

Aldo Manuzio. Il rinascimento di Venezia [Aldo Manuzio. The Renaissance of Venice]

Galleria dell'Accademia, Venezia

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Curated by Lodovico Beltramini, Davide Gasparotto, and Giulio Manieri Elia, the [exhibition](#) centers on the publisher Aldo Manuzio not simply by showcasing the innovations in his trade that transformed print culture. The history of his editions is placed in the context of Renaissance scholarly culture and visuality, with a keen attention to the social status of the book among his sophisticated first readers (often depicted in paintings by Titian and Lotto while holding one of the Aldine editions in their hands). An equally important attention is given throughout the exhibition to the the transmedial impact of Manuzio's activities in the construction of a specifically - and somehow abstract - Venetian Renaissance.

An intellectual on the move, Aldo Manuzio, born near Rome, reached Venice after having studied Greek in Ferrara and after having taught at the courts of Carpi and Mirandola. It was in response to a pedagogic need that he issued his first edition displayed in the exhibition, a Greek grammar, in a city that had expanded its trading activities - and its lasting philological interests - in conjunction with a territorial presence in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, reduced in its scope by the Turkish expansion. The engagement and rivalry of Venice with the Eastern Mediterranean is crucial to its history and its symbolic productions: the legend of the city patron saint Mark narrates that, on his way to Alexandria in Egypt from Aquileia, Mark had been hosted one night in one of the isles of the archipelago in a fishermen's hut, where he dreamt of the future glory of the city. His corpse was believed to have been surreptitiously brought back from Alexandria of Egypt by two sailors from the same Venetian archipelago. Manuzio's logo - a dolphin around an anchor, coming from an ancient coin donated to him by the humanist Pietro Bembo - was itself a symbol of the intertwined project of cultivating ancient (often Christianized) virtues in a mercantile context.

Between 1495 and 1515 Manuzio contributed to a remediation of the culture of antiquity through the new medium of the printed book, but also through the impact his editions had in other forms: Manuzio completed the publication of Aristotle's complete works, but inspired also contemporary artists with the indirect recuperation they mediated of Greek painting through the descriptions of it in the work of Lucian, or, through the praise of specific materials (like bronze) contained in the editions of Pliny - all represented in the exhibition by

exquisite paintings, prints, and other artifacts. Manuzio's edition of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, the tale of a dream that is an allegorical-oneiric quest of Medieval ascendancy updated to the contemporary cultural climate – the narrative offers inscriptions in the three languages cultivated in the redefined curriculum of the time, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – is presented in a fascinating space created for the exhibition, a narrow passageway through a wood-paneled corridor where single reproductions of its pages are pasted. The curators advance the hypothesis that the illustrations are by the Paduan publisher and artist Benedetto Bordone and by the anonymous Venetian artist-poet illuminator of Antonio Grifo's *Triumph of Venus*, both displayed in the adjoining cabinets. The portable format of Manuzio's Aldine editions of Greek and Roman classics included also Italian vernacular works, thus completing the cultural program of ennobling the vernacular language initiated by Dante in his theoretic reflections on the status of the vernacular since the *Vita Nuova*, and, more programmatically, in the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. Despite the debt incurred with Dante, Manuzio's own edition of the Florentine poet was not the first of the series, but came soon after the one of the more canonical figure of Petrarch.

These slender books printed in a beautiful typeset became the preferred editions for the private reading habits of a whole class of “diplomats, businessmen and military commanders” – as stated by the curators in their narrative – but provided also a repertoire of images and literary references that migrated to other artistic forms and ended up adorning the interiors of Venetian homes. The harmony and clarity of Manuzio's characters, as well as the rigorous structures of the page layout, deriving partially from fifteenth century manuscripts, speak of an ongoing reflection on the theological dimension of geometry in the Christian-Classical allegiances of the time, pioneered at the end of the so-called Middle Ages in the visionary lines of Dante's *Paradiso*. The curators track these interesting synergies to a memorable event: the lecture on Euclid's *Elements* by the mathematician-monk Luca Pacioli on August 1508 at the church of St. Bartholomy in Rialto, attended by Manuzio and many of the figures highlighted in the exhibition.

The geopolitical priorities of the Venetian republic are present in the room that reconstructs the popularity of the pastoral (from Teocritus and Virgil to Sannazaro) not simply as a literary genre of humanist imitation but as a new site of scientific observations – Giorgione's *La Tempesta* is placed in the same room – and of projected cultural expansion on the mainland on the part of the Venetian Republic, with the plan for the villa Giustinian at Roncade,



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designed by Manuzio's collaborator Giovanni Giocondo in a classical style. Manuzio's pan-European humanist community included the rising star of Erasmus, who spent almost one year at Manuzio's home to complete his *Adagia* published a year after Manuzio's edition of Erasmus's Latin translations of *Ecuba* and *Iphygenia in Aulide*.

In mapping Aldo Manuzio's cultural horizons against the backdrop of a specifically Venetian history, a notable absence is an attention to a more cosmopolitan and equally entrepreneurial dimension of the book trade in the period (the only other centers more referred to being Rome and Florence), for instance the editions in other languages published by Manuzio on commission, eg. the South Slavic ones (see Richard Kirwan and Sophie Milluns in *Specialist Markets in the Early Modern Book World*), or the acknowledgement, if only in passing, of the parallel development since the 1490s of the printing press in centers such as the Venetian colony of Ragusa/Dubrovnik but also, to remain in the Mediterranean basin, in Salonica, Cairo (the Egypt of St. Mark's legend), Fez, and Montenegro.

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