



## Rare book project of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

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### **Abstract:**

*Many libraries have rare book collections. And almost all of these libraries are proud of them. Usually the collections consist of manuscripts, incunabula and antique editions up to the eighteenth century. These works are kept in magazines under special conditions for conservation and the consultation is tied to restrictions. The librarians are or at least should be aware of the historical and scientific value as well as of the necessity to handle these treasures with the highest care. The conservation and the preservation of these collections are important fields of competence of book science and librarianship, and the definition of international standards help to avoid the worst mistakes in dealing with these works. But what do we really know about these collections? Or better to say: how could we improve our knowledge of their contents, in particular if we think of the possibilities of modern data technology and network communication? The library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz is currently undergoing a four years research project on the various forms of acquisition of information keeping in mind the special requirements of art historical studies.*

Let me start with a short description of the collection itself. The Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz is one of the leading German research institutes in art history, specialized in Italian art. It was founded at the end of the 19th Century. Its central 'laboratory' is the library with a collection of about 300.000 international scholarly volumes primarily on Italian art. The rare book collection consists of about 7.500 volumes and is separated from the rest of the library, which is organized by an open book shelf system. The major part of the rare-collection comprises printed books from the 15th to the early 20th Century, including 319 periodicals. Apart from several donations, the collection was almost completely acquired on the antiquarian book market over the course of the 20th Century. The topics concentrate on Italian topography, museum and collection catalogues (the earliest from 1672), iconography (more than 1.000 titles), monographs on artists, source books on Italian art (with 35 editions of Vasari's *Vite*) and on travels, Italian literature, philosophy and aesthetics. Furthermore it should be noted that the library also owns an outstanding

collection of over 500 original prints from the period of Futurism (1909 to 1930). The acquisition policy primarily focused on the importance and relevance of the books for our research community. The contents of the books were always more important than the beauty of an edition or its rareness. They shall be and they are used regularly, some more, some less. In any case these circumstances are a challenge in terms of conservation and preservation demands as well as for the subject indexing on a higher academic level.

To sum up briefly: conservation as well as restoration in individual cases is one goal of the project. Since all established international standards are respected, it is not necessary to go into further details at this point. However, the appropriate codicological examination of every volume will take into account and document its physical and historical particularities, from the binding to handwritten annotations or marks of former owners.

The latter sometimes occur in unusual ways such as in an anonymous manuscript of the 16th Century on the Roman Empire (“Abbozzi concernenti l’Imperio Romano”), which was bound into a late-medieval French parchment with a juridical manuscript, decorated with red and blue Fleuronee-initials. The unknown owner or author of the manuscript erased a considerable part of the original text and replaced it by a drawing with the Florentine ‘Marzocco’, combined with a coat of arms as well what look to be shelf marks and other numberings.

Furthermore a watermark on the manuscript paper is identifiable. The sixteenth-century text describes the principles of imperial power and of the political independence of Florence. Since neither the author nor the date of origin of this manuscript is known, a detailed examination of its content could help to gain some of the lacking information. For example, concerning the dating, we can detect two important evidences:

1. Rudolf II is mentioned in the text as emperor, so it must have been written after 1576.

2. The coat of arms seems to belong to Irsina, a small community in the Basilicata, where the Gaetani Family lived. As far as we know the manuscript was originally part of their property. In 1586 Irsina was sold to the family Grimaldi and received subsequently a new coat of arms. According to this, we have two termini, post and ante quem, for dating the manuscript. A look on the current catalogue entry of this unique specimen reveals that there is neither a reference on these particularities, which, however, provide important historical information, nor a description of its content, which could facilitate the search for this source. Its discovery is pure chance.

In a second case, a chronicle of Genoa (until to the year 1578), written in Latin language, the current catalogue record in the data base does not even report the complete title of the work. And, as expected, no additional information, nor about the edition neither about the remarkable rich content, can be found in the catalogue entry. The bibliographical description fails to the importance of the book as an outstanding source for the history of Genoa, which describes the history of Liguria and Venice and contains also descriptions of the Spanish conquests (including those by Christophorus Columbus) and the official correspondence between the Genoese Kingdom and the Kingdom of Naples as well as the Holy See. The author also enclosed many Genoese communal laws in full length. And even if this work can be found in several other libraries all over the world the result is always the same: the catalogue entries are insufficient.

This is – more or less – a common situation in many catalogues, where antique books are described in a very rudimentary manner, not least because of the limited space on the former catalogue cards. It is obvious that a combination of free-text description on the one hand and standardized catalogue information on the other hand is necessary. This happened in the age of electronic catalogues, when catalogue records mutated to extensive documentations with manifold information, often rather in free-text than in standardized form, and when subject headings were added:

First of all, they concentrate on the physical description of the individual copy in the library collection and of the particularities of the edition. There are good examples and a lot of established conventions for documenting such particularities and, of course, cataloguing standards. In this respect, the project of the Kunsthistorisches Institut does not intend to reinvent already existing models; it rather aims to be as highly organized as compatible with these extant models. Another and surely more important question is the description of the content. Here, the situation is, on the contrary, much more heterogeneous.

This circumstance can be explained by the multiplicity of different concepts of cataloguing or listing antique books in manifold forms of inventories. For decades antique books were listed not only in library catalogues but often in language specified or thematically focused bibliographies as for instance in Julius von Schlosser's fundamental work on the early modern sources for art. Most of these bibliographies were only published in printed form, but recently they occur more and more in web based data collections. A short look on some broader bibliographical initiatives may illustrate this aspect.

For Italian literature the 'Censimento Nazionale delle edizioni italiane del XVI secolo' (edit 16) lists all known printed books from the 16th Century. At this point over 60.000 titles are documented. Their bibliographical description is rather simple and is limited to six topics. The indexing of the content does not belong to them and the records of edit 16 have a very rudimentary character.

The goal of the project obviously is the documentation of the national cultural activity in the 16th Century, and not to create a bibliographical instrument for advanced searches. The German activities in this field are based on a similar concept. The 'Verzeichnis Deutscher Drucke', divided in three periods (16th, 17th and 18th Century), represents a more detailed bibliographical description since it consists in 140 optional categories for documenting a wide range of possible characteristics of a printed publication. For time and financial reasons, as explained in the introduction of the project, the creation of an index including the main keywords of the contents of the books is not possible.

The Incunabula Short Title Catalogue of the British Library, an international cooperation, is another example for a census with the aim of documenting the fifteenth-century printing production. Here too, subject headings or descriptions of the content are not included. In this respect, the 'big sister' of this project, the English Short Title Catalogue, which lists all text prints in the English language before 1801, differs considerably. The very detailed records include subject headings, which in some cases are remarkably sophisticated. The Kunsthistorisches Institut would like to follow this example. The increasing augmentation of information in modern, electronic catalogue records, culminating in a detailed documentation of the single copies, as seen before, shows a tendency to mix these two forms of book description. But the starting point for the project of the Kunsthistorisches Institut is the perspective of art historical research which differs notably from usual library documentation.

This short overview gives a first impression of what the situation in the field of antique book cataloguing looks like: rather inconsistent. While numerous conventions and standards were developed and employed for the formal description of books, which commonly have been accepted and respected in various multinational initiatives, however, the indexing of the subjects– with its very heterogeneous formal characteristics – remained an option that was rarely taken up. Apart from systematically compiled bibliographies one can observe this disparity also in many library catalogues.

As we all know, antique books are more than printed texts. They also play a prominent role as sources for images of various types. Woodcuts, maps, portraits, coats of arms and emblems can often be found only in printed books. The knowledge of their existence is of outstanding importance for art historical research. Even if the cataloguing or indexing of images is usually not an activity of a librarian, some current projects concentrate on this aspect: for example, the CodIcon online database of the Bavarian State Library, a digital collection of about 550 ‘image manuscripts’ (without or with only very few descriptive text) from the 16th to the 19th Centuries, as well as the digitization-project of the valuable collection of more than 250 Renaissance festival books at the British Library. But in this case the importance of the images for historical studies is far more decisive than professional traditions. These projects not only make available rare image material on the net, they also allow searching for it:

No doubt, such highly specialized projects and the national initiatives for documenting the cultural heritage in the field of printed books, mentioned above, are counterparts, first and foremost regarding to the quantity of the material. And nobody can expect a similar care in indexing all topics like in the case of festival books when thousands of titles have to be catalogued. However, specialized libraries with relatively small collections work under different conditions and their readers have other expectations. The library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut owns hundreds of antique illustrated books, as for instance Scipione Mazzella’s description of the reign of Naples (from 1597), which comprises not only a vast number of written information on places, personalities and dynasties, but also engraved portraits of rulers, different types of crowns and a lot of coats of arms. Also this book, subsequently published in various different re-editions, can be found in other libraries. But also in this case (as we have seen before) the summary catalogue entries generally do not refer to its character as a rich image source. On the other hand we all are convinced that in-depth indexing of rare material has enormous advantages for scientific work. If we want to avoid that a handful of meritorious projects end in vacuum or as lost islands in the endless ocean of information, we should start networking in this special sector. Networking does not mean necessarily only dividing the task of a comprehensive book-indexing, but also connecting all these data with specialized image data bases or other digital collections. This should mainly be a job of specialized research libraries. Normally their holdings are rather small as are their antique and rare book collections. Furthermore these libraries are often in close connection to research institutes and image archives. Consequently, there is a higher competence in defining the criteria for an appropriate indexing and a deeper knowledge of conventions in cataloguing images. This does absolutely not exclude the cooperation with bigger, universal libraries when they operate on the basis of highly selected parts of their holdings. The Art Libraries Section of the IFLA could possibly act as a sort of coordinator.

To come back to the rare book project of the Kunsthistorisches Institut: our goal is not to change the world. But we understand the project also as an initiative to develop standards for examining antique books and manuscripts as sources for research in art history and give them a higher visibility with the help of more or less traditional methods in librarianship.

It is obvious that the fast evolution of new (digital) forms of catalogues and search options, as well the increasing availability of sources on the internet, will help to make all the data usable which will emerge from these projects. Therefore, the attention and the necessity to create general standards in the field of data base infrastructures or a unified vocabulary today seem to be less important than it was some years ago. But it is important not to forget the following aspect: the value of information depends first and foremost on the quality of data. And this is the reason why projects like these need, now as well as in future, a high intellectual input and a profound recognition of the importance of historical sources. In this respect, the idea of the initiative corresponds perfectly with the motto of the IFLA conference of this year: "Libraries create futures: Building on cultural heritage".