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Unique view of Italian Renaissance painting in Morgan Library exhibit

by Nora Hamerman

New York City's J.P. Morgan Library is displaying, until May 7, more than a hundred rarely seen painted manuscripts and incunabula (the earliest printed books), in the exhibition called "The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination, 1450-1550."

The show offers a historic opportunity to see the colors and craftmanship of Renaissance painters. Unlike the era's better-known frescos, altarpieces, and panel paintings, most of the books have been protected for more than 500 years from the asssaults of light, weather, and restoration. The glow of the rich tempera colors and gold leaf on parchment (the prepared skin of a sheep, calf, or goat), the medium of most of the objects, cannot be captured even with the best of modern reproduction techniques. This is not to denigrate the catalogue, edited by the exhibit's guest curator Jonathan J.G. Alexander (published by the Royal Academy of Arts, London, and distributed by Prestel-Verlag, 1994; $39.95 soft cover, $75.00 hardbound, with illustrations of each work in the show, scholarly essays, and bibliography), which will be a treasured reference for years to come.

This gathering of manuscripts demonstrates how after 1450, Renaissance ideas about reviving the achievements of classical antiquity and joining them with Christianity radiated out from Florence into many north Italian cities, including especially Milan, Ferrara, Padua, and Venice as well as to papal Rome, with each leading center developing its own distinctive style. Florence, the cradle of Renaissance culture, was also the birthplace of the new style of book illumination, and continued to be the unrivaled capital of book production and patronage—the workshop of Attavante degli Attavanti became a veritable heavy industry of the day—but the show at the Morgan reveals how important other centers were, such as Ferrara.

The number and quality of painted manuscripts from Ferrara reminds us that the watershed ecumenical church Council of Florence of 1438-44 opened in that city to the north of Florence and is officially called the Council of Ferrara-Florence. (The court at Ferrara was also key in the development of the earliest polyphonic choral music.) In the 1470s, one of the finest specialists in manuscript painting from Ferrara, Guglielmo Giraldi, illuminated a celebrated codex of the *Divine Comedy* of Dante (Vatican Library), which appeared in the London edition of this show but was not lent to New York.

However, other masterpieces by Giraldi's hand are visible here, such as the delicate watercolor paintings in the borders of a superb copy of Virgil's *Aeneid* produced in Ferrara in 1458 for a Venetian patron, which, as the catalog entry puts it, show "a perfect mastery of the rules of perspective and unusual skill with the handling of space." Although Dante was the most popular non-liturgical subject of illuminated books in the 14th and 15th centuries, Giraldi's *Inferno* illustrations were the first in which the landscape matches the action of the poem and the figures capture the real drama of the character's torments.

Art wed to technology

The Morgan Library show, which opened on Feb. 15 (it was seen at the London Royal Academy of Arts on Oct. 27-Jan. 22), stresses an aspect of Renaissance bookmaking little noticed even by experts: the existence of many incunabula which were designed to be hand-illuminated after printing. This part of the show demolishes some oft-repeated assumptions about the alleged rupture between the era of hand-copied books and the age of printing. The first German printers set up shop outside Rome at the Benedictine monastery of Subiaco in 1465. In the 1470s, a Frenchman, Nicolaus Jenson, became the major producer of these remarkable early printed books in Venice. Although paper does not offer as luxurious a surface for the tempera colors as parchment, nonetheless one can only rejoice at the idea of combining the art of illumination with the new technology that obviated the time-consuming work of producing the text by hand.

The rate at which progress was made in the 15th century is also worth remarking upon, even in the period before printing caught on. For example, Professor Alexander writes in the catalog that starting around 1400, the distinctive Italic script "with letter forms which continue in use even in the age of electronic technology was evolved self-consciously by a small group of scholar-humanists in Florence, of whom Niccolò Niccoli and Poggio Bracciolini, with the encouragement of Coluccio Salutati, Chancellor of Florence, were the leaders. The way in which the new script caught on was spectacular, and within twenty years it had spread all over Italy as a style of writing. Its adoption by the printers in Italy after 1465 assured even wider dissemination, though other countries in Europe had begun to adopt it even before Guten-

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berg's invention of printing in Mainz in the early 1450s." The new script went hand in hand with spelling reforms and efforts to purify texts of corruption, as well as a style of decoration of twining white vines, believed, like the rounded letter forms, to have been based on Antiquity but actually evolved from medieval models.

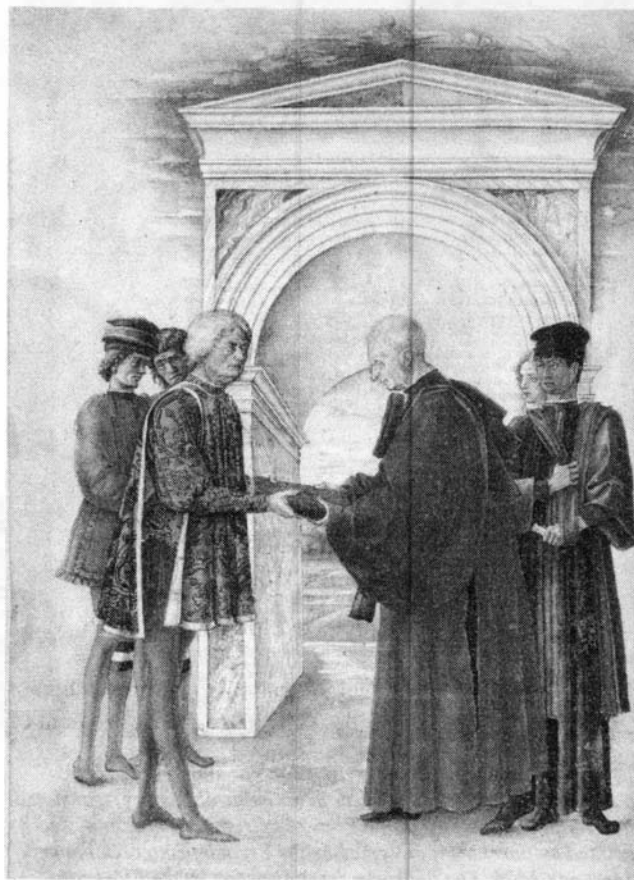
The script's analogy to the "round sound" in singing, which apparently developed at the same time, judging from the representation of musical angels in painting and sculpture, is striking. This was also the era when round paintings began to be made to commemorate very special occasions, such as a birth or marriage, and when, for the first time since antiquity, the idea of round or centralized ground-plans for churches became popular. The archeological pretext for this was the existence of some round (or regularly polygonal) early Christian churches, but it was also emphasized that the circular form most approximated the perfection of the Deity.

Christian and classical themes blended

The show, encompassing over 100 of the most important surviving examples of Italian Renaissance manuscript painting, is divided into eight sections. The first deals with liturgical and biblical manuscripts. The second, which is particularly extensive, highlights Renaissance patrons and libraries. The third deals with classical and humanist (i.e., non-sacred) texts, ranging from works by the ancients, including Livy, Aesop, Homer, Ovid, Virgil, Ptolemy, and Aristotle to the modern Italians such as Dante, Petrarch, Poggio Bracciolini, and Leonardo Bruni. A fourth section, titled "All'antica," presents manuscripts imitating "Antique" style and content, including a particularly lavish Florentine version of St. Augustine's *City of God*, made in the 1470s for a Neapolitan patron, Iñigo d'Avalos, of the celebrated Spanish family of patrons of the Renaissance.

The fifth section, "The Hand-Illuminated Printed Book," is followed by "Illuminators and their Methods of Work," "Choir Books," and "The Sixteenth Century," by which time the invention of printed books made manuscripts an uneconomic luxury restricted to exceptionally wealthy patrons. In this last part, the liturgical books made by Giulio Clovio in Rome in that era, with their vivid pastel palette, appear to add evidence to the arguments in defense of the recent cleaning of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, which has shocked some observers due to the unfamiliar bright colors revealed in the cleaning.

Among the choir books is one from the Piccolomini Library in Siena Cathedral, illuminated by Liberale da Verona. The miniature of the North Wind, a male nude with puffed out cheeks and a huge blue "Afro" hairdo, reproduced on the cover of the catalog, demonstrates the symbiosis between classical Antiquity and Christian themes. This picture appears in a Gradual with service music for the Thursday after Ash Wednesday in Lent, and has no direct connection to the Gospel text for that day. However, as the Morgan Library label points out, St. Augustine referred to the North Wind as a "wakening call" to penitence for the unconscious sinner, a theme most appropriate for Lent, and this might have been in the mind of the illuminator's clerical adviser.


Courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library

In a full-page unframed miniature, the great pedagogue Guarino da Verona (right) presents his translation of the ancient Greek geographer Strabo to a patron (Albi, Bibliothèque Municipale). This is one of the most famous Italian Renaissance manuscripts, important for its provenance, text, script, painted initials, miniatures, and its position in the history of manuscript illumination. The translation of this work (previously little known in the West), attests to the enthusiasm for geography awakened around the Council of Florence, which led to the voyages of discovery.

Petrarch and individual achievement

The extensive section on "Renaissance Patrons and Libraries" introduces us to a large number of distinguished persons and institutions of the era, pointing up, again, the message of "The Currency of Fame," a Renaissance portrait medals exhibit held at New York's Frick Collection and the Washington National Gallery of Art in 1993-94. As Stephen K. Scher wrote in the catalogue for *The Currency of Fame*, the idea of individual achievement and the "good life dignified by practical activity and rendered delightful by beauty

LIBRO PRIMO DELLA NATURALE HISTORIA DI C.
PLINIO SECONDO TRADOCTA IN LINGUA FIOREN
TINA PER CHRISTOPHORO LANDINO FIORENTI
NO AL SERENISSIMO FERDINANDO RE DI NAPOLI
PREFATIONE

ITERMINAI O GIOCONDISSIMO

Courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library

"Pliny" is shown as a Renaissance scholar sitting at his desk pointing to an armillary sphere, in his Natural History, translated into Italian by the Florentine Platonist Cristoforo Landino, and printed on parchment in Venice by the French printer Nicolaus Jenson in 1476. The book was commissioned by the Florentine Strozzi family, and the illustrations added by hand by a Florentine miniaturist in the early 1480s. (Oxford, Bodleian Library).

and learning appealed strongly to the upper classes of the Italian city-state." He went on to observe, "In the early fourteenth century one man in particular gave impetus to this development—Francesco Petrarch. . . . Petrarch assumed that human talent, if properly used, was certain of recognition. Therefore glory, or *fama,* was inevitably the result of excellence, or *virtus,* and this *virtus* was a function of a man's entire personality. . . . It was this excellence that raised a man above his fellows regardless of his material or social status. Increased consciousness of one's excellence resulted in an examination of one's own personality with the need to comment openly about such observations and do so in a way that would survive the erosion of time and fragility of men's memories. It was, in other words, important to establish a durable means of attaining earthly immortality."

Petrarch (1304-74), was born to a Florentine family exiled with the great poet Dante Alighieri's White Guelph party in 1302, and had survived the cataclysm of the Black Death of 1348. He had been involved in the effort to establish a republic in Rome at mid-century, and set up intellectual-political networks all over western Europe.

An Augustinian Christian, Petrarch was the first major figure to explicitly reject the influence of Aristotle over science as it was studied in the universities and particularly in Venice. The Italian poet, who inspired England's Geoffrey Chaucer and the parallel projects of vernacular poetry in France, Spain, and elsewhere in Europe, was the moving force behind a Europe-wide project to train a younger generation in classical Greek, recover Plato's dialogues and translate them into western languages, and more generally to revive the treasures of Greek and Roman culture. (It was Petrarch's network in Florence, around his pupil Salutati, which created the new script described above.)

The young Nicolaus of Cusa came into the orbit of Petrarch's collaborators at least by the time he matriculated at the University of Padua in 1416, and in 1429 he was well known in Italy as a successful hunter of ancient manuscripts. Cusa's library in his native town of Bernkastel-Kues, situated on the Moselle River in Germany, is filled with the beautifully illuminated manuscripts and incunabula which he once owned.

In "The Painted Page" show at the Morgan Library, we meet the image of the Petrarchan scholar over and over again. St. Jerome, the 5th-century translator of the Bible into Latin, is shown surrounded by the volumes and scientific paraphernalia of a 15th-century man of learning, as are the classical pagan writers Plutarch, Livy, Ovid, and Pliny, whose works appear in several richly decorated editions in the show.

Among the books and pages seen in this section are some commissioned by Ludovico Sforza, the duke of Milan who employed Leonardo da Vinci for two decades; a Book of Hours for Cecilia Gonzaga, the extraordinarily gifted pupil of Vittorino da Feltre, founder of the most famous Renaissance academy for children, who interceded on behalf of Cecilia to persuade her father, the duke of Mantua, to allow her to enter a convent and continue her intellectual pursuits rather than to marry; and a presentation page showing Vittorino's colleague, the other famous Italian pedagogue, Guarino da Verona, as he presents to the Venetian nobleman Jacopo Antonio Marcello his own new translation of the *Geography* of Strabo, an ancient Greek writer largely unknown in western Europe before the Council of Florence, translated on commission to Pope Nicholas V, the founder of the Vatican Library.

Here we see a telling, albeit subtle, contrast between Florence and the areas most directly in the Florentine cultural orbit, and the Venetian orbit, even in the period of the second half of the 15th century when Florentine ideas swept into the City of the Lagoon. The difference is that in Venice, it is often difficult to determine the individual patron of a manuscript, because what appears in the book is the name only of the *family.*

It was, of course, in the wake of the Council of Florence that the sharpest polemics over Plato versus Aristotle broke out, as one manuscript in the "Patrons and Libraries" section (Cat. 10) reflects. It is the attack by Andrea Contrario (ironically of a Venetian family, although Venice was the epicenter of the Aristotle revival) on the Latin translations of Plato

made by the Aristotelian George of Trebizond. Contrario's text, written in Naples in 1471 and dedicated to the king of Naples, includes among its illustrations a portrait of Cardinal Bessarion, a leading protagonist of the Council of Florence, who also wrote an attack on George of Trebizond, as a "slanderer of Plato."

Petrarch's "Triumphs" (a cycle of vernacular poems celebrating the successive triumphs over each other of love, chastity, death, fame, time, eternity), were also a favored subject of these exquisite books. There are two versions in the "Classical and Humanist Texts" section of the show, a Florentine book of 1457 (Cat. 59) of the Triumph of Love, which includes a vignette of the humiliation of Aristotle by the shrewish Phyllis; and a book produced in Urbino in the late 1470s, with the Triumph of Death over Chastity.

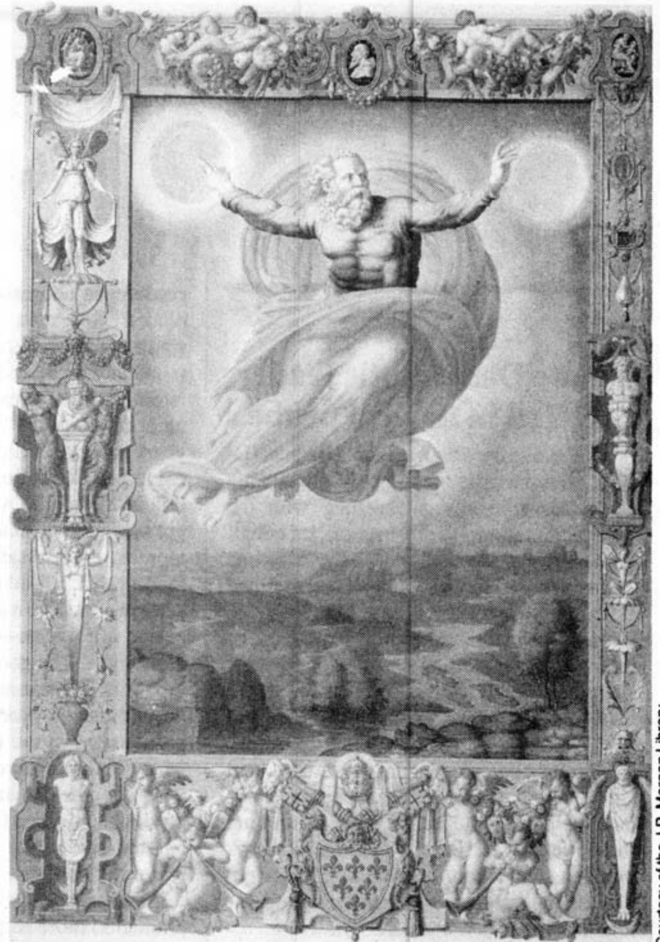
Medici birth tray at the Met

Anyone traveling to New York to see the Morgan show, should also visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, now celebrating its 125th anniversary. The Morgan show features several books that once belonged to the Medici banking family, Florence's unofficial rulers and greatest art patrons throughout most of the 1400s, such as a beautiful copy of Pliny's *Natural History* dated 1458, Aesop's *Fables* in Greek, a Book of Hours of 1485, and a sumptuous service book illustrating the Medici Pope Leo X being vested for Mass. Meanwhile, the Met has just put on display a new acquisition which was also made for the Medici, a *desco da parto* commemorating the birth in 1449 of Lorenzo de Medici, later known as "The Magnificent" and a seminal figure of European history.

Painted in tempera, silver, and gold on a circular wood tray measuring 36½ inches in diameter, the salver features the figure of winged Fame standing with outstretched arms, holding a sword in her right hand, and in her left a statuette of Cupid with his bow drawn. Winged Fame surmounts a globe pierced by six portholes, from which winged trumpets sound to herald the arrival of the newborn baby and his expected future fame. This imagery is drawn from Petrarch's "Triumph of Fame," in which Fame vanquishes Death, and reminds us of the new regard for earthly fame inspired by Petrarch in the Renaissance.

The birth tray, an altogether unique historic object, belonged to the New York Historical Society, which sold it earlier this year. The artist is Scheggia (Giovanni di Ser Giovanni di Simone, 1407-86), the younger brother of Masaccio, one of the key early Renaissance artists. The tray remained in the Medici family's possession until they were driven out of Florence in 1494. Thomas Jefferson Bryan, an American collector, bought it in 1851 in Paris and donated it to the New York Historical Society in 1867. The Metropolitan was able to raise the $2 million to keep the picture in New York City, thanks to a generous donation from Mr. and Mrs. Walter H. Annenberg and other patrons of the museum.

It should be added, however, that private patronage alone will never be adequate to sustain America's museums as teaching institutions, a role they have increasingly taken on for the millions of visitors each year, and with constantly dwindling resources. Every major loan exhibit, including the Morgan Library show reviewed here, is assisted by funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Federal Council on the Arts and Humanities, which often provide indemnities to cover the staggering costs of insuring loaned works of art. If the political agenda of some "conservative" insurgents in Congress is fulfilled, that crucial margin of funding will be reduced or vanish, with incalculable consequences on the future of our civilization. If we are to launch a new Renaissance, as many of us believe is desperately needed, then many people will need to see and be inspired by the Golden Renaissance of the Italian 15th century in shows like this one.



Courtesy of the J.P. Morgan Library

Full-page miniature of "God creating the sun, moon, and earth" attributed to Vincenzo Raimondi, a French artist who worked in Rome, inspired by the picture of the Creator on Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, from the Psalter of Pope Paul III, written in Rome, 1542 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). By this date, de luxe illuminated manuscripts were only produced in exceptional circumstances, for particular patrons, like the popes and cardinals in Rome.