



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

The splendors of the first public library in Europe

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Wonderful ancient libraries got their inception in Italy, and in particular in Rome, as the private collections of a humanist noble or cardinal. The first public library of Europe is supposed to be born in Rome and is the Biblioteca Angelica whose primacy is contended with both the Oxford Bodleian Library and the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. The Biblioteca Angelica in Rome holds the first volume of

Cicero's "De Oratore" that was printed in Italy, in 1465, and a precious early edition of Dante's "Divine Comedy."

The history of the Biblioteca Angelica, one of the hidden jewels of Rome, begins with the Augustinian Bishop Angelo Rocca (1546-1620), an erudite writer and a keen collector of rare editions. He was in charge of the Vatican Printing House during the pontificate of Pope Sixtus V.

Bishop Angelo Rocca entrusted his collection of some 20,000 volumes to the friars of the convent of St. Augustine in Rome at the end of the sixteenth century.

Over the previous centuries the Augustinian collection had acquired valuable manuscripts donated by Roman nobles, and codices transcribed by or belonging to the friars themselves who left them

to the monastery when they died. Angelo Rocca provided the new library with a suitable building, an annuity and a set of regulations. He wished the library to be open to everyone regardless of income or social standing. The unconventionality of this institution gave rise to a growing interest by the general public and soon the library's fame spread to scholars all over the world.

In 1661, Lukas Holste (1596-1661), the curator of the Vatican Library, left his valuable collection of 3,000 printed volumes to the Augustinian friars.

In the first half of the eighteenth century the Roman monastery and its library bore witness to the religious controversies of the period.

The presence of the main supporters of Augustinian thought formed a collection of books which is still fundamental to researchers interested in the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. This was also the reason why, in 1762, the huge library of Cardinal Domenico Passionei was acquired. This acquisition doubled Angelica's collection and above all enriched it with texts that the Cardinal, who was connected with the Roman Jansenist circles, had obtained during his travels as papal envoy in Protestant Europe. This was the reason why, in 1762, the huge library of Cardinal Domenico Passionei was acquired.

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So larger sectors of the collection include works on the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation with particular reference to Italy, and in addition, texts on the religious controversies of the period.

During those years, Luigi Vanvitelli was commissioned by the monks to rebuild the monastery, and he completed the current reading room in 1765.

Vanvitelli was the most prominent 18th-century architect of Italy and practised a sober classicizing academic Late Baroque style that made an easy transition to Neoclassicism.

In 1873 the Biblioteca Angelica became the property of the Italian State. Since 1940 Biblioteca Angelica has in deposit 10,000 volumes belonging to the Accademia Letteraria dell'Arcadia.

The Angelica became a part of the Ministero per i Beni Culturali e Ambientali in 1975.

Anyway, the Biblioteca Angelica holds an extraordinarily vast heritage, which ranges from literature to science, from esotericism to religion, from travel books to maps, medical books and Rome guidebooks. It includes also more than 3.000 Latin, Greek and Oriental manuscripts. The vestibule displays a small collection of portraits of past members of the Arcadia, a literary academy based in the library from 1940s.

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