes were produced between 1455-61 and cost 5,610 Marchesan *lire*. The calligrapher Pietro Paolo Marone wrote the Latin text in gothic characters. The magnificent illuminations, predominantly of gold and lapis lazuli, were entrusted to painters Taddeo Crivelli and Franco dei Russi, plus 17 collaborators. These depict biblical stories, the D'Este family emblems, flowers real and imaginary, golden buttons, jewels, putti, some 1,454 species of animals—for Borso was an avid hunter—as well as fantastical creatures such as dragons, centaurs, and sirens. Because of its uniqueness and beauty, the Bible has been nicknamed both "The Mona Lisa of Books" and "The Sistine Chapel of Books". So not surprisingly, Borso brought it with him to Rome to show the Curia when, shortly before his death in 1471, Pope Paul II proclaimed him also Duke of Ferrara.

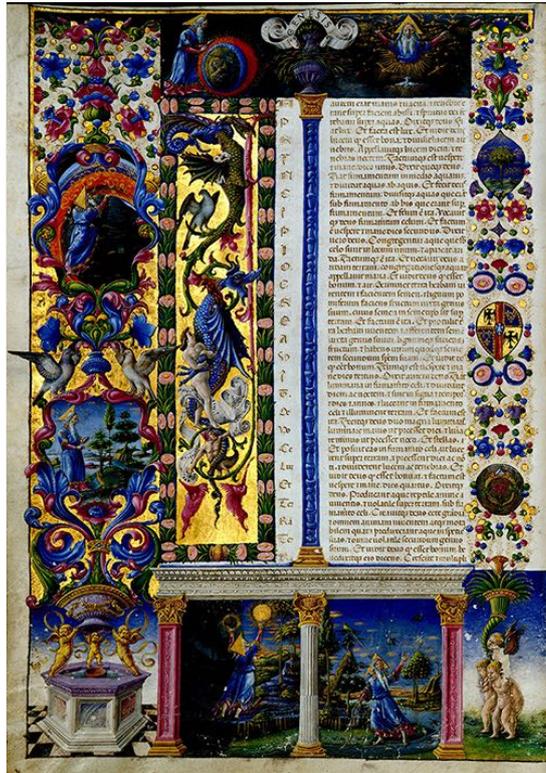


The facade of the Library of the Italian Senate with Bernini's statue of the elephant and ancient Egyptian obelisk and the back of the Pantheon. Courtesy of the Senate Library.

Borso never married and left no heirs, so his half-brother Ercole I d'Este inherited the Bible. Following the relocation of the Ducal court in 1598 the Bible left Ferrara for Modena. It remained there, except for a brief time in Treviso, until the dissolution of the Duchy in 1859 when Duke Francesco V took the Bible with him into exile in Vienna. Again, this time at the end of the First World War, the last Archduke Charles I—again with the Bible in-hand—went into exile in Switzerland, where he died in 1922. A year later his widow Zita Bourbon-Parma entrusted the Parisian antiquarian Gilbert Romeuf to auction the Bible.

Luckily for Italy, but to the dismay of J.P. Morgan, it was bought for 3,300,000 francs on May 1, 1923 by the Brescian businessman and art patron Giovanni Treccani

(1887-1961), also a Senator and later founder of his namesake encyclopedia. On November 23rd he donated his purchase to Italy in the very same room, then of the Ministry of Education, where it was first displayed 100 years ago and is on display now. Ironically, despite his generosity, in 1945 Treccani was expelled from the Senate because he had been elected during Fascism.



Opening page of the Book of Genesis. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Estense in Modena

Like the D'Este Bible, the Senate Library has had a peripatetic life. Established in 1848 in Torino, it moved to Florence in 1865 when Florence became the capital of Italy, and in 1871 to Rome where it was housed in Palazzo Madama (the Senate Building). Only in 2003 did it move to its present location at Piazza della Minerva 38 and was named for Giovanni Spadolini, the Senator responsible for this last move and for its opening to the public: from Monday-Friday from 9 AM to 7:30 PM. The visitors must be 16-years-old, but don't have to be Italian citizens.

The Library houses 2 million books about law and the history of law; history; political science; history of the media and

journalism; as well as Parliamentary documents. It also holds the most important collection of Statutes of Italian Comunes and other political bodies from the Middle Ages to the present; ancient editions of civil and canon law, and one of the richest collections of Italian newspapers (from the 18th century to the present).

Like the Library, *La Bibbia di Borso d'Este* is entrance-free, open Monday-Friday from 10:00 AM to 6 PM, until its return to Modena's *Biblioteca Estense*.

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Lucy Gordan
Italian Hours

Former editor at the American Academy in Rome and at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, with journalists.