

The “*Pietro Giuseppe Corradini Antique Book Collection*” of the *Library of the Arcispedale S. Maria Nuova of Reggio Emilia* - **By Elisabetta Montanari**

We are currently preparing a catalogue of all printed books in our antique book collection that includes all books in our possession printed before 1850. We have done much research on how the library came to possess this estate and what was done to preserve it. This paper presents some of our findings.

The Hospital Library came into existence thanks to the bequest of a doctor from Reggio Emilia named Pietro Giuseppe Corradini who graduated from Reggio’s Medical School in 1732. He worked as a “physician/physicist” in the hospital, called Santa Maria of the Carmine at the time, for forty years until his death in 1782. He left the following instructions in his Will:

“ ... I want, that said Hospital be given all my Medical Books, together with the shelves that have always served to hold them, that is to say all those books listed in the Inventory, or Catalogue, that you will find in my home ...”

Finding the aforementioned catalogue, compiled in 1782, allowed us to have a pretty exact idea of the books that had been left to the Library. We also found two inventories that were taken shortly after Corradini’s death that were very helpful.

The bequest included about 640 completed works and a total of 930 volumes. An exhaustive qualitative analysis of the collection has still to be completed, we can state however that it contains some of the most important classical authors of medical science such as Hippocrates, Galen, Vesalius, and Mercurial. Their writings are in esteemed editions that date back to the 16th and 17th centuries. The collection also includes many works published in the 18th c, most of which are in French. Judging from his collection, the impression we get of Corradini is that of a man of science with a vast cultural background whose interests show that he was always searching to know more in all branches of human knowledge.

Corradini’s intention went beyond that of merely leaving the hospital with a rich collection of valuable antique books, he wanted his collection to be but the nucleus, the starting point from which a much vaster library would grow over time. It was for this purpose that he also bequeathed a certain sum of money for the acquisition of new books and anything else the library needed to have. His Last Will and Testament seems more like the Articles of Association of a new library in which he delineates its structure and regulations. Corradini writes:

“... I want that, after my death, all my Medical Books be brought to the Hospital, that there be a room especially for them and that it may also be used as a place of study, meaning that it have good lighting, it be far from noisy interferences, and large enough to permit the books to be displayed in an orderly fashion... If a room of this sort not be ready, that the books ... remain with my Heirs until said room be built.”

He later stated:

“And so I want, ... have intended that my books be for and be used by the acting Assistant” ... i.e., the doctor “on call”, the physician who lived in the hospital day and night would be responsible for the collection and also be the future librarian, “ ... that the books be available to him whenever he decides to read and study them so long as he takes care of them, keeps them in good condition and clean and that he assures that no person damage the books and that none be lost ... “

In order to guarantee this, Corradini also established certain book lending rules:

“ ... the Assistant, who is custodian of this collection, may not allow that any book leave not only hospital premises, but not even the Study Room in which the books are displayed ... and if fate wills it that the Assistant may not deny a loan ... I want that he have not only a receipt from the person borrowing the book, but that this person leave the monetary value of the book as security...”

Corradini also adds that not all doctors living in the hospital and given charge of the collection could also administer the library's revenue but only those native to Reggio or Scandiano. The reason Corradini had extended this privilege to Scandiano is that he himself was born in Casalgrande, near Scandiano, and also because he believed that the skys above this town:

“... seem to influence the inclination toward, and talent for, the Medical Arts, as the long list of Doctors native to this town attests..., such as Doctors Magati, Sancassano, Corghi, Vallisneri, and, recently, Spallanzani and his work.”

He also willed that a library catalogue be compiled and updated once every ten years. He concluded by stating that if the rules so carefully and meticulously set down were violated that the collection would return to his heirs.

We don't know why but when he died, his collection was sent to the public Library of the Order of Saint Mary and remained there until it was transferred to the Hospital in 1790.

Over the following decades the library grew considerably thanks to new acquisitions and to donations, one of the most impressive of which was that of Count Carlo Ritorni who, in 1860, left the hospital 660 works, most of which were not about medicine.

Even more impressive was the donation of a physician from Reggio named Prospero Pirondi who, because of his membership in the liberal party, had to escape to France. He was tried and sentenced to death in absentia. In 1860, Pirondi returned to Reggio Emilia after 40 years in exile and began practicing medicine once again. He died in 1869, having donated the Hospital library around 800 medical texts over this 9-year period. Of special note are the texts on infectious diseases, hygiene, epidemiology – all particular favorites of Dr. Pirondi – and one of the rarest and most precious books owned by the library today, a 1479 edition of Avicenna's “Canon”, which we previously thought had been part of the Corradini estate.

Another interesting set of books was donated to the Library by the family of Dina Viani after her death in 1906. Dina Viani was a teacher of midwifery at the University of Bologna and all the books donated to the hospital are on this subject. Of particular note is a 1601 edition by Gerolamo Scipione Mercurio called "*La Commare o riccoglitrici*", the first treatise on midwifery published in Italian.

Not all the material donated to the Library is still in its possession – some of the books have been lost, others donated or sold by hospital administrators after the decision to slowly sell or give away all texts not dealing with medicine or texts of which there was more than one copy. In 1929, a rather large donation was made to the Public Library of Reggio Emilia of approximately 600 volumes among which there were many important editions from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Over the years, periods of almost total neglect alternated with active periods of inventory taking and putting order to the library. At the turn of the century, a first attempt was made to divide the antique books from the others and separate inventories were taken until the antique books were gathered into a collection named after Pietro Giuseppe Corradini.

The Antique Book Collection is notable for both number and quality. It is made up of 2,819 volumes comprising a total of 1,722 printed works, of which 3 are incunabulums, i.e., 3 printed editions from the 15th c, 64 works from the 16th c, an important collection of 18th c books in which we find almost all of Spallanzani's works, 15 collections of antique journals, and several atlases of different subject matter and dating to different periods.

Although the Library owns a very important and prestigious collection, few are aware of its existence. Yet, it was only a few years ago that, thanks to a contribution by the Region of Emilia-Romagna, we were able to fully catalogue the collection. We hope that the catalogue will finally make this invaluable collection accessible to all scholars.