

Chapter 14

THE ACQUISITIONS OF FLORENTINE PUBLIC LIBRARIES 1900–1935

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BETWEEN THE MID-EIGHTEENTH and the early twentieth century, Italy witnessed one of the greatest exoduses of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts. The Napoleonic invasions of the 1790s and the dissolution of religious corporations in the 1800s played a key role.¹ When the French troops arrived, however, Italy was a conglomerate of decaying states; impoverished aristocratic families had already started dispersing their libraries, and this continued well into the nineteenth century.² By the early 1900s important manuscripts were being sold to foreign collectors by influential bookdealers who traded internationally, notably Leo S. Olschki and Tammaro De Marinis, who operated from Florence; Giuseppe/Joseph Martini, who started his business in Lucca, emigrated to New York, returned to Italy in the 1920s and finally settled in Lugano; and Ulrico Hoepli, based Milan, who from the early 1920s organized auction sales in Italy and Switzerland which attracted buyers from all over the world.³

From the Unification of Italy in the 1860s, the preservation of cultural patrimony became a matter of concern for intellectuals and politicians. Public libraries, especially the newly instituted national libraries, had an important place in the government's cul-

1 Marie-Pierre Laffitte, "Napoleon et les confiscations de livres dans les monastères italiens," and Emmanuelle Chapron, "Bibliothèques et suppressions ecclésiastiques en Toscane de Pierre-Léopold à Napoléon," in *How the Secularization of Religious Houses Transformed the Libraries of Europe, 16th–19th Centuries*, ed. Cristina Dondi, Dorit Raines, and Richard Sharpe, *Bibliologia* 63 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022), 223–46, and 273–86 (respectively).

2 See Gianna del Bono, *Storia delle biblioteche fra settecento a novecento* (Rome: Vecchiarelli, 1995).

3 On these dealers, see Christina Tagliaferri and Stefano de Rosa, *Olschki: Un secolo d'editoria*, 2 vols. (Florence: Olschki, 1982); Romeo de Maio, "Tammaro De Marinis," in *Studi di bibliografia e di storia in onore di Tammaro De Marinis*, ed. Romeo de Maio, 4 vols. (Verona: Mardersteig, 1964), 1:ix–xxix; Edoardo Barbieri, ed., *Da Lucca a New York a Lugano: Giuseppe Martini libraio tra otto e novecento* (Florence: Olschki, 2017); Luca Montagner, *L'antiquariato Hoepli: Una prima ricognizione tra i documenti e i cataloghi* (Milan: EDUCatt, 2017).

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tural agenda.⁴ As now, the most important manuscript collections in Florence were concentrated in three state-owned libraries: the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, the Biblioteca Riccardiana, and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale. The Laurenziana, attached to the Basilica of San Lorenzo and inaugurated in 1571, preserves most of the Medici manuscripts and those from the library of San Marco. The Riccardiana, in the old Palazzo Medici, houses the library of the Riccardi family, who bought the palace in 1659; it was acquired by the Napoleonic government in 1813 and opened to the public in 1815. The Nazionale acquired its name in 1885. It had been opened to the public in 1747 as Biblioteca Magliabechiana, became the repository of most manuscripts from Florentine religious corporations after their suppression in 1808, and was merged with the grand-ducal Biblioteca Palatina in 1861. These libraries continued expanding their manuscript collections in the early twentieth century, but their choices were limited, as foreign collectors could pay astronomical prices for a book. New laws were issued to restrict the export of manuscripts, but they were not effective enough. After the First World War, however, the number of manuscripts leaving the country decreased, and by 1930 the government was helping libraries more than ever before. Yet, more than ever before, it was also a politicized issue.

The Laws

In terms of legislation for the protection of cultural patrimony, Italian states had been ahead of other European nations for centuries. Edicts intended to control the export of works of art and antiquities were introduced in the Granducato of Tuscany in 1602 and in the Papal States in 1646.⁵ Both states continued issuing increasingly restrictive regulations, which culminated with the 1820 edict by Cardinal Bartolomeo Pacca.⁶ For manuscripts, the 1702 edict by Cardinal Spinola prohibited their removal from Rome without official authorization; in 1754 Tuscany did the same, followed by Milan in 1804, and by Venice in 1817.⁷ In Rome, in 1820, Cardinal Pacca decreed that no manuscript of any sort could be sold without the approval of the Prefect of the Vatican Archives.⁸

The first major change brought by Unification was the royal decree of 1866 transferring all properties of religious congregations to the State.⁹ Monks and priests resisted handing over their libraries to secular institutions: manuscripts and books could procure them an income in difficult times, and, in reality, public libraries could not accom-

⁴ See Gianna del Bono, "Politica degli acquisti e gestione delle raccolte alla Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze durante le direzioni Chilovi e Morpurgo," in *Per una storia delle biblioteche in Toscana*, ed. Paolo Traniello (Pistoia: Settegiorni, 2016), 117–40.

⁵ Andrea Emiliani, *Leggi, bandi e provvedimenti per la tutela dei beni artistici e culturali negli antichi stati italiani, 1571–1860* (Bologna: Nouva Alfa, 1996), 28–32, 56–57.

⁶ Emiliani, *Leggi*, 100–11.

⁷ Emiliani, *Leggi*, 132–33, 144–45.

⁸ Emiliani, *Leggi*, 97–100.

⁹ Regio decreto 7 luglio 1866 (no. 3036), *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, July 8, 1866.

moderate such a volume of material. New legislation was urgently needed at a national level; several legislative projects were presented to parliament, but none was adopted until 1902, when the *Legge di Tutela del Patrimonio Monumentale* (known as *Legge Nasi*) was approved by the Senate.¹⁰

The *Legge Nasi* granted protection to every “object of antiquity” (objects of cultural importance older than fifty years).¹¹ Libraries, like art collections, were declared inalienable; not a single item could be sold without the authorization of the *Ministero della pubblica istruzione* (Ministry of public education).¹² Objects of antiquity could not be exported without an official licence; when the licence was granted, the objects were subject to a progressive tax.¹³ The law introduced the *diritto di prelazione* (right of pre-emption) conferring on the State the right of first refusal over objects at risk of being exported, which they could then buy at the price fixed by the seller, minus the export tax.¹⁴ A new version of the law, sanctioned in 1909, introduced more precise definitions of the objects that were granted protection, reinforced the *diritto di prelazione*, and categorically prohibited the exportation of objects of such artistic or historic importance whose removal would cause “serious damage to history, archaeology or art.”¹⁵ A new law, sanctioned in 1939 and still in force today, introduced even stricter regulations and more severe consequences for those who violated the law.¹⁶

In Florence, export certificates for manuscripts were issued by the Galleria dell'Accademia until 1904, when the task was reassigned to the Laurenziana.¹⁷ However, the *Inventario dei Codici Laurenziani acquisti e Doni* (the inventory of new acquisitions and donations of the library) documents that the Laurenziana blocked the export of a manuscript and exerted the right of pre-emption in 1899, which is even more surprising when we consider this happened three years before the *Legge Nasi*—it is possible, however, that the decision was informed by the Tuscan law of 1754, which had already introduced the right.¹⁸ The manuscript (now BMLF, Acquisti e doni 233), containing commentaries on Juvenal by the humanist Domizio Calderini, was executed in Florence in the 1480s for Matthias Corvinus, king of Hungary.¹⁹ According to the inventory, it was illuminated by Attavante degli Attavanti, the most celebrated Florentine illuminator of

¹⁰ Emiliani, *Leggi*, 201–15.

¹¹ Legge 12 giugno 1902 (no. 185), *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, Art. 1.

¹² Legge 12 giugno 1902, Art. 2.

¹³ Legge 12 giugno 1902, Art. 8.

¹⁴ Legge 12 giugno 1902, Art. 9.

¹⁵ Legge 28 giugno 1909 (no. 364), *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, June 28, 1909, Arts. 1, 5, 6, 8, 9.

¹⁶ Legge 1 giugno 1939 (no. 1089), *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, August 8, 1939.

¹⁷ Leo S. Olschki, “Le fiscalità italiane nell’esportazione di libri antichi,” *La Bibliofilia* 6 (1904–1905): 210–12.

¹⁸ BMLF, *Inventario dei codici Laurenziani acquisti e doni*, fol. 20v, no. 233; for the law, see Emiliani, *Leggi*, 40.

¹⁹ See Csaba Csapodi, Klára Csapodi-Gárdonyi, and Tibor Szántó, *Bibliotheca Corviniana*, trans. Zsuzsanna Horn (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1969), 51.



Figure 14.1. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, MS Acquisti e doni 297, Vitruvius, *De architectura*, fol. 1r, mid-fifteenth century. Photo: Federico Botana (courtesy of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana).

the Renaissance.²⁰ We also learn that the manuscript's possessor, Stefano Bardini, was about to sell it to the Austro-Hungarian government. Bardini, a famous antique dealer and collector, is described in a note in the inventory as a "great and notorious 'fabricator' of antiquities, especially of miniatures from the XIV–XV centuries, of busts of the 1500s, etc."²¹ The note is signed Enrico Rostagno, who was at the time curator of manuscripts at the Laurenziana, of which he became director in 1923.²²

Rostagno exerted the *diritto di prelazione* on at least one other occasion, around 1918, when Olschki requested a license to export three manuscripts and one incunabulum—according to Olschki, writing in 1916, his firm was "almost the only" antiquarian bookseller that bothered requesting export licences.²³ The manuscripts, now BMLF, Acquisti e doni 297–99, include: Vitruvius's *De Architectura*, executed in Florence about 1450 and embellished with an illuminated border containing the arms of an unknown cardinal (Figure 14.1); Cicero's *Epistulae ad familiares*, also executed in mid-fifteenth-century Florence, but for Filippo Strozzi whose arms can be seen in the illuminated border; and Horatius's *Carmina*, signed and dated 1460 by the copyist Alessandro di Jacopo da Montebodio, which belonged in the eighteenth century to Cardinal Braschi, the future Pius VI.²⁴ For the four items Olschki received the sum of 7,540 lire, corresponding to the 8,000 lire that he was expecting to be paid by a foreign client minus the export tax. Like the manuscript saved from the hands of Bardini, those obtained from Olschki had a special importance for Florentines.

The Nazionale and the Laurenziana: Acquisitions 1905–1916

Despite the laws, important Italian manuscripts continued to leave the country to end up in the hands of wealthy collectors in the United States. Well-known examples are the two fifteenth-century Florentine manuscripts from the library of Matthias Corvinus that were sold to J. P. Morgan by Tammara De Marinis, via the antique dealer Alexandre Imbert, for \$101,549, together with a Missal with miniatures supposedly by Jean Fouquet.²⁵

²⁰ See Annarosa Garzelli, *Miniatura fiorentina del Rinascimento, 1440–1525*, 2 vols. (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1985), 1:219–63.

²¹ BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 20v: "grande e noto 'fabricatore' d'antichità, in specie di miniature del sec. XIV–XV, di busti del 500, ecc., ecc. Enrico Rostagno." On Bardini, see Anita Moskowitz, *Stefano Bardini "principe degli antiquari": Prolegomenon to a Biography* (Florence: Centro Di, 2015).

²² See Giorgio de Gregori and Simonetta Buttò, *Per una storia dei bibliotecari italiani del XX secolo* (Rome: AIB, 1999), 153–54.

²³ Letter from Leo Olschki to Attilio Bompani, July 28, 1916, Florence, Casa Editrice Leo S. Olschki, Archivio Storico (hereafter Archivio Olschki): "E la Laurenziana non può attestare che noi siamo quasi gli unici che ci assoggettiamo a tale prescrizione?"

²⁴ BMLF *Inventario*, fols. 29v–30r. The incunabulum was Titus Livius, *Historiae Romanae decades* (Rome: Sweynheym and Pannartz, 1472).

²⁵ PML, M.496 (Didymus, *De Spirito Sancto*, 1488), M.497 (Cicero, *Opera*, 1470–1475). For the invoice, see the curatorial file for M.496. See also Csapodi, Csapodi-Gárdonyi, and Szántó, *Bibliotheca Corviniana*, 57–58.

De Marinis acquired the two Corvina volumes from Wilfried Voynich, who obtained them—illegally—from the Jesuits at Rome.²⁶ In the same year, Olschki procured two illuminated Italian manuscripts for Morgan for 50,000 francs each, then the equivalent of £1,960 or 50,000 lire—francs and lire were paired one-to-one at the time.²⁷ Between 1907 and 1911, he sold three Dante manuscripts to Morgan: an illuminated fourteenth-century *Commedia* with, according to the invoice, the arms of the Capponi family, for 30,000 francs; a fifteenth-century *Commedia* for 16,500 francs; and a rare copy of the *Comentum super poema Comedie Dantis* by Dante's son, Pietro Alighieri, dated to 1358, for 27,000 francs.²⁸ Letters sent by Olschki to Belle da Costa Greene record that he could not obtain an export permit for the *Comentum*, so he travelled with the manuscript to Germany and sent it to Morgan from Munich.²⁹

Not even for the love of Dante could Italian public libraries afford such prices. Like Morgan, the Laurenziana and the Nazionale acquired manuscripts from Olschki and De Marinis. A large portion—the majority in the Nazionale—however, came from Florentine dealers who rarely, if ever, traded internationally—Bruscoli, Gonnelli, Gozzini, and Seeber—and from an array of individuals—especially in the case of the Laurenziana—including members of the nobility (Prince Giovanni Magherini Grazziani, Countess Adelaide Alberti, and Count Alberto Douglas Scotti), historians (Gian Francesco Gamurrini, and Pietro Stromboli), a translator of Nietzsche (Attilio Rinieri de Rocchi), a geologist (Irene Bittanti), and a notorious forger of antique musical instruments (Leopoldo Franciolini).³⁰ The prices paid to these individuals, like those paid to the dealers mentioned above, were usually moderate compared to those asked by Olschki and De Marinis.

Between 1900 and 1945, the Laurenziana bought about 130 medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, the Nazionale between 160 and 180, and the Riccardiana only sixteen (Morgan amassed roughly the same number as the three libraries combined in just five years).³¹ Whilst Morgan was spending millions of dollars, Florentine libraries were

26 The lot comprised about thirty items, including the famous manuscript now at Yale University. See Dániel Pócs, "Egy corvina története: Battista Spagnoli Mantovano: Parthenice Mariana (Pontosításokkal a Pierpont Morgan Library M496 és M497 jelzetű corvináinak provenienciájához)," *Ars hungarica* 43 (2017): 301–54 at 330–36.

27 PML, M.508, *Vita Christi*, ca. 1520, with seventeen miniatures attributed to Zanobi Strozzi; M.498, devotional miscellany, ca. 1375–1400, with two full-page miniatures ascribed to the Siennese school. For the invoice, see L. S. Olschki, March 25, 1912, Morgan Collections Correspondence (hereafter MCC), 1887–1948 (ARC 1310). The Latin Monetary Union (1867–1915), paired French, Swiss and Belgium francs, and Italian lire.

28 Now PML, M.289, M.341, and M.529. For the invoices, see L. S. Olschki, April 20, 1907, March 6, 1909, MCC, ARC 1310.

29 Letters from Leo S. Olschki to Belle da Costa Greene, June 5 and 25, 1909, MCC, ARC 1310 (the second letter confirming the manuscript had been shipped).

30 Libreria Antiquaria Carlo Bruscoli (1870–1940). Still trading: Libreria Antiquaria Gonnelli (1875–), Libreria Antiquaria Gozzini (1850–), Libreria Internazionale Seeber (1861–). The manuscripts sold by the persons listed here (in the same order): BMLF, Acquisti e doni 256, 226, 290, 260, 292, 274, 225, 255. See BMLF *Inventario*.

31 Sources: BMLF *Inventario*; BNCF, *Registro cronologico d'ingresso: Acquisti*, vols. 16–24

spending mere thousands of lire. Between June 1905 and June 1916, the Laurenziana spent 11,334 lire on twenty-nine medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, and the Nazionale 11,174 lire on 120 medieval and Renaissance manuscripts.

The average price paid by the Nazionale for a manuscript was 93 lire; the highest was 500 lire, which the library only paid for two manuscripts; of the other 118 manuscripts, just ten were bought for more than 200 lire, sixteen for between 101 and 200 lire, and the rest, that is eighty-four, were bought for less than 100 lire each. Of these eighty-four, thirty were bought for between 25 and 50 lire, and twenty-two for less than 25 lire. Only five manuscripts acquired in this period by the Nazionale are illuminated, but just with a few decorated initials, and the library bought many in poor condition and unbound. Meanwhile, the average price paid by the Laurenziana was 390 lire. Whilst both libraries spent roughly the same proportion of their budgets on manuscripts priced between 100 and 500 lire, the Laurenziana bought seven manuscripts at prices higher than 500 lire, and the Nazionale none for more than 500 (see Table 14.1). Conversely, the Nazionale bought fifteen manuscripts for less than 20 lire, and the Laurenziana none for less than 20.

Table 14.1: Manuscript acquisitions by the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana and the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, 1905–1916.

Price range	Laurenziana	Nazionale
1001–1600 lire	4 MSS (= 13.8% of total)	0 MSS
501–1000 lire	3 MSS (= 10.3% of total)	0 MSS
201–500 lire	6 MSS (= 20.7% of total)	10 MSS (= 8.3% total)
101–200 lire	4 MSS (= 13.8% total)	16 MSS (= 13.3% total)
20–100 lire	12 MSS (= 41.4% total)	79 MSS (= 66% total)
2–19 lire	0 MSS	15 MSS (= 12.5% total)
	Total MSS: 29 Total spent: 11,334 lire	Total MSS: 120 Total spent: 11,174 lire

Let us now look in detail at a few examples, starting with the Nazionale. The two most expensive manuscripts (500 lire each) are: a *zibaldone sacro* (religious commonplace book), supposedly an autograph by the Franciscan Angelo Carletti di Chivasso, and an early fifteenth-century copy of Dante's *Commedia* (BNCF Nuove Acquisizioni 349 and 482).³² The first, bought from De Marinis, in addition to being an autograph, is written on parchment and has an attractive old binding (Figure 14.2). The second, bought from Bruscoli, is written on paper and in merchant cursive; however, as noted above, foreign

(1904–1947) (hereafter *Registro* A16–24); Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, *Registro cronologico di entrata*, vols. 2–7 (1886–1951), *Registro cronologico delle operazioni inventariali* (1928–1931).

³² BNCF, *Registro* A18, acc. nos. 1332/954, 1393/807.

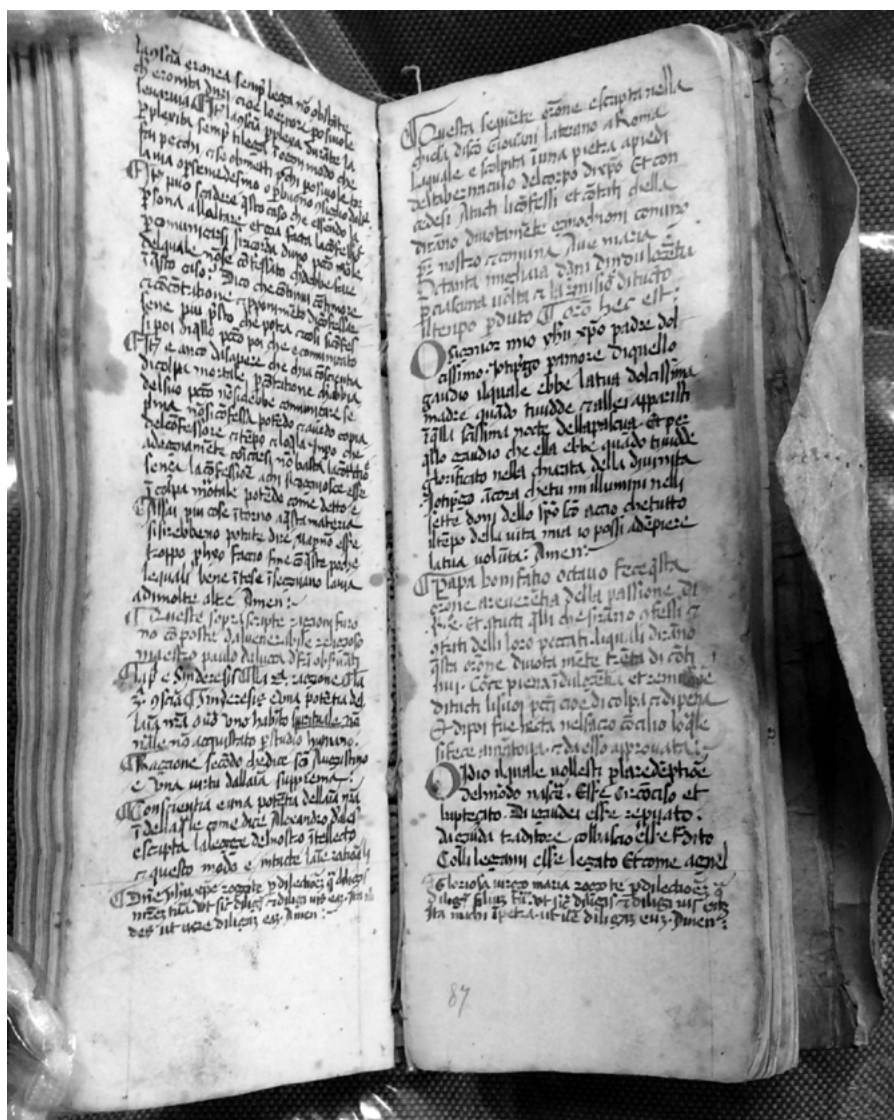


Figure 14.2. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Nuove accessioni 349, Angelo Carletti di Chivasso, *Zibaldone sacro*, fols. 86v–87r, fifteenth century. Photo: Federico Botana (courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze).

collectors were paying astronomical prices for Dante, who has a central place in Italian culture, especially in his native Florence.

Examples in the middle range include a paper manuscript containing religious poems by Bernardo Pulci, and another paper manuscript containing Petrarch's *Canzoniere* e *Trionfi*, both dating from the fifteenth century and bought from De Marinis

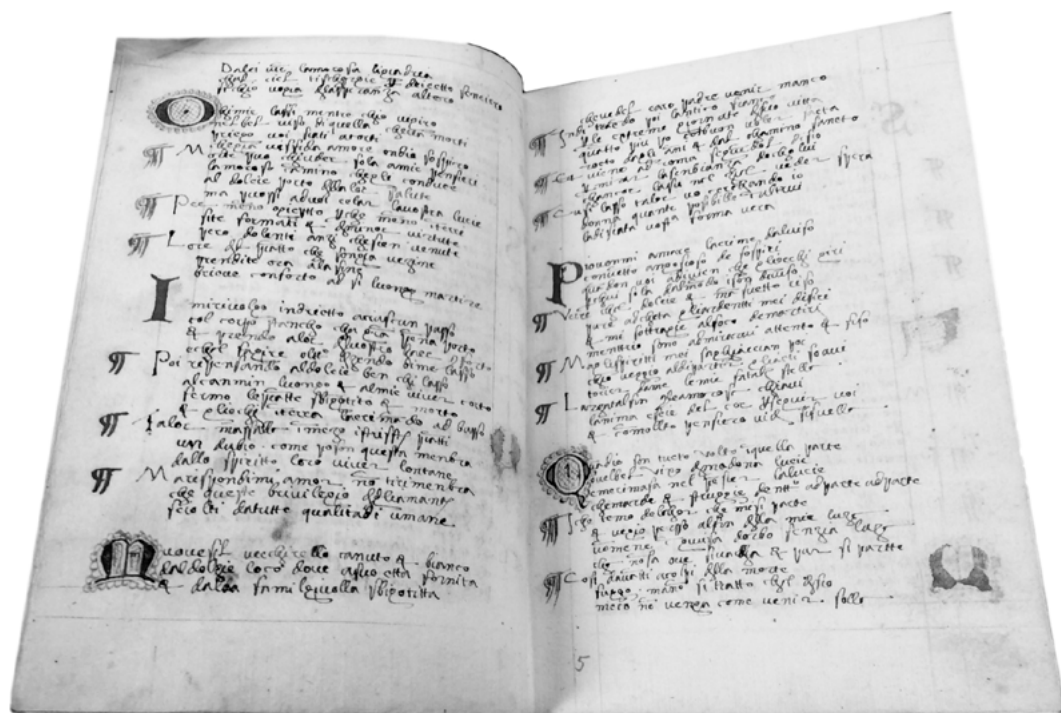


Figure 14.3. Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS Nuove accessioni 341, Petrarcha, *Canzoniere e Trionfi*, fols. 4v–5r, fifteenth century.
Photo: Federico Botana (courtesy of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze).

for 140 and 230 lire, respectively (BNCF Nuove Accessioni 340 and 341).³³ Both manuscripts were probably copied by readers for their own use.³⁴ Bernardo Pulci, merchant and protégé of the Medici, is one of the most celebrated popular poets of the Quattrocento. Whilst Petrarch is one the greatest Tuscan poets, manuscripts of his works are not as rare as those of Dante; however, this one contains colourful filigree initials executed by the copyist (Figure 14.3). The manuscripts in the lower price range consist mainly of common-place books—for instance, the *ricordi* of Malatesta Gabuzzio (a notary from Montebaldo in Le Marche), acquired from Bruscoli for 20 lire, and a late fourteenth-century *laudo fiorentino* (legal pleadings and sentences), also bought from Bruscoli but for just 3 lire (BNCF Nuove Accessioni 493 and 173).³⁵

The prices paid by the Laurenziana suggest more selective choices (Table 14.1). Of the 11,334 lire spent in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts by the library in 1905–1916, almost two thirds, 7,273 lire, were spent on seven items from the Thomas

³³ BNCF Registro A18, acc. nos. 1332/945–46.

³⁴ See Federico Botana, *Learning through Images in the Italian Renaissance: Illustrated Manuscripts and Education in Quattrocento Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 3–4, 19–49.

³⁵ BNCF Registro A16, acc. no. 1120/037, A18, acc. no. 1405/426.

Phillipps collection. The first and most expensive of these was Diogenes Laertius's *Vitae philosophorum*, executed in Florence in 1455 and bought from De Marinis in 1909 for 1,600 lire (BMLF, Acquisti e doni 259 (olim San Marco 323)).³⁶ The manuscript had been stolen from the library of San Marco in 1797, later entered Phillipps's hands, was auctioned in London in 1895, and by 1908 was with De Marinis, who advertised it for sale for 2,000 lire—thus he appears to have offered the library a 20 percent discount.³⁷

The other six manuscripts were acquired at the Phillipps sale at Sotheby's in London in June 1910 by Bernard Quaritch at the request of the Italian Ambassador.³⁸ Rostagno, who received the auction catalogue two weeks in advance, must have contacted the Ministero della pubblica istruzione with a list of desiderata, as he did later for Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and the Ministero communicated the request to the Ambassador in London.³⁹ The six manuscripts, now BMLF, Acquisti e doni 262–67 include the *Cronica del Abadia Fiorentina 1418* and the *Fratres praedicatorum contra clerum Florentiae* (both chronicles compiled in the fifteenth century); poems by Lorenzo il Magnifico de' Medici and his son Giuliano, duke of Nemours (early sixteenth century, probably copied for Giuliano); the *Satires* and the life of Persius, signed and dated October 11, 1451 by the copyist Tomasinus filius Laurentii de Leva; Petrarch's *Epistolae de rebus senilibus* (fourteenth century) with a note of possession by the Venetian humanist Francesco Barbaro, dated 1424; and a fragment of a twelfth-century manuscript of Seneca's *Epistles* which had passed through the hands of the notorious Venetian abbot turned art dealer Luigi Celotti.⁴⁰ None of the seven Phillipps manuscripts acquired by the Laurenziana between 1909 and 1910 include miniatures. The *Vitae philosophorum* is written on parchment and has a large illuminated initial, and the compilation of poems by Lorenzo and Giuliano de' Medici has a colourful foliage border but is made of paper, like the two Florentine chronicles. The Persius, the Petrarch, and the Seneca manuscripts are on parchment, but only the second includes a pen-work initial; the other two have no decoration at all. In summary, like the manuscripts acquired by the Nazionale, those acquired by the Laurenziana were mainly of historical and literary interest.

36 BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 24r.

37 *Manuscripts et livres rares mis en vente à la librairie ancienne T. De Marinis* (Florence: De Marinis, 1908), no. 26.

38 BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 24r–v. London, Bernard Quaritch Ltd., Quaritch Archives: Commission Book 8 (1910–1913), 480.

39 Letter from Sotheby's to Enrico Rostagno, May 24, 1910, BMLF, Carteggio Rostagno, 1831.

40 *A Further Portion of the Classical...of the Late Sir Thomas Phillipps...Which will be Sold by Auction...6th of June, 1910* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 1910), lots 328, 333, 561, 654, 656, 724. The most expensive were the Medici poems at £52 (1,324 lire) and Petrarch's *Epistolae* at £61 (1,553 lire).

Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Hoepli, and the Italian State

The acquisition of Giovanni Boccaccio's autograph of the *Teseida* by the Ministero della pubblica istruzione marks a turning point in the contributions of the State to public manuscript collections in Italy (Figure 14.4). It was also a great achievement for Rostagno, by then director of the Laurenziana, who had probably witnessed with sadness many precious manuscripts leaving Italy. Rostagno recorded the *Teseida* in the *Inventario dei Acquisti e Doni* in May 1929.⁴¹ We learn there that it was acquired at the Hoepli auction of April 7–9, 1927 in Milan.⁴² He wrote "It is undoubtedly the autograph of Boccaccio."⁴³ In the 1830s, the manuscript belonged to the erudite printer Étienne Audin de Rians (known in Italy as Stefano Audin) who knew it was an autograph and published the text in 1840.⁴⁴ It was then acquired by Lord Vernon; but when it was sold at Sotheby's in June 1918, neither Vernon's heirs nor Quaritch, who bought the manuscript, seemed to know it was Boccaccio's autograph.⁴⁵

Rostagno wrote that when he saw the reproduction of the manuscript in Hoepli's catalogue, he immediately recognized Boccaccio's handwriting, so he provided the Ministero with a list of fifteen desiderata, without mentioning that one of them was Boccaccio's autograph, to "avoid spreading the rumour."⁴⁶ He explained:

If they suspected the exceptional value of the manuscript, who could have rescued it from the greed of the Americans or the English, who would have fought for it with thousands of dollars or sterling? Certainly, the Ministero could not have bought it for only 5,100 lire!⁴⁷

The estimate in the catalogue was actually 6,000 lire. Rostagno informed some trustworthy friends about his discovery, notably the philologist Michele Barbi, who authenticated the manuscript. Rostagno concluded his account with a bold statement: "This is the real, genuine, precise story, of what happened, was said or written about this codex, of which

⁴¹ BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 34r–v.

⁴² *Manoscritti, miniature, incunabuli, legature, libri figurati dei secoli XVI e XVIII*, April 7–9, 1927 (Milan: Hoepli, 1927), lot 356.

⁴³ BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 34r: "È indubitabilmente autografo del Boccaccio" (underlined in the original).

⁴⁴ Étienne Audin, *Il libro dell'Amazonide overo della guerra di Theseo ducha d'Athene* (Paris: Crapelet, 1840).

⁴⁵ *Catalogue of a Choice Selected Portion of the Famous Library Removed from Sudbury Hall...Which will be Sold by Auction...10th of June, 1918* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 1918), lot 81.

⁴⁶ BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 34r–v: "Esaminando io preso il Ministero il Catalogo Hoepli ... nel facsimile della tav. C riconobbi subito la scrittura del Boccaccio. Perciò raccomandai caldissimamente al ministero, in particolare al prof. ispettore bibliotecario Gallo, l'acquisto in 1^a linea dei Mss. '87. 354. 356. 357' in 2^a linea dei n. 29. 38. 61. 76. 100. 151. 269. 303. 344. 34 & 55....Tacqui sull'autografia del cod. 356, per non metter il campo a rumore" (underlined in the original).

⁴⁷ BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 34v: "Se si subodorano questo pregio insigne del Ms., chi l'avrebbe potuto sottrarre all'avidità degli americani e degli inglesi, che se lo sarebbero disputato a migliaia di dollari o di sterline? Certo il Ministero non l'avrebbe più potuto avere per sole lire 5100!"

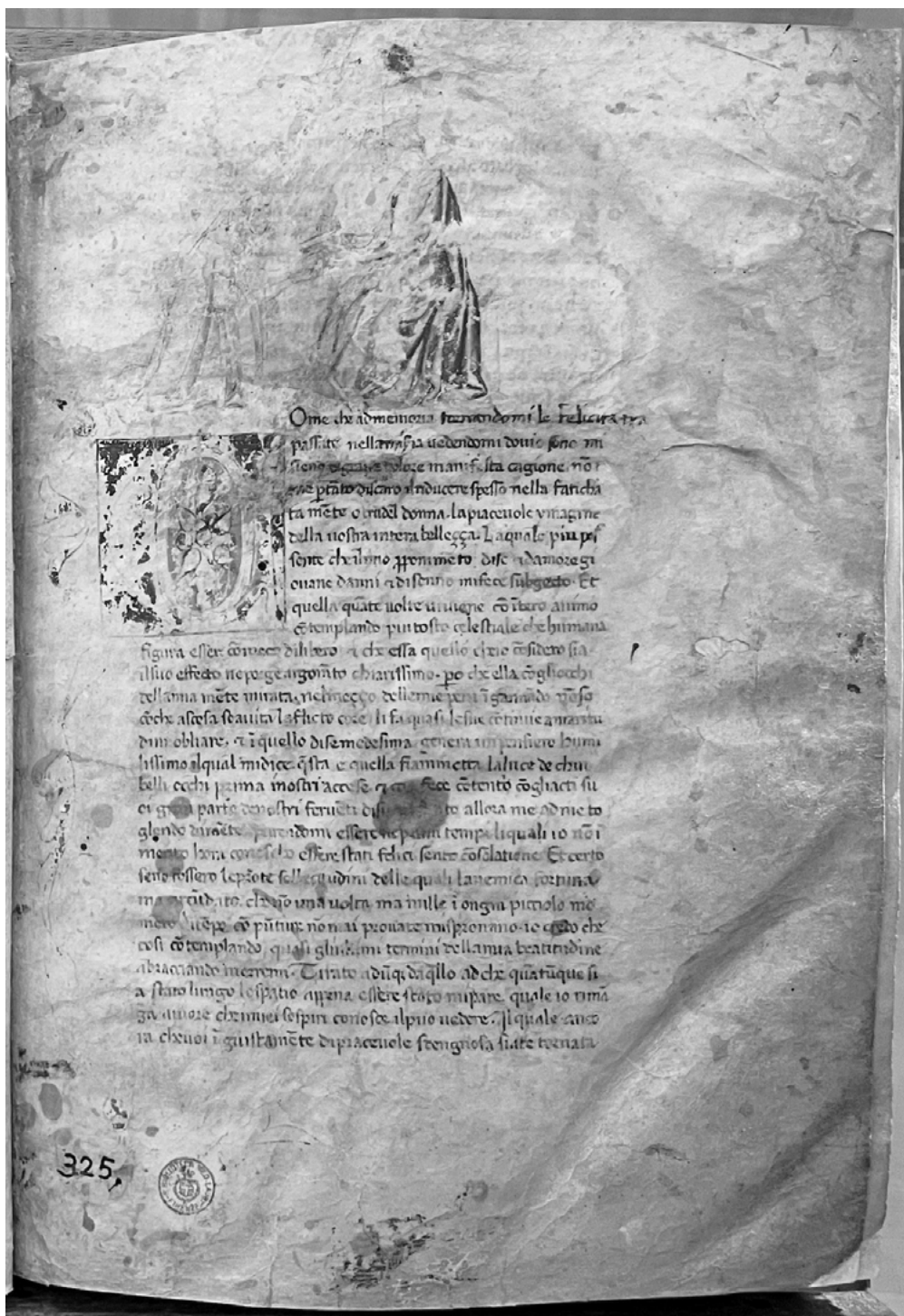


Figure 14.4. Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana,
MS Acquisti e doni 325, Boccaccio, *Teseida*, fol. 1r, ca. 1348–1350.
Photo: Federico Botana (courtesy of the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana).

the assignation to the Laurenziana it is not possible to say how dear it is to me!—I am happy and proud.”⁴⁸ The Laurenziana already housed the autographs of eleven works by Boccaccio, in addition to several manuscripts copied or glossed by him.⁴⁹ By the time the *Teseida* joined the library, the news had already reached the press; apparently, the events were not accurately reported, and this seems to be the reason behind Rostagno’s detailed account in the inventory.⁵⁰

Besides the six Phillipps manuscripts acquired in London in 1910, only two other manuscripts that entered the library between 1900 and 1927 are recorded in the *Inventario* as gifts from the Ministero.⁵¹ However things changed by 1927. With the *Teseida* the library received three other manuscripts bought at the same auction for a sum of 37,285 lire (then worth £500), including the only extant copies of the vernacular version of the *Aeneid* by Ciampolo di Meo degli Ugurgieri of Siena, and the commentaries on Dante and Petrarch by Mino di Vanni d’Arezzo.⁵² In the following five years, the Ministero obtained for the Laurenziana at least two other manuscripts from Hoepli, and many more for other libraries across Italy, which were usually allocated according to their origin—for example, the *Relazione dei viaggi* by Alvise da Ca’ da Mosto was sent to the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana.⁵³ For the Laurenziana, the Ministero also acquired manuscripts from Jacques Rosenthal of Munich: in 1928, he provided four manuscripts, supposedly from the Certosa di Garegano, for a total of 11,153 lire, and in 1933 a manuscript of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere e Trionfi* for 17,616 lire.⁵⁴

The bounty was soon to end. In 1934, for the sale of Martini’s collection organized by Hoepli in Lucerne, the Nazionale of Florence sent the Ministero a list containing eight desiderata, but only acquired two manuscripts.⁵⁵ The autograph of Leon Battista Alberti’s *Elementi di matematica*, included in the list, ended up at Harvard.⁵⁶ The Biblioteca Nazionale’s budget began decreasing from year to year: between 1933 and 1934,

48 BMLF *Inventario*, fol. 34v: “Questa è la storia reale, genuina, precisa, decchè sia stato, detto o scritto a proposito di questo codice, della cui assegnazione alla Laur. è a me cara non è possibile dire quanto!—Sono lieto e orgoglioso. Enrico Rostagno.”

49 See “List of Manuscripts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Boccaccio*, ed. Guyda Armstrong, Rhiannon Daniels, and Stephen J. Milner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), xvii–xxiii.

50 Pio Rajna, “Un codice autografo della ‘Teseide’ di Giovanni Boccaccio,” *Il Marzocco*, February 10, 1929, 4, in response to an article by Salvatore Battaglia published in *La Fiera letteraria* on February 3, 1929.

51 BMLF Acquisti e doni 237 and 274.

52 BMLF Acquisti e doni 314, 326–27, 328; *Manoscritti, miniature, incunabuli*, lots 87, 354, 357.

53 BMLF Acquisti e doni 330, 336; Venice, BNM, Cod. Marc. Ital. VI, 454.

54 BMLF Acquisti e doni 315–17, 338, 371.

55 Letter from Domenico Fava (?) to the Ministero dell’Educazione Nazionale, August 13, 1934, BNCF, Archivio Storico 2607 (Librari italiani). *Bibliothèque Joseph Martini, première partie livres rares et précieux d’autres provenances* (Milan: Hoepli, 1934), lots 41 (Poggio Bracciolini, *De varietate fortuna*), 104 (*Vita di S. Paola*), now BNCF Nuove Accessioni 693 and 94.

56 *Bibliothèque Joseph Martini*, lot 239; now Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library, MS Typ. 4221.

the library spent 55,897 lire on books and manuscripts; 37,500 lire between 1934 and 1935, and just 24,406 lire between 1935 and 1936.⁵⁷ The Wall Street crash of 1929 and the cost of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 were probably among the causes.

Patriotic Acts

The Ministero's increasing participation in the acquisition of manuscripts for public libraries was motivated, it is reasonable to suppose, at least in part, by the exacerbated nationalism that swept Italy from the 1910s. The return of Borso d'Este's Bible to Modena in 1923 can be seen as a defining moment. This magnificent Renaissance Bible was in Paris about to be sold by an antique dealer to a banker in the United States.⁵⁸ At the request of Mussolini himself—who had been asked to intervene by De Marinis—the Milanese industrialist Giovanni Tréccani contributed 3,300,000 francs so that “the most beautiful manuscript in the world”—as described in the Italian press—“returns to its motherland.”⁵⁹

Indicative of a new attitude are probably the series of articles that began appearing before the outbreak of the First World War in *La Bibliofilia*, the bibliophilic journal founded and directed by Leo Olschki. In the first article, published in December 1913 under the title “Salvaguardiamo il Patrimonio artistico nazionale: Un grido di alarma” (“Let us protect the National Artistic Patrimony: A wakeup call”), Olschki compelled the Italian government to take immediate action to protect illuminated manuscripts in public libraries, still at the mercy of thieves’ scalpels.⁶⁰ A short anonymous feature amongst the “Notizie” in the same issue, entitled “Una ‘rapina’ Francese dei manoscritti leonardiani,” called on the French government to return the twelve Leonardo da Vinci notebooks at the Institut de France to Italy.⁶¹ In December 1917, the “Notizie” denounced the sale in London of a collection of original documents from the Medici archives, including autographs by Leonello d’Este, Lorenzo il Maginifico, Angelo Poliziano, and Ludovico Sforza.⁶² The “Notizie” of June 1918 included a feature lamenting the ongoing dispersal of private archives, and concluded by reporting the victory of the Italian government at London’s High Court of Justice, which ruled that the documents from the Medici archives pertaining to state affairs should be returned to Italy.⁶³

57 BNCF, *Registro* A22 (1933–1938), 95, 161, 238.

58 See Ernesto Milano, “La Bibbia di Borso d’Este. L’avventura di un codice,” in *La Bibbia di Borso d’Este: commentario al codice*, 2 vols. (Modena: Panini, 2005), 1:15–72.

59 Carlo Tridenti, “Il più bel Codice del mondo torna alla Patria italiana,” *Il Corriere d’Italia*, May 11, 1923, 3.

60 Leo S. Olschki, “Salvaguardiamo il Patrimonio artistico nazionale,” *La Bibliofilia* 15 (1913): 329–31.

61 “Una rapina Francese,” *La Bibliofilia* 15 (1913): 355–58.

62 Carlo Frati, “Per una vendita di documenti Medicei,” *La Bibliofilia* 19 (1917): 281–84.

63 “Per la conservazione dei nostri archivi privati,” *La Bibliofilia* 20 (1918): 153.

In at least two instances Olschki collaborated with the Italian government to save manuscripts for the nation. In 1914, he liaised between his friend Jacques Rosenthal and the Ministero to facilitate the return to the Cathedral of Mantua of three miniatures stolen from the fifteenth-century Missal of Barbara di Brandenburgo, which Rosenthal had acquired in Bologna.⁶⁴ In 1934, together with his son Aldo, Olschki engaged in arduous negotiations with Lathrop C. Harper in New York so that a rare manuscript of Dante's *Commedia*, copied in Istria between 1398 and 1400 and including the commentary by Benvenuto da Imola, was returned to Italy from the United States.⁶⁵ In addition, he donated manuscripts to public libraries on at least two occasions: in 1898, he presented the Laurenziana with a fourteenth-century manuscript of Dante's *Vita nuova*, and in 1906 he offered the Biblioteca Classense in Ravenna a copy of Dante's *Inferno* with the commentary by Cristoforo Landino.⁶⁶ Despite all this, and having been awarded the titles of *commendatore* and *cavaliere*, with the promulgation of the racial laws Leo Olschki was forced to move to Switzerland in 1938, where he died in 1940.

Conclusion

Before the First World War, Florentine public libraries could not compete financially with American collectors like Morgan. The first *Legge di tutela* was not effective enough to stop the export of valuable manuscripts. Yet, despite that and their financial limitations, the Nazionale and the Laurenziana succeeded in obtaining manuscripts of significant historical and literary interest. The Laurenziana appears to have preferred manuscripts with a strong connection to Medicean Florence and its humanists, continuing a tradition that can be traced back to its foundation. The Nazionale seemingly prioritized quantity over quality, which seems consistent with its new role of central national library. After the First World War, the Italian State seems to have provided more help to public libraries to acquire manuscripts than ever before, but for both political and economic reasons the times of bounty were soon over. It must be admitted, however, that the available documentary sources are fragmentary—the Nazionale's administrative archive, for instance, was almost completely destroyed by the 1966 flood. To arrive at a thorough understanding of the situation, we need to include other libraries in Italy, notably the Braidense in Milan, the Marciana in Venice, and the Nazionale of Rome. The results of my research in Florence, however, strongly suggest that developments in Italy

⁶⁴ Archivio Olschki, C 1045–47. On the theft, see Giuse Pastore, “Furto e recupero di miniature del Messale e successive vicende dal 1913 al 1991,” in *Messale di Barbara Brandenburgo Gonzaga: commentario all'edizione in facsimile*, ed. Giuseppa Zanichelli (Bologna: Il Bulino, 2012): 28–31.

⁶⁵ Now Venice, BNM, Cod. Marc. Ital. IX, 692. For the correspondence, Archivio Olschki C 698–744. On the manuscript, see Valentina Petaros Jeromela, “I due codici e la tradizione del commento rambaldiano alla Divina Commedia,” *Annales: Series Historia et Sociologia* 25 (2015): 677–704.

⁶⁶ BMLF Acquisti e doni 224; Medardo Morici, “Per un Codice dell' ‘Inferno’ dantesco-landiniano, donato dal Comm. Leo S. Olschki alla Classense di Ravenna,” *La Bibliofilia* 9 (1908): 401–9. Now Ravenna, Biblioteca Classense, MS 655. See Floriana Amicucci, “L'Inferno e scritti danteschi di Ficino e Landino,” in *Dante e la divina commedia in Emilia Romagna*, ed. Gabriella Albanese, Sandro Bertelli, and Paolo Pontari (Milan: Silvana, 2021), 222.

were similar to those in other European nations: an educated middle class increasingly conscious of the cultural value of medieval manuscripts; bookdealers, politicians and scholars who would intervene to safeguard the cultural capital of the nation. Whatever their personal agendas were, their actions have helped us to understand that a despoliation of medieval manuscripts on the scale of that which occurred in Italy between 1796 and 1914 should never happen again.