

The “Liquid” Library: the Social Role of Libraries in an Era of Fragmentation

by Angela Munari

With an Introduction by Isotta Poggi

Venice’s connection with the history of the book and art libraries has a long tradition. The Marciana National Library is not only the first *libreria pubblica* in the Republic of Venice, but also one of the first public collections in Italy. It began in 1468 when Cardinal Bessarion, the former Latin patriarch of Constantinople, donated his collection of Greek codices to Venice’s Senate. The cardinal famously declared that “no other place was as safe and as accessible as the city of Venice,” referring to its hegemonic position in the Mediterranean and the high influx of foreigners visiting or living in the city. The core values of public libraries—preservation and wider access to information—were intrinsic factors in this donation.¹

From early on, Venice has also left a mark in the history of book dissemination, with the creation of the first portable-format book. Developed by Aldus Manutius in the 1490s, the *Aldine* editions, smaller in size compared to the traditional codices and printed with modern fonts and styles (such as the cursive font known as *italics*), could be reproduced in multiple copies and, with its rapid reproduction, broaden the range of topics to also include current literature. In addition, the innovative pocket-size books could be carried around and distributed beyond elite institutions, thus promoting literacy across a wider public and contributing to the democratization of knowledge.

As a prosperous maritime republic called the Serenissima, which lasted more than 1,000 years (from the 8th century to 1797, when it was ceded to Austria by Napoleon Bonaparte), over the centuries Venice became a major cultural destination for its art and architecture, from antiquity to the present period. Its extensive tradition and network of libraries and collections, preserved since the Middle Ages, were integrated with books in foreign languages reflecting the highly international profile of the city. Foreign enclaves in this major port between the Mediterranean basin and continental Europe also contributed to importing or printing in several languages including Hebrew, German, English, French, and Spanish. These editions in foreign languages offered alternative bibliographic sources to circumvent the censorship imposed by the Roman Counter-Reformation movement during the 16th and 17th centuries.²

In the 21st century Venice still remains a global destination for its art shows and the biennial

¹ Quoted in the 18th-century travel guide Albrizzi, Giovanni Battista, Zucchi, Francesco, and Filosi, Giuseppe, *Forestiere illuminato intorno le cose più rare, e curiose, antiche, e moderne della città di Venezia, e dell'isole circonvicine...* (Venezia: Giambattista Albrizzi, 1740), p. 41 (... *Cardinale Bessarione, che fu prima Arcivescovo di Nicea, indi patriarca di Constantinopoli. Questi avendo raccolti con grandissima diligenza, fatica e spesa, una gran quantità di Codici Greci in qualsivoglia scienza, e considerando che niun altro luogo era più sicuro e comodo della Città di Venezia per depositarli a pubblica utilità, ne fece un liberalissimo dono al Senato...*). Available at https://archive.org/details/gri_000033125009326139/page/n85/mode/2up. The travel guide, dated 1740, refers to the original collection of the Marciana library as the “libreria pubblica” of Venice.

² For a more detailed survey of the history of libraries in Venice, see Zorzi, Marino. “Le biblioteche veneziane, espressione di una singolare civiltà,” in Lisa Pon and Craig Kallendorf, editors, *The books of Venice* (Venice, et al. 2009). pp. 1-30.

international exhibition, with 2019 marking its 58th edition. With the title “May You Live in Interesting Times,” this Venice Biennale provided an engaging cultural backdrop for the study tour organized by the International Relations Committee of ARLIS/NA: over seven days (June 9-15), a group of 20 ARLIS/NA members visited 12 art libraries behind the scenes and met with librarians from public collections such as the Marciana National Library, and private institutions like the Querini Stampalia Foundation and Save Venice. The group of participants stayed at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, on the Island of San Giorgio Maggiore, a former monastery now transformed into a cultural foundation for advanced studies with multi-disciplinary institutes and scholarly programs in the arts and the humanities. The participants also saw 17th-century archival records at the State Archives and more recent documents at the Archives of Contemporary Arts of the Venice Biennale and Ca’ Pesaro Museum, among several other collections. Besides books and paper documents, the group also visited the glass color library of the Orsoni Fornace, which has been in the glass mosaic business since 1888.

Venice: Signs of a City

The intense schedule of the week-long study tour culminated with a symposium “[Building Bridges: Art Libraries between Venice and North America](#),” hosted at the Fondazione Ugo e Olga Levi, in Palazzo Giustinian Lolin on the Grand Canal, thanks to the generous support of its director Giorgio Busetto and the sponsorship of Giovanni Scorcione of Facsimile Finder.³ This symposium provided the opportunity for ARLIS/NA members and Venetian colleagues to meet and reflect on professional challenges and the rewards of art librarianship. The title of the symposium, *Building Bridges*, was also meant figuratively as a tribute to the unique nature of Venice, a city built in the middle of a lagoon on an archipelago of 120 or so islands connected by bridges. The existence of the city has been contingent on these two co-dependent and interconnected parallel planes: land and the sea.

It is this binary relationship that makes Venice a unique historic city. And while Venice’s pictorial qualities as a romantic setting have always captured the imagination of artists of every generation, it is the conceptual artist Guido Sartorelli (1936-2016) who has most successfully attempted to present this city through its *grand system of transmission of messages*.⁴ In the late 1970s, inspired by the notion that art should no longer be something to “spontaneously admire” but to understand as a “critical-creative process,” Sartorelli looked at his native city as an intricate network of interdependent signs and functions.⁵

³ We are also very grateful for the financial support provided by the Delmas Foundation, which sponsored the public transportation for the whole week and the passes to visit churches.

⁴ Cristiana Moldi-Ravenna and Guido Sartorelli, *Semiopolis* (Venice: Fondazione Bevilacqua La Masa and Comune di Venezia, 1984), p.19

⁵ *Un atteggiamento mentale, cioè, che consideri l’arte (o l’eventuale sua nuova definizione) come procedimento critico-creativo da capire e non come risultato spontaneo da contemplare*” (Sartorelli quoted by Riccardo Caldura, “Le opere di Guido Sartorelli al Centro Candiani,” in *Nexus* 105, no.15 (Primavera 2018), p.6



Venezia Rialto 1976 by Guido Sartorelli
 Gelatin silver prints mounted on cardboard
 Photographs by Mark E. Smith
 Image Courtesy Archivio e Collezione Guido Sartorelli

His work *Venezia-Rialto 1976* (Fig.1) is part of a series on Venice presented as a metropolitan interconnected system. However, instead of a typical or conventional view of the Rialto Bridge, Sartorelli marked the famous landmark's location on a city map and contextualized it as the core center of commerce through its surrounding environment. The 17 photographs are focused on the overlooked in-plain-sight details of the city's urban furniture and services and reveal—juxtaposed in an orderly manner on a grid—the complex infrastructure that provides logistical support for the highly commercial area: the mailbox, the taxi service, the police callbox, the phone booth, the light pole, advertising posters, the water bus (*vaporetto*) stop, multilingual directional signs, and so on.

The invisibility of the complex cultural infrastructure of the city is also revealed in the keynote address that Angela Munari delivered at the opening of the symposium “Building Bridges” mentioned earlier. Munari, President of the Veneto Chapter of the Italian Library Association (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche-AIB) and a librarian at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia,

presented key points on the current challenges of cultural heritage libraries in Venice (and by extension also in Italy) in dealing with today's fluid nature of information and social challenges. Information, visualized as in a fluid state and in constant transformation across media and platforms, is an insightful metaphor for art libraries in Venice.

The *liquid library* in Munari's title blends the fluidity of information in this digital age and Venice's parallel planes, land and sea. Like Sartorelli did with his work *Venezia-Rialto 1976* on the city's fabric, Munari's essay presents the overlooked signs of the interconnected infrastructure in which art and public libraries play a role today.

However, in June when Munari opened the symposium, it was not anticipated that her title would indirectly also address the exceptionally high *acqua alta* of November 2019, which threatened Venice and its libraries, including the Querini Stampalia library. In an era of fragmentation and threats to the environment and society at large, her appeal to acknowledge the value of cultural heritage in a civic society, from text to territory, and the role of art librarianship in promoting it, is more relevant than ever.

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Angela Munari

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Keynote address of symposium Building Bridges : Art Libraries between Venice and North America

Fondazione Ugo e Olga Levi, Venice, June 14, 2019

Venice and Cultural heritage

In 1986 the New Zealand scholar Donald McKenzie published the essay *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, in which he gave a new definition of the disciplinary field of bibliography and its object of study: "bibliography is the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms, and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception [...] I define 'texts' to include verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data" on any support and in any form. [...] I will begin by asking if in any sense in which the land -- not even representation of it on a map, but the land itself -- might be a text."⁶

The new proposal by McKenzie breaks, at the beginning of the era of the web, the text/book dogma, widening and fragmenting the sphere of competence of bibliography, as well as the concept of management, control, and use of information and access to knowledge.

This definition of text as an anthropic sign seems almost to overlap with that of cultural heritage described in the Italian Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape. The library consequently loses a part of its fixity, of its physicality; it becomes liquid, as are liquid the contents and textual supports

⁶ McKenzie, D. F. *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1986). Panizzi Lectures, 1985, pp. 4, 5, and 13.

that it records, whether they are analogic or digital.⁷

In the era of liquid information, Italy is facing the management of an immense historical and artistic heritage. According to UNESCO data, Italy is the first country in the world for concentration of cultural sites and the second, after China, if we consider both natural and cultural heritage sites.

In Italy there are more than 5,000 museums. The Veneto Region alone has 7 UNESCO sites: Venice, Verona, Vicenza and the Palladian villas, the Botanical Garden of Padua, and three natural sites. According to surveys by the Veneto Region, conservation libraries account for around 10% out of more than one thousand in the area.

All the seven capital cities of the Veneto Region, including Venice, if we consider the Correr Museum library (which became a public library in 1836,) and now the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, host libraries that perform the double function as public reading libraries and conservation libraries, and are charged with extensive library, artistic, numismatic, and graphic collections that are difficult to manage and to enhance.

The ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics) 2018 report on Italians' literacy notes, however, that only 30% of adults in our country have visited at least one cultural site in a year, while in the Scandinavian countries the percentage rises to 80%. Again, only 32% of Italians attend public libraries, and only 42% have read at least one book in a year.⁸

IT literacy in Italy is also low compared to the EU average. Again, as for the transfer of knowledge from the research field to companies, Italy occupies one of the lower places in the European ranking. The only positive OECD (Economic Co-operation and Development) data is scientific literary production: Italy ranks 6th for the most cited research contributions.

The Historical Library of the Accademia di Belle Arti of Venice: a Case Study

The library of the Accademia di Belle Arti represents an example of McKenzie's theory, as it used to preserve and still preserves the library, graphic, and archival collection of the institute, stored in architectural spaces, which are documents themselves: the Convento della Carità, which was built in the 15th century and later expanded by Andrea Palladio, became the location of the School and the Gallery in the 19th century; the Ospedale degli Incurabili, which was built in the 16th century on a project designed by Jacopo Sansovino, has hosted the library since 2004.

The core of the library dates back to 1750, when, thanks to the willingness of some artists, such as Giambattista Piazzetta, a small book collection was made available to teachers for their students

⁷ The Italian Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape, Article 2: *Cultural Heritage*: 1. The cultural heritage consists of cultural property and landscape assets. 2. Cultural property consists of immovable and movable things which, pursuant to articles 10 and 11, present artistic, historical, archaeological, ethno-anthropological, archival and bibliographical interest, and of any other thing identified by law or in accordance with the law as testifying to the values of civilization. For a definition of the Italian Code of the Cultural and Landscape Heritage see:

https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/en/legislation/ita/legislative_decree_no.42_of_22_january_2004-code_of_the_cultural_and_landscape_heritage/title_i/articles_1_2_3/code_of_the_cultural_and_landscape_heritage.html

⁸ https://www.istat.it/it/files//2019/12/Bes_2019.pdf

of painting. It was only later in 1807 with Napoleon that all academies of fine arts of the Kingdom of Italy, including Venice, had to be equipped with adequate artistic collections for the study "from the copy."

Leopoldo Cicognara (1767-1834) was an art critic and historian who became president of the institute in 1808. To expand the Library of the Accademia he chose volumes of anatomy, painting, antiquity, architecture, ornamentation, and numismatics from the inventories of the libraries of the Venetian monasteries that had been suppressed.

Cicognara also bought a large number of drawings, including Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* from the Giuseppe Bossi collection in Milan, now preserved in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, and etchings by Andrea Mantegna, Giulio Campagnola, Luca di Leyda, and other great Venetian masters of the 16th-18th centuries. He restored the Convento della Carità, where he set up a gallery of paintings.

Since the archive still preserves the examination papers of many students, above all of architecture, as well as projects of Venetian and Italian architects of the 19th century, such as Giacomo Quarenghi, and of the early 20th century like Guido Cirilli, we can follow the whole educational development of the schools of the Accademia.

Unfortunately, this well-organized, catalogued, and digitized archive is little known by scholars and almost completely unknown even to the students who today attend the Accademia di Belle Arti.⁹

Valorization or Value?

I have the impression that in the last decades the Italian cultural institutions have often worked to enhance the cultural heritage, unaware of the inability of potential users to recognize the intrinsic value of the heritage itself. Legislators took it for granted that cultural assets and knowledge were a value in themselves. But are we really sure about that? Are we sure that potential users recognize the implicit value of cultural testimony, of texts as conceived by McKenzie ?

The *Presentation of Christ in the Temple* by Giovanni Bellini, the most valuable painting of the Museum of the Querini Foundation, has a market value of about 24 million euros, contributing significantly to attracting visitors and generating an income of around 300,000 euros. If we look at the Italian football market, we need to go down to 334th place to find a player, Dries Mertens, with the same market value as Bellini's painting, with the difference that the income of his soccer club, Napoli, is 636 times the one of the Querini Stampalia Foundation. (Fig.2)

⁹ For further information, see <https://www.accademiavenezia.it/servizi-culturali/archivio-storico-12.html>.



Presentation of Christ in the Temple c. 1460 by Giovanni Bellini

Tempera on panel

Image Courtesy:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentation_at_the_Temple_\(Bellini\)#/media/File:Bellini_maria1.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presentation_at_the_Temple_(Bellini)#/media/File:Bellini_maria1.jpg)

Collezione Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice

It is evident that before working on valorization it would be necessary to construct or reconstruct the social "value" of knowledge and its forms of testimony. How can it be done? What can libraries do?

I believe that today's conference is an excellent example of how Venetian and all Italian conservation libraries should continue to create cultural value by building bridges with international institutions like the ones that are present here, which have been producing, managing, and making their cultural patrimony accessible for decades.

As for universities and their canonical, Humboldtian missions of education and research, they should overcome the 19th-century limits of a production and access to knowledge addressed to the ruling class only, and work with greater effort on the objectives linked to the so-called Third Mission (after education and research), by transferring their knowledge to civic society.¹⁰

Finally, public reading libraries more than all other libraries should work with schools and adults not only on computer and digital literacy, but also on major themes regarding cultural, environmental, and landscape heritage, and on issues of cultural integration of second- and third-generation immigrants. Considering them as Italian citizens would help them to decode the cultural fabric and its texture.

¹⁰ For more information on higher education's "third mission" see for example the document: "Green Paper Fostering and Measuring 'Third Mission' in Higher Education Institutions." As part of the Lifelong Learning Programme, a European universities consortium received funds from the European Commission to define how to rank and *improve Higher Education Institutions' contribution to society*. See also:

<https://www.dissgea.unipd.it/sites/dissgea.unipd.it/files/Green%20paper-p.pdf>

It is clear that my consideration, like my goals, oversimplifies the complexity of the discussion. However I think that the mission of our associations is to work together to bring light to cultural testimonies and to facilitate their understanding and accessibility. With more skills the liquid society may reunify around the great humanistic themes.

But maybe mine is just an ideal as it was the ideal Utopian dream of Thomas More and his Republic of Knowledge. I only hope not to meet his fate !