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# *The Uses of Woodcut Illustration in Books of the Italian Renaissance*

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## **Printed Images and the Printing Revolution**

Why were woodcuts used in books? If we answer that they were employed to illustrate the text, we have only given our question another form. For the idea of “book illustration” has a meaning given us by centuries of practice of this craft, just as the efforts of craftsmen today amplify the art. Once the early printers had connected text and image, there began a fertile new development with artistic, literary, and intellectual importance. In the use of woodcuts in early printed books we may study what the intercourse of a printed text and a printed image in a codex book meant to them and to their readers of the latter half of the fifteenth century.

Printing put thoughts, words, ideas into a very material world of commerce; the art of the Renaissance was sensuous but floated upon a sea of incorporeal ideas; printers and artists then are joined together in early illustrated books, in the decades that closed the Middle Ages and began the modern world: so what, in the midst of the powerful changes in communication caused by printing, did it mean to place a woodcut in a printed book? What was book illustration before book illustration was developed as we know it?

Every illustration in an early book raises this question. The answers will be found through many other questions: what are its stylistic attributes? who was the artist? what is the date? where was this made? in what other books was it used? what changes did it undergo in its history? what known manuscript miniatures, drawings, majolica, stained glass, wood carvings, medals, bronze plaquettes, crystal carvings, and works in other media are related to it or shed light on it? what works in other media did it influence? what is the background of the iconography? how does it relate to the text? Some of these questions are unanswerable, each yields its own quantity of detail, all require lots of hard work. The answers will describe the march of word and image in the first century of printing--the revolution in communication viewed anew and reflecting onto our understanding of each of the specific arts of communication, including book illustration.

The small woodcuts that constitute almost all early book illustrations have been little favored by art historians. Art history grew in a perspective that placed woodcuts, with the other applied arts, toward the bottom of a hierarchy of media. Almost all book woodcuts are unsigned: it is a world in which even single-leaf woodcuts of the fifteenth century have received far less attention than the cuts of Dürer and his successors, with whom the collecting of woodcuts begins. Furthermore, they are small. And they are many, far too many for the painstaking work of good art history. We must also record the failings of book historians, for before the last few decades there had not been in their work the field of concepts necessary to support deep studies. There had been instead little but generalities and nothing to encourage the exploration of wide connected sectors of cultural history such as art historians had developed in the study of painting.

Art history and printing history have changed in the last century. They now have the will and the means, conceptual and analytical, to co-operate in viewing early book illustration as a chapter in the history of communication. But the same great darkness as to facts, the same difficult choices as to probabilities, and the same unsatisfying hedged assertions remain in the study of woodcuts in early books. These may overwhelm the hopes, interest, or attention of

some historians. Nonetheless, others will be drawn to these deep issues and the vast pool of archaeological data in early printed books. They will be drawn as well by the beauty and charm of these old woodcuts.

The richest trove, as to both quantity and beauty, is in Italian books. The printers of Venice alone produced one-seventh to one-eighth of all printing in Europe before 1500, two and one-half times the output of Paris.<sup>1</sup> The books of the Italian printers before 1500 included about two to three thousand woodcuts (and a few engravings), vastly more than in any other country. From the introduction of illustration in Italian books in 1465 until around 1540, when engraving largely supplanted woodcuts, perhaps ten thousand woodcut book illustrations were made, most of which present the impossibility of attribution to artist or atelier that offends art historians. These woodcuts existed in a complex and active network in which a great many objects were acted on by very many influences<sup>2</sup>, notably the influence of the text--the one factor unique to the craft of book illustration. But it is this critical mass of complexity and quantity in Italian woodcut book illustration that yielded a capital change in technique unparalleled in Europe. Its story, stretching from 1465 to 1540, helps to answer the questions about the invention of book illustration and the revolution in communication.

### **The Desire for Printed Images**

Christian preaching in the Middle Ages until the twelfth century was often an academic exercise in the cloister or monastery, rather more like a lecture than a passionate exhortation.<sup>3</sup> But, since the thrust of the Christianity was incarnation, immanence, the kind of divine presence it called *parousia*, the history of its worship often was the unravelling of barriers between the spiritual and the mundane. Whenever such heretics as the Cathari or the Waldensians attracted large followings, it was in part because their words established an identity between their ideas and lives and those of ordinary people.<sup>4</sup> Where popular preaching flourished, it stood in contrast

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1 Lowry, Martin, *The World of Aldus Manutius* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1979), p. 7.

2 Samek Ludovici, Sergio, *Illustrazione del libro e incisione in Lombardia nel '400 e '500* (Modena, 1960), *passim*.

3 Magli, I., *Gli uomini della penitenza* (N.p., 1967), p. 25.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 30

to the rigid preaching in the cloister, addressed by clerical authority to clerical follower, or later to the official preaching in the university, from intellectual technocrat to educated urban elite,<sup>5</sup> and it responded to a vastly increased mass interest in devotion.<sup>6</sup>

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Dominicans--members of the "Order of Preachers"--and others in Flanders, western Germany, southern France, and Lombardy seized hold of a solid psychology of conversion, passionately exhorting the audience to dramatic penitence. By the fifteenth century penitential movements drew from the strong material sufferings and passions of ordinary people<sup>7</sup> to become large, visible features of the common religious life of these areas and especially in northern Italy,<sup>8</sup> where most of the woodcut illustrated books were later produced. Thus Fr. Roberto da Lecce (1429-1495) drew capacity crowds to the piazza grande of Brescia by his preaching for eight days in 1451.<sup>9</sup> Popular penitential preaching so successfully involved a wide audience in an intimate rapport with the ideas of the speaker that over time it created a new relation between the performer and the audience. The preacher and the actor in the religious theater mediated the sacred and this new kind of public, so that the preaching and the performance became a place of *divismo*, identity with the sacred.<sup>10</sup>

This helped to change the world of images of the fourteenth century, because sight became more important in devotional manifestations than before. In 1424 a bull of Pope Martin V authorized the showing of relics to the faithful. Processions multiplied, flagellants and other penitent groups made compelling public spectacles, actors performed sacred plays, and popular feasts had more religious elements.<sup>11</sup> Imagery developed a meaning arising from the belief that it was a sacred space through which by sight the faithful would enter into a species of identity with the sacred.

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5 *Ibid.*, pp. 45ff., 53.

6 Manselli, Raoul, *La religion populaire au Moyen Age* (Montréal, 1975), pp. 113-114.

7 *Ibid.*, 79ff.

8 *Ibid.*, 87, 94.

9 *Ibid.*, 92-93.

10 *Ibid.*, 96.

11 *Ibid.*, 127-130.

A part of this belief was fetishism. Much of Italian popular devotion was derived from pagan customs.<sup>12</sup> It transferred this folklore to monotheism.<sup>13</sup> Church reforms, such as that under Pope Gregory, and urban Christian culture did not erase the older beliefs but made the interpenetration of doctrinal and popular religion more and more complex and difficult, a dialectic of unity and conflict.<sup>14</sup> The temblors of this faultline deeply affected imagery as popular devotion grew in force. A fetish in pagan belief is an object having a direct and decisive influence on life. It has power as an emanation of the supernatural,<sup>15</sup> often transferred by impression upon or into it. Fetishes were made and employed throughout Italy in those days and indeed today. Thus a Christian benediction could be thought of as a fetish--i. e., as creating sacred presence in an ordinary object.<sup>16</sup> In the case of a woodcut on paper fetish of St. Francis of Assisi giving a benediction, his thought is impressed in the picture of him blessing, by which the paper acquires a virtue from the image upon it.<sup>17</sup> This kind of belief was in the background of the rise of devotional imagery in the minds of those present, who sought the powerful presence of the sacred in their lives.

Much has been written about the circumstances and causes of the appearance of text in print, but there has been far less consideration of the causes for the entry of images into the printed text. Those we have briefly discussed were a large part of the picture. These were part of a popular devotional tradition that permeated the common life of the day; and since the first known images reproduced on a press were devotional, they are essential to the entry of imagery into print. The connection of press and woodcuts was made possible by technique, but what made it necessary was that the one needed the other. Printers had use of woodcuts because people wanted and used imagery.

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12 Vecchi, Alberto, *Devozione Popolare a S. Antonio di Padova* (Padua, 1981), pp. 15-16.

13 Manselli, op. cit., pp. 36-38 et passim.

14 Isambert, F. A., *Le sens du sacre* (Paris, 1982), pp. 72-73; Manselli, op. cit., pp. 216-218.

15 Bellucci, Giuseppe, *Il feticismo primitivo in Italia* (Bologna, 1983, repr. Perugia, 1919), p. 7.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 153.

17 *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

These are the some of the conditions that finally created a market for images that have been described as expressions of the spiritual needs, taste, lyric simplicity, and psychology of humble people;<sup>18</sup> as a popular art with the same graceful decor and aspiration to beauty found in other art of the Renaissance;<sup>19</sup> as ways of making lines in wood show an intensely felt world of experience filled not only by joys and sorrows but also by mystical presence;<sup>20</sup> as a way in which ordinary people seek, gaze at, and own images that “embodied religious feeling and ordered knowledge” and were “the beginning of a new coherence of the masses of a feudally splintered society.”<sup>21</sup> After printing had become a mass medium, this intimate and powerful style of popular imagery was decisive in the story of the development of book illustration in Italy between 1465 and 1540.

### The First Woodcuts

The first images printed in Italy were single-leaf woodcuts. No more than 200 Italian single-leaf woodcuts survive from the fifteenth century, as opposed to the thousands extant of German origin. Many are fragments. This fact has led earlier scholars to believe that few were made or that there was no production or trade at all until printing had become well-established in the last quarter of the century.<sup>22</sup> Yet as early as 1838 William Chatto had correctly concluded that the importation of German woodcut playing cards and saints’ images was a competitive factor in an established market. He discussed the 1441 edict of Venice’s Council of Ten, well-known for a century, forbidding these imports in order to protect the trade of the native craftsmen.<sup>23</sup> Kristeller in 1922 cited documents establishing the existence of vendors of reproduced images of saints on paper in Bologna in 1395 and Florence in 1430.<sup>24</sup>

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18 Toschi, Paolo, *Stampe popolari italiane* (Milan, 1964), p. 14.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

20 Turelli, Elisabetta, *Immagine e azione riformatrice: le xilografie degli incunaboli Savonaroliani* (Florence, 1985), p. 7.

21 Fields, Richard, *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Other Relief Prints* (New York, 1975), pp. iv-v.

22 Lippmann, Friedrich, *Italian Wood Engraving in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1888), pp. 2, 63.

23 Chatto, William A., *A Treatise of Wood Engraving* (New York, n. d.), pp. 43-45.

24 P. Kristeller as cited in Saffrey, H. D., “Ymago de facili multiplicabilis in cartis: Un document méconnu, daté de l’année 1412, sur l’origine de la gravure sur bois à Venise”, in *Nouvelles de l’estampe*, no. 74 (1984), pp. 4-7.

Schizzerotto has described an inventory of more than 3,500 prints sold by a dyer at Padua in 1440.<sup>25</sup> To this the recent discovery of H. D. Saffrey must be added: a description, dated 1412, of the use since 1396 of an “ymago de facili (sic) multiplicabilis in cartis” for the cult of Catherine of Siena.<sup>26</sup>

This evidence implies a wider context of similar objects put to similar uses, of which there are a few traces. From the earlier literature there are sightings of now-lost woodcuts dated 1418, 1423, and 1437. But we still have today, in a side-chapel in the Duomo of Forli, the marvelous woodcut of the Madonna del Fuoco, named for having survived a fire in 1428.<sup>27</sup> Finally, Erwin Rosenthal not only convincingly dated two woodcuts to before 1450 and two others to before 1420 or 1430 but also suggested in 1962 what Saffrey’s discovery of 1984 tends to confirm: that early Italian woodcuts have an air of the Trecento about them.<sup>28</sup>

The likely story is this. Sometime in the late fourteenth century, the demands of a renewed and augmented popular devotion created a large market for images. The press and the woodblock served this market with images of the saints. By the 1440’s there was a flourishing trade in these images in Venice and probably in most of Northern Italy<sup>29</sup>, which began to show their influence even in other lands.<sup>30</sup> Late medieval popular culture and painting produced a trade in the woodcut imagery that flooded fairs and marketplaces and thence onto the walls, cupboards, chests, and books of homes on the eve of the introduction of printing into Italy.<sup>31</sup>

When we ask why woodcuts were first printed in books, we can find one answer by asking why woodcuts were put into other objects. Why were single-leaf woodcuts “pasted, tacked,

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25 Schizzerotto as cited in *ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

27 Evelina Borea in Bellini, Flora, ed., *Xilografia Italiana de Quattrocento da Ravenna*, (Ravenna, 1988), pp. 31-34.

28 Rosenthal, Erwin, “Two Unrecorded Italian Single Woodcuts and the Origin of Wood Engraving in Italy”, in *Italia Medioevale et Umanistica*, vol. 5 (1962), pp. 353-369.

29 E. Borea in Bellini, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 19; C. E. Rava, in his *Supplement* to Sander, M., *Le livre à figures italiennes*, depuis 1467 jusqu’à 1530 (New York, 1941; Suppl.: Milan, 1969), vol. 4, p. xiv.

30 Fields, *op. cit.*, no. 59; Fields, Richard, et al, ed., *Fifteenth Century Woodcuts and Metalcuts* (Washington, 1965), no. 221.

31 Fields, *op. cit.*, p. v.

and sewn to all sorts of objects and surfaces”?<sup>32</sup> After all, they were ultimately pasted into books, as in the books of the lawyer Jacopo Rubieri that yielded the largest trove (now in the Bibliotheca Classense of Ravenna). One group of fragments, now at the Museum Dahlem in Berlin, was found on the walls and doors of a house in Bassano as it was being demolished<sup>33</sup>; others are found on the covers or sides of chests or even sewn into garments. Even the Paduan humanistic lawyer Marco Benavides tacked them onto the walls of his studietto in 1532.<sup>34</sup> What were the uses of these woodcuts?

There are two closely related uses. First, there are the uses suggested by the “cult of images,”<sup>35</sup> with its strong spiritual and fetishistic features, that formed in this period: “they were often viewed as quasi-magical objects with protective powers”<sup>36</sup> and “they added a note of divine presence to even the most humble dwelling.”<sup>37</sup> Second, these images may be based on the cycles of frescoes that taught the unlettered the truths of religion and stimulated their devotional sentiment.<sup>38</sup> Since the woodcuts were more widely distributed than paintings, they developed a new didactic or “speaking” function in the changing devotional environment. Thus, these woodcuts were not fine but applied art. They taught, reminded, inspired, and protected.

These uses motivated artists to transform the old woodcutting techniques of textile manufacture, in which color designs were printed on fabrics by carved wood blocks, through the introduction of the human figure to the design. The new art developed on the basis of an old and sophisticated technique, the practiced skills of which could now be used to reproduce images from painted canvas and wood or stained glass.<sup>39</sup> Its market was great enough to effect an “extraordinarily extensive circulation and distribution of woodcuts in all strata of society”

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32 *Ibid.*

33 Goldoni, Maria, *I legni incisi della Galleria Estense* (Modena, 1986), p. 26.

34 Rosand, David and M. A. Murano, *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut* (Washington, 1976), p. 10.

35 Fields, *loc. cit.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 Rosand and Murano, *loc. cit.*

38 Chiminelli, C., “L’incisione in legno a Venezia”, in *Ateneo Veneto*, vol. 29.II, fasc. 1 (1916), p. 67.

39 Field, *op. cit.*, p. iv.

in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>40</sup> People had various uses for woodcuts that, growing out of the original fetishistic or spiritual impulses, had many ramifications. Popular demand changed the old manufacturing technology into a visual communications technology.

### The Printing and Woodcut Trades

The trades of the new communications technologies in the Renaissance grew from the commerce of older trades. For example, in France the makers of pattern papers, used as linings of boxes and cupboards and eventually as book wrappers and end-leaves, were called *dominotiers* because they began by making woodcut popular religious images, such as portraits of Jesus (“dominus”);<sup>41</sup> there were also *marinotiers*, who made woodcuts of the Virgin Mary, and even *paternostiers*.<sup>42</sup> Their guild was organized in 1540, but there is evidence of French devotional woodcuts from the same early dates as the Italian.<sup>43</sup> After printing was established, the work of these craftsmen was produced by the press, and the printers in turn published single-leaf woodcuts that they made.<sup>44</sup> Thus in France printers and woodcutters employed each other, and a separate decorative art grew ultimately out of their association. In Italy, also, the use of woodcuts by the printing trade was tied to the traditional woodcut trade. The stylistic liaison of Italian woodcut book illustration in its full flower in the 1490’s to the traditional devotional images began in the circumstances of the new printing trade.

Woodcutters became one part of an intricate network of craftsmen and businessmen who made and sold books in Italy in the Renaissance. This network supplied commercial relationships for the printing trade that at first derived from “the economic organization of the world of the manuscript book,” the system of finance and distribution of which was extended as its original commercial framework.<sup>45</sup> Just as the printing trade was tied to the pre-printing

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40 Rosand, *loc. cit.*

41 Foot, Mirjam, “The Olga Hirsch Collection of Decorated Papers”, in Mirjam J. Foot, *Studies in the History of Bookbinding* (London, Scolar, 1993), pp. 256-257.

42 Meier, Henry, “Woodcut Stencils of 400 Years Ago”, in *Print Collector’s Quarterly*, vol. 25 (1938), p. 26.

43 Toschi, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

44 Meier, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-25.

45 Rouse, R. H. and Rouse, M. A., *Cartolai, Illuminators, and Printers in Fifteenth Century Italy* (Los Angeles, 1988), pp. 17-19.

trade in manuscript books, its crafts and its market, so also book illustration was tied to the development of the manuscript trade. When and why did the Italian printers turn to woodblock engravers? Richard and Mary Rouse have identified the *cartolai*, or paper merchants, as principals of the early arrangements of the printing trade. They dealt in the most expensive raw material and thereby often controlled the most money, so that they “were intimately involved at many levels with early printing in Italy, supplying funds or...the paper... (and) were majority partners, minority partners, silent partners, public partners, or straightforward investors against collateral.”<sup>46</sup> Their ownership of copies gave them a place in their marketing, as a part of which they arranged for the services of illuminators and even binders, whom they employed for manuscripts, either to fulfill a client’s order or as a way of upgrading their stock.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, some were booksellers, as was Zanobio di Mariano, whom Cosimo de’ Medici commissioned to stock a monastery library and who ended up as an important second-hand book dealer by the time of his death in 1495.<sup>48</sup> As printing got on its feet, each publication of most printers was a separate venture undertaken by a different combination of these investors, merchants, and craftsmen.<sup>49</sup> Early printers thus appear and disappear or move, and publishing corporations grow in longevity and size through the 1480’s and 1490’s.

In light of this “vertical integration” of the printing and paper trades, the Rouses argue that the printer was sometimes the least important figure in the provision of illuminations;<sup>50</sup> it was the paper merchant who transferred “assembly-line decoration from manuscript books to printed books and back again as custom dictated.”<sup>51</sup> Just as this structure was that of the pre-printing manuscript trade (largely standardized since the thirteenth century), so also were the crafts those of the pre-printing manuscript trade, which included illumination but not woodcuts. Manuscripts were illuminated for elite patrons, but the popular devotional woodcut had no patronage in this sense.

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46 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-58.

48 *Ibid.*, pp. 29-32.

49 Barker, Nicolas, *Aldus Manutius Mercantile Empire of the Intellect* (Los Angeles, 1989), p. 11.

50 Rouse, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

Thus wood engraving was at first employed to mimic efficiently or to aid the work of the illuminator. One example of this was the use of woodcut outlines of initials, called xylographic initials, in a number of Venetian incunabula, stamped onto the printed page and then often partially or completely illuminated.<sup>52</sup> These are not book illustration in that they do not picture the text, but they are book decoration. They seem more to have been the idea of paper merchants, hiring cutter and miniator to work together, than of a printer. Another example is the extraordinary set of six woodblock illustrations hand-stamped in blank spaces provided by the Venetian printer Adam von Ambergau in the Rylands copy of the second edition of the first Italian translation of the Bible, the Malermi Bible of 1 October 1471.<sup>53</sup> This unique attempt to illustrate a text tends to prove that “early mechanized book decoration originated in the workshops of miniaturists,” according to Lamberto Donati.<sup>54</sup> Yet, as Donati says, this idea for an easy technique of text illustration was an idea that failed, overwhelmed by the techniques of which the press was further capable.<sup>55</sup> Yet other ideas of the 1470’s, such as the stamped borders of interlacing white-on-black arabesques in Ratdolt’s books may have come from German painters.<sup>56</sup> Such ornaments may well have been added after the books left the printer,<sup>57</sup> and the stampiglia that produced them were owned by the artists.

These early Italian woodcut book decorations, whether stamped by hand or printed, were demanded and used by the manuscript books market to which its financiers and merchants were introducing the proprietors of printing presses in the 1460’s and 1470’s. Both illuminations in printed books and that stamped woodcut borders and initials were born in the same moment. As the effect of the new technologies of communication grew more powerful, profound, and

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52 See Abrams, George, “Venetian Xylographic Update”, in *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 1988, pp. 43-53; Donati, Lamberto, “I fregi xilograficistampati a mano negl’incunabuli italiani”, in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 74.II (1972), pp. 157-164, 303-317; *ibid.*, “I fregi xilografici stampati a mano negl’incunabuli italiani”, in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 75.II (1973), pp. 125-174; *ibid.*, “I fregi xilografici stampati a mano negl’incunabuli italiani”, in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 81.I (1979), pp. 41-74; Goff, Frederick, “Illuminated Woodcut Borders and Initials in Early Venetian Books”, in *Gutenberg Jahrbuch* 1962, pp. 380-389.

53 Barbieri, Eduardo, *Le Bibbie Italiane del Quattrocento e dal Cinquecento* (Milan, 1991), vol. 1, pp. 191-196.

54 Armstrong, Lillian, *Renaissance Miniature Painters and Classical Imagery* (London, 1981), pp. 28-29.

55 Donati, L. “I fregi xilografici stampati a mano negl’incunabuli italiani”, in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 75.II (1973), p. 155.

56 Baer, L., “Bernhard, Maler von Augsburg, und die Bücherornamentik der italienischen Frührenaissance”, in *Monatshefte für Kunstwissenschaft* (1909), pp. 46-57.

57 Pollard, A. W., *Early Illustrated Books* (London and New York, 1893), pp. 83ff.

pervasive, we will see the printing trade once again turning to another old and established craft. This was the woodcut trade, accustomed to wide distribution rather than to patronage and commissions; and its connection with the printed book both required and helped to create for the press a new economic basis. The result was the replacement of illuminated decoration by woodcut illustration.

### **The Uses of Woodcut Illustrations in Books**

The first book printed in Italy with woodcuts was the *Meditationes* of Turrecremata (Rome: Ulrich Han, 1467). Its marvellous woodcuts, in their four editions (plus two other woodcut Italian versions and one metalcut German version), have attracted modern attention since the first copy was brought to light by the peripatetic Dibdin.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it is difficult not to be rapt by their clarity and strength as well as by their atmosphere of humble and ancient devotion. They tell Old Testament and Gospel stories as frankly and as sincerely as it has ever been told in pictures.

Two of manuscripts of this text that have miniatures as well as a brief preface by Han refer the images to a series of thirty-four paintings on the walls of the cloister of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome, executed roughly 1425-1455, now destroyed. The work of Donati and others has shown that there is a complicated and unclear relationship among the frescoes, manuscript text, illuminations, blockbooks, woodcuts, and printed texts comprising this body of text and image during a century.<sup>59</sup>

In this book Han, whom Lippman thought to be the woodcutter,<sup>60</sup> whose hand corrected copies, and who owned a manuscript of this text, did something that had only been done once before in Europe (by Anton Sorg in Bamberg): he illustrated a book-length printed text with

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58 Donati, Lamberto, "Divagazioni intorno alle `Meditationes Johannis de Turrecemata'", in *Maso Finiguerra*, vol. IV (1939), pp. 3-68 (reprinted as *Prolegomena alla studio del libro illustrato Italiano*, Milan, 1939).

59 Donati, Lamberto, "A Manuscript of `Meditationes Johannis de Turrecemata' (1469)", in *The Library Chronicle of the University of Pennsylvania*, vol. 21 (1955), pp. 51-60; Unterkircher, Franz, "Der erste illustrierte italienische Druck und eine Wiener Handschrift des gleichen Werkes....", in *Hellinga Festschrift* (Amsterdam, 1980), pp. 498-516.

60 Lippmann, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

woodcuts. He did this apparently by sawing off the xylographic portion from the woodblocks of a blockbook and replacing their text with metal type. Thus he turned to woodcuts from an earlier popular tradition for a vernacular devotional text just two years after his former employers Sweynheym and Pannartz started to make editions of the classics programmed like pillars of an edifice. Against this background one is especially struck by his personal connection to the book, of which he produced three editions.

The cloister frescoes were explained by the words of the “meditations”. Indeed, they probably included a representation of a seated Dominican, reciting a text and perhaps pointing to the picture above. Similarly, a ninth-century manuscript from Bobbio of classical rhetorical texts, now in the St. Gall Stiftsbibliothek, has a frontispiece portrait of Cicero as if speaking the text to the reader. In Han’s book, the book is speaking, the monk now gone. It is as if the woodcuts themselves are speaking the text below. They explain Turrecremata’s meditations on the words of the Bible. Thus the frescoes and the woodcuts after them connected the original reality, the sacred history of the life of Jesus preserved in Biblical text, to the interior devotional world, the meditations, of the author and of the audience. These folkish devotional images do not decorate or even only explain a text but rather are in a deeply felt connection to the text. They represented and through a text described the stages of sorrow in the life of mankind and of Jesus.

So, from the beginning, representational woodcuts in printed books didn’t only make the book pretty. They were used to the didactic purpose of teaching religion and had been empowered to this use by the history in which woodcut religious images developed in late medieval Italy. In his first study of this book, Donati asked from what context Italian woodcut book illustration of the Renaissance came.<sup>61</sup> The first book so illustrated shows the context of one need that caused printers to use woodcuts. By mediating the divine and the mundane, they were used with a text to teach.

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61 Donati, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Another closely related way in which the woodcut taught was as a mnemonic aid. In 1888 Lippmann was already aware of this when he stated that the little text woodcuts that began to appear after 1489 were “reminders or signals for the guidance of the reader.”<sup>62</sup> To him this was the only logical answer to a puzzling difficulty: why did the refined connoisseurs and elevated humanists of the Renaissance, bathed in fine art, tolerate crude and mean folk art woodcuts in their books? Since they are not “artistic” in his terms, they must be utilitarian; they were “intended simply as landmarks for the reader, to guide him in the search for specific lines or passages, and to fix in his memory the leading actions,”<sup>63</sup> as had been true in manuscripts. Today we understand that the power of images is not in direct proportion to the strength of their aesthetic qualities but rather lies in their spiritual and psychological strength,<sup>64</sup> so that Lippmann’s insight flourishes in a different context.

Mary Carruthers has shown that even manuscript illuminations and calligraphy of the Middle Ages were parts of memory systems, adding into the text images that, marking and dividing sections of text, the reader could use to memorize long texts and complex related ideas.<sup>65</sup> Woodcut text illustration in printed books assisted the memory both when representing the action of a story, as in the Bible or Livy, and when picturing a mnemonic device, such as the hands used for counting and musical composition. In this context, one might make sense of some printers’ puzzling habit of using a mess of woodcut initials in student texts, such as commentaries on Aristotle. Why did the printer throw many woodcut initials of different sizes from different sorts onto an otherwise sober page? Perhaps it was by their differences, or by their marking of relations of text sections, that the reader would be able to fix in his memory the sections of text on the page. It was their variety that may have given him the hooks on which to hang each passage or idea.

Woodcuts in Italian books of the Renaissance were used in ways related also to the

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62 Lippman, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

64 Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images* (Chicago & London, 1989).

65 Carruthers, Mary, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge, 1986).

purpose and power of imagery in the other artistic media. Thomas Kren points out that Italian Renaissance manuscript miniatures are a unique and intimate link between the visual arts and humanism, that in manuscripts many more secular decorative cycles survive than there are extant painted cycles, and that the calligraphy of Italian Renaissance manuscripts (imitated in the earliest woodcut decoration of printed books) is also part of this picture.<sup>66</sup> Much of this is also true of printed books, their typography and their illustrations. They too contributed to and took their place in the rich iconic milieu of Northern Italy.

Study of the relationship of manuscript miniatures and book woodcuts has focused on parallel iconography, but our knowledge of the purposes and effects of the imagery of the arts should come into play in the study of the book woodcut. This will bring it into the context of medieval popular devotional art, such as the marvelous Chiarito Tabernacle by Pacino di Bonaguida, at the Getty Museum. In this privately commissioned wooden altarpiece for a home of the 1340's one can see the same kind of frank, dramatic, and folkish images that are preserved in the book woodcuts of more than a century later. There is also a type of medieval painting that, like the cycle of cuts in a printed book, tells a story: the dossal, on which small square scenes are presented in orderly rows. This presentation, as in the scenes from the life of St. Catherine of Alexandria painted by Gregorio and Donato d'Arezzo around 1330, also in the Getty Museum, brings to mind the title-page of the Giunta Biblia Italica of 1490 and any number of the larger square woodcuts in the Malermi style. The social, spiritual, emotional, and psychological content and effect of these works of art appear in the formally or iconically related book woodcuts because of continuities between the periods and the media.

Readers wanted to look at woodcuts in books for at least some of the same reasons for which they looked at images in manuscripts, in the churches, and in their homes. Woodcuts of devotional subjects, on single leaves or with text, presented episodes, singly or in series, clearly enough to engage the empathy and imagination of the viewer, as an aid to meditation.<sup>67</sup> Other

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66 Kren, Thomas, ed., *Renaissance Painting in Manuscripts* (New York, 1983), pp. 89ff.

67 Freedberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-178.

woodcuts provided ways of learning and remembering religious and secular subjects. But printing changed the woodcut as it absorbed it. Charles Talbot argues that the manufacture of an image by a press gave authority to that image, as a seal bore the authentic image of the original and validated the document to which it was affixed, so that prints of sacred subjects might have been thought to be made sacred by the touch of the original, as rank was conferred by touch and as Veronica's Veil or the Shroud of Turin brought Christ's presence by the image transferred from his own body.<sup>68</sup> While the products of the press were still authenticated by the touch of the original image or type, hallmarked by the printer's device, the press made so many copies of so many objects that these changed their environment so much that in time they were seen and used differently. Thus, while viewers and readers looked at the first illustrated books from a medieval point of view, within a couple of decades they were in a different "optical" world, in which reading and seeing were changed, images being far more common than they had been before mechanical reproduction. Documentation supplanted memory, seeing superseded touching. Yet the old uses of woodcuts remained, though weakened, agents within this craft and its trade--the world into which they were absorbed, that of the printed book.

### **The Invention of a New Style of Book Illustration**

The progress of woodcut book illustration in Italy through the 1470's and 1480's has been well described a number of times.<sup>69</sup> The production was very scattered. Thus one Roman printer, Lignamine, illustrated de Barberiis's *Opuscula* in 1481 with woodcuts of the Sibyls, and shortly after Reissinger at Naples copies him, but thereafter between these two cities one finds the pictorial cuts of Roman editions of the *Mirabilia Romae*, a Neapolitan illustrated book of hours printed by Moravus, two editions of Ovid by Reissinger and one by Tuppo, and a few other books, none forming a consistent series of subjects or styles. There are few books illustrated with woodcuts from the presses of Florence before 1490. There are besides a handful of Florentine books--Berlinghieri, Bettini, and Dante--and one in Milan illustrated

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68 Talbot, C., "Prints and the Definitive Image", in Tyson and Wagonheim, ed., *Print and Culture in the Renaissance* (Newark, 1982), p. 199-201.

69 Lippmann, *op. cit.*; Rava, *op. cit.*

with copperplate engravings.

An exception is found in a series of editions of Aesop. Verona was home to presses that issued the Valturius of 1472, with some of the most technically accomplished early woodcuts; and the magnificent Aesop of 1479, copied in Naples by Tuppo in 1485, by Benali in Venice in 1487, and by Bonellis in 1491. Giovanni Mardersteig identified the artist of the Verona edition as Liberale da Verona.<sup>70</sup> Liberale was a pupil of the great book illuminator Girolamo da Cremona and worked with him in Siena; it was in the tradition of the miniator that he made these woodcuts as outlines to be brought to life by brilliant coloring. Thus this line of woodcut illustrations of Aesop derive directly from the manuscript tradition and is part of a picture that does not show the establishment of a school of book illustration.

Meanwhile in the town of Mondovi a press in 1476 produced another edition of Aesop, extant today in but one copy, that is completely apart from the series of editions that began in Verona. Its folkish woodcuts are, as Mardersteig put it, the “*espressione di un’ arte popolare molto primitiva.*”<sup>71</sup> This is a trace of the vast body of popular imagery, which we have briefly followed from its origins, that was the distinguishing feature of the large and potent school of woodcut book illustration that developed in Northern Italy at the end of the 1480’s. The narrow survival of the Mondovi Aesop, as of the single-leaf woodcuts, is a signal that much of this art as it appeared in books has disappeared, as popular books of all periods tend to do. For example, 39 of the 101 known publications of the Ripoli press in Florence listed by the Rouses were not located in a single copy by any bibliography and are known only through the archives of the convent.<sup>72</sup> Neil Harris’s recent work on the editions of romances adds striking proof: it was small-format vernacular and popular works that disappeared far more easily than great tomes of theology. Harris sweepingly claims that “reconstructing the annals of early printing from what remains in today’s libraries is like compiling the menu of a great banquet from the

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70 Mardersteig, Giovanni, *Liberale Ritrovato nell’ Esope Veronese del 1479*. Verona, 1973.

71 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

72 Rouse, op. cit., pp. 69-94.

scraps afterwards thrown to the dogs and the beggars at the gates.”<sup>73</sup> Whatever may be the case regarding the whole body of early printing, there can be little doubt that many woodcuts applying the old craft of devotional images to the subjects of everyday life are now irretrievable.

While we cannot measure this commerce in popular pamphlets or how many woodcuts appeared in them, the later work in books certainly shows that there must have been a substantial, and perhaps very great, practice of the craft, which bequeathed well-formed techniques and regional styles in the same period, the 1470’s and 1480’s, in which more sophisticated texts went largely unillustrated throughout Italy. We know that the entire commerce in printed books grew and broadened in these years, but how far it accomplished this by the production of popular literature we cannot judge.

As it grew, the activity of illuminators decreased. Most of the printed books sumptuously customized by illuminators date from 1470 to 1485. The most magnificent of these have a painting on the first leaf that visually converts it into something other than a flat sheet--a frescoed wall hung with a broadside or a Roman lapidary monument. It is well known that as the printed book began to become more familiar and to stand on its own, there was of course less desire that it should imitate a manuscript. But furthermore, those to whom the physical transformation of the book by marks of ownership or the display of the owner’s wealth appealed became a smaller part of the market for printed books than they had been for manuscripts, because books, capable of a greater distribution, had a wider and more diverse audience. Thus, as the printed book became more and more essentially a published text, it was less and less a unique trophy. Printed books were for reading, studying, praying, and thinking. There was no sense in transforming the printed book into something else by painting it, when it was wanted for reading and study, like a text manuscript.<sup>74</sup>

This change and the subsequent invention of a new kind of book illustration were part of

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73 Harris, Neil, “Mario Sanudo, forerunner of Melzi”, in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 95.III (1993), p. 19.

74 Cf. Alexander, J. J. G., *Italian Renaissance Illuminations* (New York, 1977), p. 45.

the intellectual changes caused by printing and the commercial and economic conditions of Venetian printing and publishing. In the early 1470's the printers of Venice overdosed their market in editions of the Latin classics. At the moment of this market glut, in 1472-1473, there were both sharp attacks on the morality of printing books, along with a general purge of public morals, and also a crisis of the money supply in Venice.<sup>75</sup> Then, through a transformation as yet imperfectly understood, in the later 1470's the trade's output doubled or tripled<sup>76</sup> as its financial structure changed;<sup>77</sup> and in the 1480's, led by large firms with world-wide liaisons, it was an economic engine transforming the world.<sup>78</sup> In addition, in the late 1480's, Venice waxed wealthy, as stone replaced wood and grand palazzi were built.<sup>79</sup> The artistic changes--the decline of the activity of illuminators as illustrators of printed books--and the economic changes--the success of great publishing houses--were together part of a great intellectual and cultural change in which the printed book was implicated: "It was not just the manuscript itself that was being superseded but the whole range of social relationships and intellectual attitudes which had made it a focus of friendship and a work of art."<sup>80</sup>

In the books published by Luc Antonio Giunta and printers associated with him we find a new kind of book illustration that drew from the established craft of woodcutting and its traditional popular imagery to provide illustrations to printed texts that now had a wider market than they had reached before and to which these new readers had attitudes differing from those that had previously characterized the market.<sup>81</sup> This imagery had been created by a commerce that cut across most social strata, rather than in response to commissions, and had its roots in the traditional devotion of the people.

Luc Antonio Giunta, with his brother Bernardo, began work in the shop of a cartolaio in

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75 Lowry, *op. cit.*, p. 13; and *ibid.*, *Nicholas Jenson and the Rise of Venetian Publishing in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 106ff.

76 *Ibid.*, p. 177.

77 *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 201.

79 Lowry, *Aldus*, pp. 75-76.

80 Lowry, *Jenson*, p. 200.

81 Essling, V. Masséna, prince d', *Le premier Livre Xylographique Italien* (Paris, 1903); Bellini, *op. cit.*, pp. 44.

Venice before 1480, in his early twenties. He was not rich, nor did he come from a rich family.<sup>82</sup> And yet within four years of his first publication in 1489 he had issued the four most influential Italian woodcut illustrated books of the fifteenth century, comprising great cycles of hundreds of woodcuts, as well as numerous other books that began the wealthiest and largest printing dynasty of fifteenth- and sixteenth- century Italy. The other great dynasty was that founded by Aldus Manutius, who stands in contrast to Giunta. Lowry claims that Aldus was “a courtier...in his background and in his social values”, formed in the “polished atmosphere” of the courts at Carpi and Ferrara, whose many influential patrons funded his business.<sup>83</sup> Giunta was not this sort of man but a trader and a merchant at heart, whose financing was not from patrons, so far as we know, but from shares in books and contracts negotiated with other printers largely outside the sphere of Aldus. The printers he employed in the 1490’s, like those with whom he signed a five-year contract in 1507,<sup>84</sup> never seemed to be part of the genteel humanistic world of the house of Aldus Manutius. Giunta also was much richer, more than doubling his capital between 1491 and 1499.<sup>85</sup> Thus, perhaps getting his start from smart investing in publications in the 1480’s, and depending not on patrons but on the market, Giunta seems to have sought a way to illustrate his books apart from the established decorative traditions.

In 1489 Matteo di Codeca, also called Capcasa, printed an illustrated edition of St. Bonaventure’s *Devote Meditatione* in two issues. Two years previously Hieronymus de Sanctis et Cornelio printed an edition illustrated by the woodblocks of the only known Italian blockbook, made at least several decades earlier;<sup>81</sup> as in Han’s *Turrecremata*, pieces of blockbook woodcuts are re-configured to import popular imagery into the printed book. But the 1489 Codeca edition is the first edition with woodcuts expressly made for this book, and it is these woodcuts which are the first appearance of the style that swept Italian book illustration in the next two decades. The blocks were carved by the artist or atelier responsible or at least the source of inspiration for the books that followed. This text and its woodcuts

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82 Pettas, William A., *The Giunti of Florence* (San Francisco, 1980), pp. 27ff.

83 Lowry, *Aldus*, p. 302.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

85 Camerini, Paolo, *Annali dei Giunti* (Florence, 1962), vol. 1, pt. 1, p. 22.

or copies of them may be followed through editions by Bernardino Benalio, alone and with Codeca, Guglielmo de Cereto “de Anima Mia,” Manfredo de Bonelli, and later in the editions of Rusconi, Bindoni and Pasini, and others.

If it was Codeca who first found and employed this atelier, it was Luc Antonio Giunta who exploited his discovery. He seems to have secured the services of this atelier for himself, making it virtually his, perhaps planned as a key constituent of the business he hoped to create. In light of the radical change in the use of woodcuts at his hands and the consistency of the atelier involved, Giunta may well have been the first printer, or among the first, to own the woodblocks. Through this atelier, Giunta scooped up the long, old tradition of popular devotional imagery and brought it, re-shaped, into the realm of the printed book in Italy. Although popular woodcuts appeared in pamphlets both extant and lost before 1489, they had not been employed to illustrate the great texts of which Giunta made such influential editions. These include his Livy, *Deche Volgari* of 1493 and the Ovid, *Metamorphoses* of 1497 from the press of Giovanni Rubeo; and the *Vite de Sancti Padri* attributed to St. Jerome and, above all, the Malermi *Biblia Italica* of 1490, from the press of Giovanni Ragazzo. The woodblocks used for these editions and for the editions of a few other texts published by Codeca, Rubeo, Ragazzo, Pincio, and Benalio circulated among them in complex patterns of exchange for use in other editions of all these texts; and, in the next generation, were used again and copied and re-copied for the presses of Bindoni and Pasini, Benalio (the longest-lived early Italian printer), Rusconi, de Vianis, de Vitalibus, and others. These amounted to a large corpus of illustrated books over more than two decades in a single broadly identifiable style.<sup>86</sup>

The most important and famous of all these books is the illustrated edition of Niccolò Malermi’s Italian translation of the Bible, which Giunta published in 1490, 1492, and 1494.<sup>87</sup> Giunta took a text that had been fiercely attacked by the religious old guard in the 1470’s<sup>88</sup>

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86 Rava, *op. cit.*, pp. 8ff.

87 Barbieri, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 219-228.

88 Lowry, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

and made it the most beautiful example of Venetian woodcutting and book illustration. It is true that many subjects were suggested by woodcuts in the Cologne Bible of 1479, but most are fresh to the Giunta edition, and the woodcuts of the Malermi cycle as a whole are an original work of art. These cuts and those of the other Giunta and related editions are known as the work of the “Popular Designer.”<sup>89</sup> In 1990 Lilian Armstrong argued that the designs were the work of the distinguished illuminator known as the “Maestro di Pico.” The imagery and use of the woodblocks are nonetheless linked more fully with popular imagery than with the traditions of commissioned manuscript illumination. If the Maestro di Pico devoted the last phase of his career to books rather than to manuscripts--and artists of all periods have often switched media--it was because the influence on the printers’ market of readers with a “popular” and traditional attitude toward imagery, deeply connected with devotion and spirituality, created the opportunity for a different kind of book illustration. While some of his images are derived from those of the manuscripts he illuminated, he produced a larger body of work for which such a claim has yet to be made in detail and which can be seen in the context of popular imagery. Indeed, it was Tammara de Marinis who in 1941 first asked if the Malermi style of small woodcuts was derived from early popular printing and woodcuts.<sup>90</sup> In 1493, another printer, Guglielmo de Cereto de Monteferrato, known as “de Anima Mia,” issued the Malermi text with another large suite of woodcuts imitated from those of Giunta’s edition in such a way that their artist is known as the “Classical Designer”. Its influence became more prominent later in the sixteenth century, when a more classicized artistic style was applied to the system of book illustration developed in this period.

The appeal and importance of the woodcuts of the Malermi style, and especially those in the Malermi and related cycles, may be described in these terms. Most of them are small rectangular woodcuts, usually column width, set within the text or at the head of its principal divisions; their small size parallels in a general way the diminution of book format as the

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89 Poppelreuter, Josef, *Der anonyme Meister des Poliphilo. Eine Studie zur Italienischen Buchillustration und zur Antike in der Kunst des Quattrocento* (Strassburg, 1904. *Zur Kunstgeschichte des Auslandes*, heft XX.)

90 Marinis, Tamaro de, *Castello di Monselice* (Verona, 1941), p. 72.

fifteenth century drew to a close, although they were often used in folios. Within these small spaces, the scene is skillfully composed to fit the space and successfully establishes a space behind the frame. This organization is enhanced by the fine control of the line in narrative detail and choice of background and ornament. In addition, the faces are “noble and feeling.” At their best, the artist shows that he works with hatching and shading tools that give vivid, bold descriptive and pictorial texture.<sup>91</sup> The drawing is graceful and supple, so that the whole picture is easy to understand. Within their world, there is what Gruyer called the intimate poetry of devotional and daily life.<sup>92</sup> They bring the sincere, spontaneous, panoramic, and passionate pictures of courage, love, joy, sorrow, virtue, evil, prayer, the home, and the marketplace from the popular literature into sacred and pagan texts. Furthermore, they often bring with them imagery from oral traditions of faith and superstition. These cuts are intended to represent the text, not other works of art; they live inside the text, and the text is their proof-stone. Thus they enlarge the space of the reader’s imagination, adding an extra dimension to the imaginary space of the book by means of their “short-hand narrative capability.”<sup>93</sup> This capacity enabled the printer to use them both in liturgies and in narratives, such as the Bible or Livy, lending to narrative some sense of the cyclical ritual and giving to liturgy a vivid pictorial realism. They served as well to mark sections of text for the reader’s memory, but they illustrate the text and do not schematize it. The Malermi-style woodcut book illustrations are fully harnessed to the service of the text.

Woodcuts in the Malermi style appeared in the great editions of Giunta and of his contemporaries; in editions of Dante, Massaccio, and Boccaccio with cuts from the same atelier or from others of the day drawing from the same traditions and emulating its success; and in books printed in Ferrara, Parma, Milan, and elsewhere in Italy and throughout Europe that employed small woodcuts in regional and individual styles to picture the text with imagery both from daily life and classical sources. Of course, woodcuts set in the text are to

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91 Fields et al., *op. cit.*, p. xi.

92 Gruyer, Gustave, *Les livres publiés à Ferrare avec gravures* (Paris, 1889), p. 55.

93 Field, *op. cit.*, p. v.

be found in the 1480's from presses in Antwerp, Strassburg, and elsewhere; but at the head of the vast increase in illustrated books everywhere in the 1490's stands, as one of its causes, the Malermi style.

### **The Progress of Woodcuts in Books**

Throughout Italy in the 1490's the presses produced many more books with woodcuts, and very often with many cuts, than they are known to have done in the previous quarter-century. When the Malermi style of illustration was applied to classical texts, which in general had been previous minimally or not at all illustrated, they were presented in an entirely new way that became immensely and permanently popular. In the Italian illustrated editions of sacred and secular texts from 1490 to around 1540, and even after, they picture cycles of events, applying the old way in which popular devotional images pictured stories of the Bible and of the lives of the saints to printed liturgies, fictions, and histories. Thus the stories of Ovid, for example, have an air of being part of the eternal cycles of life, like a liturgy. The woodcuts helped to bring these texts into the consciousness of a wide array of readers, aiding their memory and reflection on the events told and depicted. They were not self-consciously aesthetic "suites" of images; rather they were utilitarian, organized by the text they illustrate. In this way the Italian woodcut illustrated books formed a part of the complex development of communication through the press in the Renaissance.

In a sense it is easier to study these woodcuts by the texts they illustrate rather than by groupings attributed to ateliers, eponymous masters, monograms, or names. There may never be enough documentary evidence to satisfy the questions about the identities signified by "ia", "b", "n", "Zuan Andrea", the Maestro del Melchiorre da Parma, or even Luc Antonio degli Uberti. The influence of many artists of the Italian Renaissance may be looked for or guessed at, and that of Mantegna can unquestionably be seen and traced. Yet the purposes and conditions of the books in which these cuts appear, such as text and readership, obscure the artistic background. The art historical elements are only some among the many facets of

the history of communication by printing, since the cuts must be understood in conjunction with texts.

From a stylistic point of view, perhaps the most satisfying analysis is by region. Kristeller and Samek have described the purely linear expression of Lombard graphic art. In Pavia there was what Samek called a sweetened, more fluid line.<sup>94</sup> In Brescia there are important illustrated books of the 1490's, due perhaps to its position as a center of the trans-Alpine trade in wood, paper, and books, and the consequent German influences.<sup>95</sup> The edition of Ovid by de Mazalis in 1497 in Parma shows that there were distinctive artists working there. Fava has shown strong correspondences of woodcuts in books printed in Modena to Modenese art.<sup>96</sup> Some of the most beautiful woodcut book illustrations of all were produced in Ferrara for the de' Rossi over a period of just a couple of years, 1496-1498, combining both Malermi and individual stylistic elements.

Certainly the greatest body of illustrated books produced outside Venice was Florentine. These woodcuts grew from a separate indigenous artistic tradition, more painterly in feel and executed by a set of techniques largely different from that used by Venetian woodcutters. The woodcut illustrations of Savonarola functioned as powerful tools of communication, threading traditional devotional imagery into a new and dynamic direction.<sup>97</sup> Another large group of Florentine woodcuts illustrate popular books, the famous *rappresentazioni* and related texts. These were used well into the late sixteenth and even seventeenth centuries and are or are derived from very early woodcuts. And finally, there are a handful of Florentine books that rank among the most beautiful books of all time by virtue of their woodcuts. In the *Quattregio del decorso della vita humana* (1508) the images are steeped in medieval moral values and yet mirror the diffusion of classical sources through all strata of society. Thus humanistic and pagan elements entered the traditional devotional woodcut as they entered the old moral

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94 Samek, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

95 *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49; Pasero, Carlo, *Le xilografie dei libri bresciani dal 1483 all seconda metà del XVI secolo* (Brescia, 1928).

96 Fava, Domenico, *Modena--Reggio Emilia--Scandiano (La Cultura e La Stampa Italiana nel Quattrocento. vol. 1)* (Modena, 1943).

97 Turelli, *op. cit.*

verities of popular life.<sup>98</sup>

The images of the Italian woodcut book illustrations as they were made and changed from their medieval beginnings during their fifty years' flourishing are a window into an unrecorded part of the culture of the Italian Renaissance. This is the sphere of the popular "mentality," full of irrationality, archaism, emotions, and superstitions that suffused the culture but of which the remains are elusive. Woodcuts in books, occasionally censored,<sup>99</sup> can depict images of popular belief from lost or almost lost oral traditions, mixed with approved theology or humanism. Some of the devils, apparitions, tiny icons, ghosts, monsters, disasters, and maps of the universe seen in these woodcuts are pictures from the landscape of "an obscure, almost unfathomable, layer of remote peasant traditions."<sup>100</sup> They are one clue to what Carlo Ginsburg called a screen or a filter that the non-learned reader "placed between himself and the printed page...that emphasized certain words while obscuring others"<sup>101</sup>--that is, an oral tradition of beliefs. The popular literature has been studied recently to uncover these distant ideas, for example in the prophecy literature<sup>102</sup> or in the literature about the hidden Lutheran cells in Venice.<sup>103</sup> The woodcuts, appearing sometimes in learned and sometimes in popular books, are derived from an ancient popular tradition and continued to be parts of all this, expressing popular spiritual beliefs.

While the woodcut book illustrations maintained in different ways their primitive devotional uses, the printers of the sixteenth century invented a new practical use for them as well. They also portray the decorative vocabulary of the world of the Italian Renaissance. The first lace pattern book in Italy was printed in 1526, and it was followed by many more throughout the century. In this case, the woodcuts did not illustrate a book; they were the book.

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98 van der Sman, Gert Jan, "Il 'Quatregio': mitologia e allegoria nel libro illustrato a Firenze intorno al 1500", in *La Bibliofilia*, vol. 91.III (1989), pp. 237-265.

99 Niero, A., "Decreti pretridentini di due patriarchi di Venezia su stampa di libri", in *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia*, vol. 14 (1960), pp. 45-452.

100 Ginsburg, Carlo, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore and London, 1980), p. xxiii.

101 *Ibid.*, p. 33.

102 Niccoli, Ottavia, *Prophecy and People in Renaissance Italy* (Princeton, 1990).

103 Martin, John, *Venice's Hidden Enemies* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1993).

But it is important to remember that not only pattern books served as models. The editions of Livy and Ovid and the Bible by Giunta and printers associated with him were also pattern books, because the woodcut images in them were the first easily consulted, inexpensive, and internationally available fund of images. Thus one recent study has found in these editions the models for many of the scenes on majolica of the period.<sup>104</sup>

### Changes in Book Illustration

These successes of the uses of woodcuts by the printing trade caused more general changes to its books and to the traditional craft of woodcutting. They changed books so much that what strikes one in looking at earlier illuminated manuscripts is how much they are not like books: the Giunta editions of the Malermi Bible are nothing at all like the Bible of Matthias Corvinus nor are the Giunta missals like the Missal of Lorenzo de Medici, and the editions of Dante illustrated in the Malermi style do not put one in mind of Federico da Montefeltro's *Divina Commedia*. The small text woodcuts were not made for coloring, whereas, for example, Parisian printed books of hours mimic the illuminated manuscript book of hours and were often colored. The Venetian service books published for export in the 1480's were not illustrated, as are most of Giunta's because they were not all intended for the German market, successfully serviced by Hamann and other Venetian printers, but rather mostly (with a few exceptions) were both cause and effect of a different style of book in Italy. The extensive development of this style of printed illustration was part of the decoupling of the manuscript and printing trades and was in turn one of the linchpins connecting the book to the changed and expanded importance of imagery in the world of the late Renaissance and of the Baroque.

The stresses on the craft became apparent. The artistic decline of the woodcuts, as designs were re-copied by less skillful artists for less discriminating printers, has long been noted by all the old connoisseurs. But the story is rather broader than a loss of taste. There are other causes, among which is the maturation of the publishing industry, signalled by the decline in quality

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104 Gentilini, Anna Rosa and Carmen Ravanelli Guidotti, *Libri a stampa e maioliche istoriate del XVI secolo* (Faenza, 1989).

of woodcutting itself. When the industry ripened, having become greater and more stable, old forms fell away like husks as new needs arose. Tastes, stimulated by the woodcut, changed in a direction woodcutting could not follow.

The fading of the artistic impulse of the woodcutting atelier employed by Giunta and his associates is just the first of the reasons for these changes. In the 1530's and 1540's, the differences among regional styles blurred. Although techniques had been shared by artists of different regions of Italy to a greater degree and at an earlier date than has been recognized--hatching being not Venetian alone nor *fondo nero* Florentine only--in these decades the regional styles miscegenated, as they did throughout Europe, following the printing trade's lines of distribution, in favor of an "international style" standardized by classicism. The most sophisticated stylistic ideas were classicizing, producing a demand for softer, more refined imagery that soon shed its local, earthy, folkish, stark, rough qualities.

Furthermore, the evolving understanding of meaning, representation, and metaphor in the sixteenth century moved art and literature further and further from medieval ideas of presence and uses of allegory, in complicated philosophical and artistic movements. In the realm of the illustrated book, this led to the use of allegory in picturing the text. The nature of the literary forms of the text and of the relations of text and image became more intricate as the Baroque approached, producing complexified forms of allegory and emblematics from about 1540 on.

Finally, there was a demand for technical illustration that woodcutting could not produce. One can make fine lines in a woodblock only by laboriously cutting away the tiny spaces between the relief lines, so that it has always been easier to control the thickness of the line and to illustrate detail simply by drawing it directly with the burin into the engraved plate. As the printed text took on the job of preserving data, and with this teaching the skills of architecture, music, artillery, etc., it required the enhanced precision and detail of engraving.

In the end, woodcutting within the realm of the printed book returned to its origins: the popular book and pamphlet of devotion, chivalric and mythic tales, elementary education, love stories, humorous verse, political satire, and folk songs. The rudeness, for example, of Rusconi's copies of the de Mazalis illustrations of Ovid is the same directness found in the woodcuts illustrating chapbooks for about 300 years more. In a sense, woodcutting did not change, but book illustration did. It grew beyond the stage to which the woodcut, in a phase of its own history, had taken it.

## Conclusion

Woodcutting apart from its uses as book illustration was cultivated by artists in Venice, such as Titian, and throughout Europe--above all in Germany. Yet the decisive influence of book illustration on the art has been little noticed. It is astonishing that book historians have not observed that Benalio, who had printed for Luc Antonio Giunta in the 1490's and was one of his principal followers in the use of his woodblocks and of copies of them, was also a publisher of prints, such as the works of Titian he issued in 1515-1516. Benalio and de Gregoriis, who employed second-rate copies of Malermi-style cuts in his books, published the woodcuts of degli' Uberti and Vavassore as well.<sup>105</sup> When Titian began a new era in the Venetian woodcutting technique, which had traditionally been "suggestive rather than definitive" and "an essentially open calligraphy" of independent strokes,<sup>106</sup> he worked in the trail of the great era of woodcut illustrated books and with some of their printers and publishers.

Book woodcuts were traditionally seen as the passive and ephemeral receptacles of cast-off influences of the fine arts, their unintended consequences, interesting only to the extent to which they are dependent on other, higher arts and wholly mysterious to the extent they are not. David Landau and Peter Parshall in their recent book *The Renaissance Print*, within the year of this writing, are the first to propose a quite different approach to art historians. They

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105 Rosand and Murano, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 32.

106 *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 32.

argue that the woodcut has its own history as a widely cultivated skill quickly expanded and exported by printing for text illustration, because of the requirements of which it was “an arena of iconic innovation.”<sup>107</sup> The competition of woodcut and illumination led to experiments in both and to cross-fertilization of techniques and styles, so that the movement of the woodcut from the monastic and popular contexts to “the more demanding ateliers of book-printers both secularized and professionalized the skill,”<sup>108</sup> “the intimate, solitary, and independent nature (of which) stimulated it to constant innovation.”<sup>109</sup> Thus its employment in the illustration of printed text led to technical improvements and to its acceptance by printers but has not been acknowledged as “the dominant and moving factor in the emergence of the print as an independent art form of aesthetic stature and commercial success.”<sup>110</sup>

To book historians, as well, all this should suggest that the woodcut book illustrations of the Italian printers connect their interests--the history of text, publishing, reading, and reception--with the deep currents of popular culture and with the heights of art and philosophy. The growth of readership shaped the responses of the printers, whose work in turn changed the readers and what they wanted to buy. Here, in this web of influences as seen through woodcuts, we are in a very different world from that described by M. D. Feld in his views on early printing in Italy. He sees the presses as very little different from the miniators’ ateliers, dominated by patrons to whom “no interpretative vantage point is superior.”<sup>111</sup> Therefore their work was more the satisfaction of these patrons’ intellectual and social needs than “the production and distribution of a commodity.”<sup>112</sup> However true this may have been in Rome in a few early years, it is nothing like the world from which many of the early printers came and to which they responded.

As part of the history of communication, the woodcut book illustrations of the Italian

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107 Landau, David and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print* (New Haven, 1994), pp. 2-3.

108 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

110 *ibid.*, p. 33.

111 Feld, M. D., "A Theory of the Early Italian Printing Firm Part II", in *Harvard Library Bulletin*, vol. 34, no. 3 (1986), p. 323.

112 *ibid.*, pp. 309, 329

Renaissance do not express the psychology of rich patrons. They were used because they could represent--gracefully, intimately, and easily--what men and women learned from their religion and saw in their daily lives, that we are not merely “observers...of the surface of things.... We are not here alone nor for ourselves alone but...are part of higher, mysterious entities.”<sup>113</sup> They are one way in which that society tried to communicate its accumulated wisdom to itself, to its posterity, and to us.

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113 Vaclav Havel, "The New Measure of Man", in *The New York Times*, July 8, 1994.