The general public of today knows certain prints as well as any painting or statue. Rembrandt’s “Hundred Guilder” etching of Christ Healing the Sick is probably as famous as his Night Watch, and Dürer’s Knight, Death, and the Devil is certainly more familiar than any of his paintings. But in the past most people looked at prints for the information that they conveyed about something else—a foreign view, an exotic costume, or a painting in a far city. Like the driver watching the road, they were unaware of the glass through which they saw the world around them. So when an old print attracted attention for itself, the event is worth notice.

The best-known print in early times was certainly the miraculous woodcut of Forlì in northeastern Italy that became famous as Our Lady of the Fire. It is the subject of the earliest monograph on a printed picture, which also fixes the earliest date that can be attached to a surviving Italian print. This book is Giuliano Bezzi’s Il Fuoco Trionfante, printed in 1637 at Forlì, between Florence and Ravenna. Bezzi wrote of miracles with irresistible hyperbole:

“Around the year of our Lord 1420, in a pleasant house by the cathedral at Forlì, the devout and learned Lombardino Brussi of Ripetosa imitated Christ among the disciples at Emmaus by breaking the bread of the fear of the Lord and of humane letters with school-boys. Their household devotion turned to the Virgin. They ever began and ended their literary exercises by praising and praying to this great sovereign of the universe. They said their prayers before an image of Our Lady rudely printed from a woodblock on a paper about a foot square. Printing was then new, and who knows if this may not have been the first print by the first printmaker? The simplicity of the image certainly matched the well-mannered scholar’s simplicity of heart. It showed, and still shows, the most Blessed Virgin holding her Holy Infant and surrounded by saints like King Solomon by his guard. Above to the right and left shine the sun and the moon, luminously forecasting that the Virgin was to consecrate this paper with a power like the moon’s over water and the sun’s over fair weather.

“The worship of the Virgin had advanced these happy boys from easy letters to graver studies when, on February 4, 1428, fire broke out in the downstairs classroom. Whether it started by accident or by design is not known, but certain it is that the outcome so glorified God and his Blessed Mother that fires nowadays cause joy where they burn. When this fire had feasted on the benches and cupboards of the school, it followed its nature to ascend and sprang at the sacred paper. In awe at the sight of the most holy image, the flames stopped and—wonder of wonders—like the blameless fingers of a loving hand, they detached it from the wall to which it was tacked. The fire thought the wall too base to support so sublime a portrait and longed to uphold the heaven of that likeness, like the other heaven, on a blazing sphere. Above the flames raging in the closed room the unscorched image floated as on a throne. When the fire had consumed the ceiling beams it wafted out the revered leaf, not to burn but to exalt it. With this leaf on its back it flew to the second floor, to the third, to the roof, then through the roof, and behold, the Virgin’s image burst above the wondrous pyre like a phoenix, triumphant and unconsumed! The miracle drew the eyes of all the populace and came to the ears of Monsignor Domenico Capranica, the papal legate, who carried the paper in a procession, accompanied by all the people, to the cathedral of Santa Croce, where it was placed in a holy but simple chapel.”

As time went on the woodcut gathered the whole religious life of Forlì about itself. Copies were in every house, and the shrine of the image gradually disappeared under paintings.
Our Lady of the Fire, woodcut in the cathedral at Forli. Partly painted in water color. The frieze at the bottom has been damaged and repaired. Photograph courtesy of Lamberto Donati
and gold and silver amulets showing buildings saved from fire, or ships from wreckage. During a drought in 1608 the town invoked rain by building a stage in the square where winged children sang hymns to "the great Lady of the Air." When the plague struck in 1631-1632 "children ceased their games for the holy pastime of painting and decorating images of Our Lady. They lighted tapers and lamps and hung them with bells to call the neighbors of all ages. They ended every song and prayer with 'Regina ab Igne, Protectrix Nostra, ora pro nobis.'"

In 1619 the cult of Our Lady of the Fire had so far outgrown the "holy but simple chapel" which had been her home for two centuries that Forli started to rebuild the left transept of the cathedral into a special shrine. By 1636 eighteen thousand scudi had been spent to complete a charming chamber about twenty-five feet square under a cupola fifty feet high—the world's first and still handsomest print room. The print is still enshrined there above the altar in a carved tabernacle closed by a gilded bronze plaque embossed with flames. On high holidays during mass this sparkling shutter is lowered by a concealed pulley, while all the bells ring out around the town.

On October 20, 1636, the miraculous print was "translated" from its old chapel in the cathedral to the new one by being paraded through all the main streets in a fantastic procession. The town had adorned itself with a marble column, two big painted perspectives, or vistas, three arches of carpentry, and one of brick. On the eve of the long-prepared celebration a cloudburst seemed to threaten a rainy morrow but instead gave "the Mother of rain and sunshine" a chance to mark her day with a miracle of October brilliance. Each important guild or organization had constructed a complicated float for the procession. Each float displayed an allegory as elaborate as the one illustrated here, which was made for the Fraternity of Death. This group of volunteers,
who consoled condemned criminals on their way to execution and buried paupers and plague victims, symbolized their mission with a Triumph of the Rainbow displaying the sun after the storm and life after death. The foremost lady on the platform wears the seven rainy Pleiades as a crown and upholds a storm cloud, while her companion points upward to the sun. The contrast is repeated in a higher allegory by the life-sized Virgin enthroned on the rainbow, followed by the risen Christ as the sun of eternal life. This ponderous intricacy was carried by men shuffling inside the platform. A series of banners and similar floats led up to a climax of chinking censers and pungent incense around a canopy of gold and silver brocade, under which the bishop walked with the miraculous woodcut in his hands. As the procession returned to the cathedral it assembled around a huge green canvas mountain that split in quarters, spilled four sham cascades of the Deluge, and then launched forth Noah's Ark. The machine did not produce the Moses and singing cherubim that had been planned as the climax of control over fire and water because the contriver fell ill before he could finish it. So, instead, the bishop said a prayer and blessed the people with the woodcut, while rockets sparkled and cannon boomed to welcome the Madonna of the Fire to her new home.

Bezzi wrote as though he had consulted contemporary sources for his circumstantial account of the miracle of 1428. The date is important because it is only five years later than the earliest date printed on a European woodcut which is the German Saint Christopher of 1423 in the John Rylands Library in Manchester. The Saint Christopher is a provincial Gothic work, whereas the Forli Madonna is in the full early renaissance style because Italy was so much ahead of the rest of Europe. This contrast might be what led Mr. Hind, in his *Introduction to a History of Woodcut*, to suggest a date after 1428 for the Forli Madonna. While he might be right, Italy repeatedly produced works of art that anticipated a future style. Mantegna, for instance, began to engrave when the art was a bare generation old but produced works that have nothing stiff or quaint about them.

Bezzi was, of course, wrong in hoping that his Madonna might have been the first woodcut ever made. Even if there were no documents to prove the existence of woodcutters much earlier, the technical proficiency of the Forli Madonna would presuppose some experience in picture printing. Since Italy led for so long in the figure arts and also established the first European paper mills, Italians could quite possibly have been the first Europeans to adapt the old technique of block-printing patterns on cloth to printing pictures on paper. The destruction of most of the early woodcuts makes it impossible ever to be sure where picture printing really started in Europe.