ITALIAN XVIII CENTURY BOOK ILLUSTRATION

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Demand a description of a typical Italian eighteenth-century page from almost any bookish man, and he will probably think of one printed by Bodoni—or rather a pair of pages, since Bodoni frequently insisted on symmetry to the point of cutting or padding opposing footnotes to make them balance. It is a pity that the general idea of the Italian eighteenth-century book should be Bodoni’s cold paper tablets where the monumental lettering rarely emphasizes the sense of the words. Nothing could be more un-Italian than this sacrifice of human values to mechanical finish.

As a matter of fact the eighteenth-century Italians printed a wide variety of texts with all the intelligent legibility and inventiveness of their great predecessors. In the field of architectural publications their books and sets of prints continued to lead Europe as of old. In the middle of the century Piranesi brought a new sense of mystery and tragedy to the old tradition of making views of Roman ruins, and a little later each fresh discovery at Pompeii and Herculaneum was published in huge copperplates. The modern architecture of the day, especially the gardener’s capricious summer-houses and parterres, became current property through books. And the Italian invention of mathematical perspective was applied to new needs in manuals for decorating churches and opera stages.

The old Italian specialty of musical festivities produced books too charmingly original to pass over in a sentence. The subsidized princely presses of Parma and Naples published a few lavish folios in the Louis XIV manner, but the really original festival books were the innumerable quarto pamphlets printed at Venice. Whenever the daughter of a great Venetian family took the habit of a nun, or when her father or her brother became Procurator of Saint Mark, or when a well-planned marriage enlarged a noble bridegroom’s power in the Grand Council, the occasion was celebrated with a musical show. After the guests had listened to a cantata sung by a well-trained chorus of foundling girls they were given souvenirs of the occasion in the shape of a pretty paper-covered booklet. The text did not describe the ceremonies or the grandeur of the hosts, as books of festivities did in France and Germany, but instead gave the words of the music that had been composed for the occasion or a collection of poems written by friends of the family. By the 1790’s the growth of pride in the national past began to turn these booklets into historical essays or reprints of ancient documents, a form that has become traditional for Italian weddings to this day. In this way inventories, old contracts, and manuscripts of great historical interest have been printed in limited editions that are still further reduced when the wedding guests go home, exhilarated with champagne, and toss their souvenirs into the trash basket.

The eighteenth-century Venetians decorated every page of a festival book with sumptuous fantasy and economy of cost by combining type with a ready-made stock of copperplates etched with airy allegorical vignettes and borders garlanding the text. In all these richly wrought pages only one piece of copper had to be specially engraved with the title to insert in an opening cut through a splendid etched framework. Ready-made, and therefore inexpensive, elements could not be more intelligently fashioned for rearranging in displays of ornament.
as gaily varied as the festivities themselves.

These now rare booklets enjoyed their heyday during the sixteen years when Bartolozzi worked in Venice. He came from his native Florence in 1748, aged twenty, and left in 1764 for his famous, dull period in London. Venetian copperplate work was then belatedly but brilliantly coming into its own. The “Engravers and Copperplate Printers” became important enough to incorporate themselves into a guild only nine years before Bartolozzi’s birth. Yet by the time he arrived, Venice was the center of a tradition of bold, free sketching with the etching needle that had begun two centuries before with Parmigiano. Canaletto is today the most celebrated member of this great generation of Italian free etchers, but Bartolozzi was probably more popular then and certainly made more prints. To know Bartolozzi only by his London stipple, as most English-speaking people do, is to know only the least native part of him, for Italians were too fond of line drawing to do much with tone processes like aquatint or mezzotint or even with Giulio Campagnola’s invention of stipple.

As long as Bartolozzi worked in Venice he entered entirely into the city’s taste and drew with the sprightliness of line that was the delight of the Venetian rococo. The city’s bygone political independence survived in such an independence of taste that the French traveler de Lalande wrote in 1765: “of all the cities that I have seen, this is the one that pays least homage to our fashions.” Venice flaunted her local preferences to the extent of illustrating Guicciardini’s very Florentine—even anti-Venetian—history of Italy with etched vignettes of Venice and near-by islands.

The Venetian book trade, which had long catered to all Europe, still governed much of the city’s life in the eighteenth century. The production was so great that books sold in Venice for half their price in Paris, and their subjects were more novel and varied than anywhere in Italy. In 1786 the Venetian bookseller Pasquali wrote to a colleague near Florence: “Tuscany prints quantities of books, but most sell badly because they are either reprints or inaccurate compilations from old books.” In Venice the constant printing of new texts made bookshops the centers of conversation that drawing rooms then were in London and Paris or that clubs are today. Since society in

Two etchings by Antonio Visentini, from Guicciardini’s “History of Italy,” Venice, 1738. The initial D shows the Dogana, or Customs House. Above, a view near Venice. Dick Fund, 1947


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Venice was old-fashioned enough to be ruled by men, and not by women as in France and England, homes were closed except on great occasions and men ordinarily met and talked in the bookshops. In 1740 Goethe's father saw scholars and noblemen there discussing and reading, but never buying, the books that stood in perfect order on open shelves, all bound and ready to take home. When Sir Henry Wotton lived in Venice in the early 1600's he seems to have made some of his most useful contacts through meetings in bookshops.

The Venetian eighteenth-century publisher's artistic alertness and power to attract brilliant minds appears in the career of the greatest of them, Giovanni Battista Albrizzi. From 1696 to 1717 one of his ancestors had published a periodical illustrated with pictures of the latest scientific discoveries, and his brother founded an academy for the publication of scholarly works and the best obtainable prints. In 1740 Albrizzi brought out a tiny Book of Hours that was often given to Venetian brides because of its delicious illustrations, drawn by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta and engraved by Pitteri. This
book started Pitteri on a career of making about a hundred and fifty engravings after Piazzetta’s drawings, which he continued to do even after Piazzetta died fourteen years later, so poor that Albrizzi paid for his burial. In his long effort to render Piazzetta’s luminous smudges of charcoal Pitteri started from Mellan’s manner of engraving in parallel curves and evolved his own vibrating etched texture like threaded specks laid close together. This collaboration of engraver, painter, and publisher culminated in a broad book of heads and nudes for art students to copy, published six years after Piazzetta’s death. Each drawing was reproduced twice, once by Pitteri in all its glow and velvet and again in bare, firm outline by Bartolozzi, who drew with a Florentine’s sharp assurance until London debauched him.

Piazzetta’s masterpiece of book illustration was unfortunately carried out by a lesser engraver, probably because it was started while Pitteri was busy with the book of hours. Yet despite the somewhat mechanical engraving, the Albrizzi edi-
tion of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered* of 1745 made a European sensation. When Goethe's father saw proof sheets five years before publication, he "beheld them with astonishment and admiration." The novelty of the book did not lie in the imposing full-page engravings, since these are in the manner of sixteenth-century illustrations. This was by no means the only time that the Italian and French eighteenth century harked back to the sixteenth, when Correggio and Parmigianino had laid the foundations for rococo painting. What was new was the series of headpieces and tailpieces tossed on the page with a casual airiness that had never before been seen in book illustration. Innovation ordinarily begins in minor pictures—in the little predella, not in the main altar panel. Albrizzi probably realized that he had something really novel, for he took out a fifteen-year copyright on the copperplates.

To eyes brought up on the typical seventeenth-century engraving that carves into the paper with blacks, Piazzetta's vignettes, so Silvery, so irregularly cloudy, must have seemed to have drifted onto the paper like a vapor. This was the style of the French "livres à vignettes" that were to sweep Europe twenty or thirty years later through the engravings of Marillier and Choffard. But in 1745, when Piazzetta's *Tasso* was published, Choffard was fourteen years old and Marillier was five. The first "livre à vignettes" in the Louis XV style was the Fermiers Généraux *La Fontaine* of 1762, for which Choffard invented fifty-three exquisite vignettes. In the last of these he drew his own head, a practice most singular under the absolute monarchs in the north of Europe, where the only portrait in a book was usually that of the author (if venerably dead) or the sovereign who paid for the printing. Choffard may have taken courage from the last page in the Venice Tasso where Piazzetta and his publisher talk and loll on an Arcadian hillock.

Piazzetta's *Tasso* was much appreciated in eighteenth-century France. It was praised by P. J. Mariette, the leading authority on prints, and in the great sales of the Lavallière and Gaignat libraries it brought far higher prices than any other edition of the *Jerusalem De-

livered*. But it, along with the rest of Italian eighteenth-century book illustration, has been overwhelmed by the production of France. Only such a rich and centralized country could have concentrated or attracted from abroad the talent and money required for big publications like the Kehl edition of Voltaire, which employed two dozen illustrators, took five years to print its seventy volumes, and is said to have appeared in an edition of 20,000. Italy, then a congeries of starveling states, could manage no such outlay. But in spite of handicaps the old Italian tradition of picture-making was still lively enough to get there first with an invention. French and Italian books show even in their covers the contrast between wealthy standardization and ingenious poverty. Louis XV or Madame de Pompadour commanded bindings of scarlet morocco emblazoned with gold ornament stamped on by elaborate copper plaques. A Venetian senator displayed a wittier caprice with inexpensive gilt or white woodcuts on pink or green cardboard.

Of course the flow of ideas was not always northward, for Bodoni drew heavily on Fournier and Baskerville. Indeed, the whole of Parma became a French enclave in 1749, when it acquired a duke with a French education, a duchess who was the daughter of Louis XV, and an all-powerful French prime minister who emulated Colbert in state sponsorship of the arts. But the French respect for disciplined craftsmanship and high finish that was thus imported into Italy caught up an idea there and returned it to France when Bodoni printed one of his very few illustrated books in 1795, the *Scherzi Poetici e Pittorici*. Its strictly axial borders reflect the recent excavations at Pompeii in amphorae and tripods, in lozenges and ovals adapted from antique wall paintings. The figures are etched with the pallid uncertainty that Winckelmann, thirty years before, established as permanently obligatory for copying Greek and Roman antiquities. Despite their anaemic origin, Bodoni's illustrations anticipate French and German books of some fifteen years later. Like Canova's sculpture, this strange, cold book belongs to Italy's last great artistic innovation, the Empire style.
Title border for Venetian festival books etched by Francesco Bartolozzi about 1763. Title and vignette were printed from another copperplate inserted in the border. Dick Fund, 1935

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Etching from "Studi di Pittura" by Marco Pitteri after Piazzetta, Venice, Albizzi, 1760. Whittelsey Fund, 1949.
Title page etched by Francesco Rosaspina. The illustration inside the border is after Teixeira. Parma, Bodoni, 1795. Gift of Samuel P. Avery