

DECEMBER 2015

BOOK DISPATCH FROM ROME

by J. David Archibald

For the fifth year in a row, my wife Gloria Bader and I spent the Christmas holidays in an apartment in the aptly named *Piazza del Paradiso* near the *Campo de' Fiori* in the heart of Rome. Our apartment sits in the curved trace of Pompey's theatre, dedicated in 55 BCE and still visible on Google maps. We never tire of the Eternal City, from its ancient ruins to modern art exhibits. And, oh, yes, the food and drink are passable.

Each visit begins with some thematic subplot, such as seeing all of architect Borromini's works or visiting

filming locations for the 2013 *The Great Beauty*, a Felliniesque tale of decadence and lost loves. Surprises, however, lurk around each and every corner. Last year a truly expansive exhibit on Escher's art appeared within Borromini's Cloister, as did an exhibit on ancient Western libraries in the atrium of the Coliseum. One can still buy the catalogue for this, but *solo in Italiano*. For a bibliophile, books and book arts such as the Coliseum exhibit always present themselves, but in 2015 the centerpiece of our stay was antiquarian libraries and bookstores of Rome. This was only eclipsed by a per-

formance of *Tosca* viewed from box seats at the *Teatro dell'Opera di Roma*.

Our first visit featured, not a bookstore, but rather, more appropriately, a gallery specializing in modern art and ancient books—*PhiloBiblion*. In December of 2015, in conjunction with Bloomsbury Auctions, the curators held an art auction, *Arte Moderna e Contemporanea*, and an antique and rare book auction, *Millecinquecento Libri del Cinquecento*, dealing with important sixteenth-century European books.

We enjoyed the art gallery, as well as a few of the rare books, through the kind auspices of Dr. Margherita Palumbo, whom we had met at the 2015 New York Antiquarian Book Fair. Dr. Palumbo is an expert with wide interests, from German philosophers to ancient libraries, and serves as the book expert for *PhiloBiblion*. We were shown both an illuminated manuscript produced just fifty years after Dante's death as well as incunabular versions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. A copy of the 1481 first Florentine edition (above right), viewable at the *PhiloBiblion* website, has two small copper engravings (both colored and uncolored versions) derived from Botticelli drawings. We also saw a beautifully en-

graved leather-bound book from Jean Grolier's library and another engraved volume with Persian-style lappings of leather protecting the text edge. This latter volume also has gauffering composed



of small regular divots on the edge of the text—both a term and a technique new to me. We were also shown wonderful fold-outs in four books dealing with the history of museums that will be included in their March 2016 “*Kircher e Wunderkammern*” auction.

This led to a wonderful visit to a reconstructed small version of Kircher's museum at the Visconti School, which held his original museum in the seventeenth century (left). This aptly titled *Wundermuseum* under the direction of Dr. Vasconi, a Kant scholar, comprises a new, small building housed within





Above: the *Wundermuseum* at the Visconti School. In the left background a view of the original seventeenth century museum can be seen, while enclosed in the glass cases are animal mounts, obelisks, and other artifacts from Kircher's era.

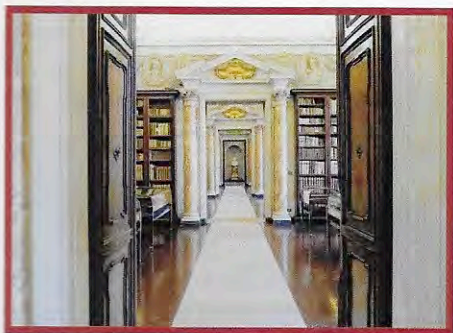


a reading room decorated in the late nineteenth century with frescos of the muses and medallions of famous authors, philosophers, and scientists, including my favorite, Darwin (left). Beyond this is a series of smaller rooms serving as stacks (for the lack of a better word), employing beautiful

wood cabinets and shelving. Beyond the *Lincei* rooms is a series of older rooms of the *Corsini* library, devoted, as the above-door medallions note, to various subjects as organized at the time (page fifteen, top left). The last and much larger room has a series of later, smaller bookcases high above the floor (page fifteen, top right). Pope Clement XII, who, along with his nephew, Cardinal Neri Corsini, helped start this very early public library, placed himself to destroy in these high, small

a much older large lecture hall. The *Wundermuseum* contains not replicas but actual animal mounts, skeletons, telescopes, and obelisk models, all dating from Kircher's time (above).

Our friend and guide Raffaella Tomasetti arranged or directed us to three libraries, some dating from the early seventeenth century. The first is the *Biblioteca Corsiniana* and *Lincei*. This, as the name implies, is the physical combination of two libraries. The *Lincei* library has at one end a former ballroom, now



bookcases, and curious browsers could be told that these volumes were too high to reach. The director, Dr. Guardo, showed us some gems, including a seventeenth century natural history of Mexico. Also we saw their copy of Galileo's 1613 *Istoria e Dimostrazioni Intorno Alle Macchie Solari e Loro Accidenti Rome* (History and Demonstrations Concerning Sunspots and their Properties), noting on the title page (below) his membership in the *Lincei* scholar's group, which would become the library of the same name.

The second library we visited briefly



on our own was *Biblioteca Angelica* (page twelve, top). As with the other two libraries, it holds a large, ornate, combination reading room and stacks. Although we could not venture past the public access area, the view of the great hall was breathtaking.

I have left the most interesting and convoluted story to the last—*Biblioteca Casanatense*. Rafaella had arranged a pri-

vate tour for which we were quite willing to pay a fee to help support the library. Dr. Palumbo of *PhiloBiblion*, a former director of *Casanatense*, could arrange a free tour, but we all agreed that helping support the library was worthwhile. Then Italian governmental bureaucracy reared its Cerberine head: we would need to pay by postal order or bank transfer. Nope, we were not going to spend our time in Rome in lines filling out paperwork. The tour was off until a twist of bibliophilic fate brought us back a few days later.

This part of the tale begins with Scott Clemons of the Grolier Club in New York. Scott noted last April in his fantastic symposium on the Aldine Press that Aldus Manutius' son Paulus was buried in Rome in *Santa Maria sopra Minerva*, best known for the elephant obelisk out front executed in Bernini's studio. Alas, the marker for Paulus Manutius' 1574 sepulcher disappeared in a late nineteenth century remodel. Various triangulating sources showed quite convincingly that the marker rested near the fifth column from the back on the left, but, more precisely, where? Was it in the floor, on the column, and on which side of the column had it occurred? My friend, guide, and talented painter, José Grave de Peralta, and I searched the vicinity carefully for any trace of this tomb, but none was found.



the lost slab of stone, but it clearly indicated that the inscription had lain next to the fifth column on the side of the small side chapels. His inscription was lost but not forgotten, nor was our visit to the *Casanatense*, for, as Gloria and I closed the 1829 manuscript, our ebullient library guide Ricardo Artico approached us, informing us

It was suggested that the neighboring *Casanatense*—the library in which we were supposed to have a tour—might hold books or manuscripts about the burial inscriptions. With great help from the *Casanatense* staff, an 1829 manuscript was found that faithfully recorded all the burial inscriptions and their quite precise locations. It could not bring back

the library was now closed, and we could not leave. We must accompany him to the Christmas party in the great hall of the *Casanatense* (above and below). Not only had we thwarted Italian bureaucracy, but we had done it with a glass of bubbling *prosecco* in hand as we strolled the great hall looking at the current exhibit on world travel.

