The illustrated sermons, poems, and mystery plays that were printed at Florence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are little known as compared with the illustrated books that during the same period flowed from the presses of Germany, France, and Venice. The historians of the woodcut, with the notable exception of the late Paul Kristeller, have paid no more than passing attention to them. In this country there are only three or four sizable groups of them in institutional collections. In our private libraries even single specimens are with difficulty to be seen. And yet it may reasonably be doubted whether any more interesting old woodcut books can be found or any that are equally charming.

The first Florentine woodcut book bearing a printed date was the Specchio di Croce of 1490, but it is quite probable that it was preceded by others that bear no dates. By 1508, the year in which Frezzi’s Quattroregio was printed, practically all the Florentine woodcut illustrations of particular merit had been made, but the blocks, lingering in the possession of the printers and publishers, were constantly used through the greater part of the sixteenth century, and it is thanks to this that some of the loveliest of the fifteenth-century Florentine woodcuts are known to us. Thus the earliest illustrated Florentine edition of Boccaccio’s Ninfale Fiesolano that has been described is of 1568. Its illustrations, obviously made to accompany its text, were printed from well-worn blocks in the style of 1490 to 1500, and there is every reason to think it was during those years that they were made and first used. Of the Epistles and Evangels only two copies are known that were printed before 1501 and both are imperfect, but there are rare and widely scattered copies of at least half a dozen editions printed after that date, one of them as late as 1578. Of many other books there are several different editions each of which is of very considerable rarity. As between two editions of the same text printed but a few years apart, the blocks often show wear and breaks that can only be reasonably explained by the hypothesis that between those two editions there were others that have totally disappeared. Of several of the most beautiful books of a very popular nature only one copy is known.

This means that these Florentine books must have been printed again and again and that the people for whom they were made threw them away or used them for the menial purposes to which popular printing of little value is doomed. The big, learned volumes of the Renaissance have come down to us in great number, many of them unused and fresh as the day they were made, but the little tracts and pamphlets—for that is what most of the illustrated Florentine books were—have vanished into thin air, just as have the tracts published in this country a hundred years ago. Very few of those that have survived are what the typographically minded would describe as fine books. With few exceptions they are chapbooks, carelessly printed on poor paper for sale at niggardly prices to the man in the street.

It has become almost de rigeur for historians and critics of printing to lament what happened in the 1490’s and especially in the years that immediately followed 1500. According to these learned people, the printers at that time allowed themselves to be seduced by commercialism, so that, abandoning their true
"Fior di virtu hystoriato." Florence, 7 May, 1519
old traditions of fine paper, generous design, and sound craftsmanship, they indulged in a long debauch of undercutting of costs, used cheap paper and bad ink, threw design to the wind, and tossed pressmanship after it. It has even been said, and with the voice of authority, that it was not until the nineteenth century and in England that the high ideals of the earlier printers were recaptured and intelligently emulated.

However, if we stop being typographically sentimental and look at the evidence, it becomes doubtful whether authority's pronouncements have been based on anything other than fashionable local prejudice. What happened in those years after 1490 was no more a debasement of ideals than the invention and pervasion of the old Model T was a debasement of the ideals of the Brewster Victoria. The men who were molding opinion discovered that cheap printing was a tool made to their hands. It did not take long for others to discover that it also provided a way of bringing the great, the pleasant, and the useful texts within the reach of everyone from prince to artisan, and in such form that they invited the careless, easy familiarity that comes only to pocket-sized books—books so cheaply produced that their prices can be charged to the casual cost of living rather than entered in the solemn ledgers of investment. A book on which you cannot with impunity spill your crumbs and ashes, and the margins of which are too precious for scribbled comment, is doubtfully one that you will ever know very well. The function of all but very few books is to be read and then thrown away so that others can take their places; it is not to be unsullied monuments for eternity. The discovery of these things marked the coming of age of printing. Had it not been made the world could easily have dispensed with the printed book. Having been made, the Bills of Rights of the democracies name the Freedom of the Press as one of the basic things that government shall keep inviolate. But—the framers of the Bills of Rights have had no thought or care of the Kelmscott Press and its fellows, or of its predecessors or its followers.

Aldus of Venice achieved undying renown for having in 1501 invented pocket-sized editions of the great texts of classical literature for international circulation among the highly educated. It was, however, the printers of Florence who invented vernacular printing for the populace. They did it at least a decade before Aldus began to issue his pocket classics. By 1490 they had begun to provide their cheap little books—most of which, interestingly, were just about the size and thickness of the Reader's Digest—with woodcut illustrations for which they called to their aid Florentine artists who were the contemporaries of Botticelli. After 1508, as said above, the making of new illustrations at Florence, for practical purposes, came to an end. Thus the creative development of Florentine illustration took place within a period of about twenty years. To understand why it began when it did and why it lasted such a short time it is necessary to look at what was happening in other ways to the life of Florence. The facts, or such of them as can be mentioned in sev-
Il PROEMIO DI SER ALEXANDRO BRACCIO AL prestantissimo & excellentissimo giouane Lorézo di Pier frá cesco de Medici sopra la traduzione d'una historya di due amanti composta dalla felice memoria di Papa Pio. ii.

Enche molti sieno li exampli Lorézo mio excellentissimo: pequali facilmente in altri ho potuto comprendere quanto sieno ualide & gran di leforze damore & molte carte habbi riolte: doue incendii suoi ostraetano & fannosi manifesti: niemdiramé alcuna cosa non ha potuto piu uremente mostrarmi la sua potenza: che lo experimento che ho fatto in me stesso: conciosia cosa che nella mia florid a
LEFT: Savonarola's “Epistola a uno amico.” (Florence), n. d. Kristeller 380 a
RIGHT: His “Tractato diuoto & utile della Humilita.” (Florence), n. d. Kristeller 394 a
In 1491 Jerome Savonarola was elected prior of the convent of Saint Mark. A puritanical revivalist, certain of his inspiration and calling for reforms not only in civil manners but in the conduct of the church, he rapidly became the most popular and effective preacher in Florence. In 1492, summoned to the bedside of the dying Lorenzo de’ Medici, he refused him the consolations of religion. Lorenzo was succeeded by his harebrained son Piero. In the fall of 1494 Piero, a craven, misplayed his hand against Charles VIII of France, then marching south on his way to Naples. Florence rose against Piero, and he fled for his life. Charles and his troops promptly occupied the city. They stayed but a week, and on the twenty-fourth of November, Charles having been exhorted by Savonarola, they left Florence and moved on towards Rome. Under the lash of Savonarola’s tongue the city embarked on an orgy of reform—religious, constitutional, legal, social, and economic. For three years Florence was in constant uproar. It lost its credit and its power; trade was paralyzed. The coast provinces were lost. Pisa was in armed revolt. There were plague and famine. And all the while Savonarola, as a cynic said, tried to “govern by paternosters.”

In November, 1497, Savonarola was excommunicated by Alexander VI, the Borgia Pope, who thus exhibited an orthodoxy in keeping with the scandal of his life. Finally Savonarola was arrested by his enemies, and in May, 1498, at a great public spectacle they hung him and then burned his body. He had solved nothing, he has not been canonized, but the issues he raised are still fought over, and his name is still a rallying cry. His quality is shown by his adherents, among whom were Botticelli, Lorenzo di Credi, the della Robbia, Marsilio Ficino, Politian, and Pico della Mirandola. Condivi, who knew Michaelangelo, tells us in his life of him, that “likewise, with deep study and attention, he read the Holy Scriptures, both the Old and the New Testaments, and searched them diligently, as also the writings of Savonarola, for whom he always had a great affection, keeping always in his mind the memory of his living voice.” Possibly no other man beginning and ending in so short a time has made so great an impression on history.

In 1499 the war against Pisa was renewed. In 1501, Caesar Borgia, Pope Alexander’s bastard son, forced the city to make him its captain general at a huge salary. The political and legal experimentation continued, and in 1506 Machiavelli, then Florentine secretary of state and seeking to end the abuses of the mercenary troops, organized the first national militia in Italy. Spain came to the aid of Pisa, but in 1507 the Florentines managed to besiege it and in 1509 to capture it. In 1512 the Spaniards, under de Cadorna, captured Florence and brought in with them Giuliano and Giovanni de’ Medici. Giuliano took over the government of the city, and the next year Giovanni, as Leo X, became Pope. In 1527 the Medici
were again driven from the city. In a couple of years they were back in control, and in 1532 Alessandro, a Medici bastard, became hereditary Grand Duke of Tuscany. The black night of the most repressive of autocracies settled down over Florence, not to be raised until 1859, when the Austrian successors of the Medici gave way before the armies of liberation.

All through the period of chaos, just before and just after 1500, the Florentine printers were busy putting out their little popular pamphlets and books, and, especially, the first editions of the illustrated ones. No one knows the names of their illustrators. Attributions have been proposed for some of these woodcuts, but it is doubtful whether any of them
should be too seriously accepted. And, perhaps, it is best that they remain anonymous, as it is only in this way, men being what they are, that they will be seen for their own merits and not for those associated with some name in questionable baptism.

It is not improbable that at the time these books were made the Florentines were the most generally literate town population in Europe. A century and a half earlier, if Villani can be believed, about ten per cent of the population were children at school learning to read. Many a proud city of today cannot say as much. The contents of their little illustrated tracts, pamphlets, and books afford such an idea of what the Florentine populace was like, of the ways in which perhaps it was unique, as can be obtained from no other source. There are few things as revealing of character as a man’s or a people’s familiar books, unless it be the pictures with which they are illustrated.

The Florentine population, then, was interested in sermons—not any sermons, but those that were rousing political speeches and eloquent masterpieces of Italian prose, such, for example, as those of Savonarola. There were also the writings of the blessed Antonino, the saintly bishop of Florence who died in 1459 after having bravely wrestled with the problems of property and prices in one of the most ruthless capitalist communities that ever existed—a noteworthy economist centuries before political economy was baptized. Of course there was an Aesop, for reading; compilations of correspondence forms, for writing; and, for arithmetic, the Calandri, the first pictorial arithmetic in a popular tongue, which contained the first printed problems in long division done in the modern way and many prettily illustrated exercises in commercial reckoning. There was a pamphlet on banking, and another on the wealth of the newly discovered Indies, even an account by Amerigo Vespucci of what he saw on this side of the Atlantic ocean. There were many little garlands and bouquets of poetry, the Canzone a ballo of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the Laudi of Jacopone da Todi—he who wrote the Stabat Mater—the Ninfale Fiesolano of Boccaccio, and the Morgante Maggiore of Pulci. There was also Enea Silvio’s Story of the Two Lovers—when he became Pope he repented of this brilliant youthful literary escapade, but it survives him. And then there were the Rap-presentazioni, the librettos in verse of the mir-

“Lagiostra di Giuliano de Medici.” (Florence), n. d.
Kristeller 336 a
acque and mystery plays so beloved of the people. These were not only the first plays in a modern tongue, but they were the first to be printed for popular use, and they were the first to be gathered together in collected editions. It has been said that in all Germany before 1501 there were printed only two books (Parsifal and Titurel) written in German by Germans that are still valued for their literary content, and that even so they were written in the thirteenth century. But to return to Florence, there was Jacopo da Ces-solis’s moralizing, anecdotal book of The Game and Playe of Chesse, as Caxton called it in his translation, which was one of the first books to be printed in English. There were different editions of the Ars Moriendi, and of Bonaventure’s Meditations on the Passion of Our Lord. There was an Epistles and Evangels—this, one of the most remarkably and beautifully illustrated books ever printed anywhere for any group of men—the Imitation of Christ, the Fioretto of Saint Francis and the Fior di Virtù. The last of the new books for a long time to come was Frezzi’s Quatriregio of 1508—with the exception of the Epistles and Evangels, the most richly illustrated book that ever came from the Florentine press.

Of a considerable number of these the Museum has copies printed in the fifteenth or the sixteenth century with the original woodcut illustrations. Properly to list and describe them would require a learned and elaborately illustrated catalogue of appreciable length, for there are many different titles in our collection of these precious relics and almost every one of them presents its bibliographical and iconographical puzzles.

The accompanying reproductions speak charmingly for themselves, and, for those who know how to see, excuse the present writer from attempting any account of the pictorial merit and loveliness of the originals.

The one serious study and list of the Florentine illustrated books is Paul Kristeller’s Early Florentine Woodcuts (London, 1897), which contains 193 facsimiles.