

The Rare Book Collection of the Library of the Italian National Institute of Health: from the past to the present

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Abstract

The Library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS), the Italian National Institute of Health, is the main library for public health and biomedical research in Italy and holds a small but valuable special collection of ancient books. Known as the Rare Book Collection, this fund consists of over 1200 scientific printed volumes published between the XVI and the XIX century. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the challenges and the process undertaken by the Library to share and digitalize this Collection.

Key words: libraries, medical; rare books; book collecting; digital technology; Italy.

Introduction

The Library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (ISS) is the main documentation centre for public health and biomedical research in Italy and since 1934, the year of the Institute's foundation, it supports its activities and makes its scientific heritage accessible to the research community.

The Library holdings mainly consist of periodicals in print and/or electronic format, publications by national and international institutions and organizations, pharmacopoeias, official publications, health legislation, textbooks, grey literature and much more. The ISS Library also collects and disseminates the World Health Organization publications that the Library receives as the Italian WHO Documentation Centre.

In addition to all these documents the Library holds a special collection (Figure 1), commonly known as the Rare Book Collection (1) that consists of over 1,200 ancient printed books (XVI-XIX centuries), as well as about one hundred books, published in the same period, on Italy's mineral waters the "Italian Mineral Waters Collection" (2).

The Rare Fund also possesses 17 anatomical sketches, more precisely myologic studies, drawn by the famous Italian sculptor Antonio Canova (Possagno 1757 - Venezia 1822) probably between 1776 and 1779, in his youth. The artist used black carbon to draw the ten-



Fig. 1. Félix Vicq D'Azyr (1748-1794). *Traité d'anatomie et de physiologie ...*, 1786.

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dons and the adjoining anatomical parts, while sanguine (hematite, red ochre) was used for the muscles.

The Rare Book Collection

The Collection mainly covers medical and health-related subjects such as anatomy, general pathology, hygiene, pharmacy, pharmacology, medical and officinal botany, veterinary and entomology (Figure 2), but it also includes books on physics, natural and applied sciences as well as a few volumes on literary and historical topics. Many works are by the major medical and scientific authors including Hyppocrates, Galen, Avicenna, Mattioli, Mercurial, Vesalius., Morgagni, Redi, Vallisneri, Lancisi etc. Several editions are notable for their rarity, historical value, beautiful engravings, and the importance of their printers: Gryphius, Froben, Valgrisi, Blado, Giunta, Giolito, Albrizzi, Pasquali and others.



Fig. 2. Pierre André Latraille (1762-1833). *Histoire naturelle, générale et particulière, des crustacés et des insectes* ..., [1801-1805].

Sharing our cultural resource

For many years this Collection was unknown to the public. The chance for sharing this precious heritage arose in 2008 when a specific project (3) – “The medical-health collection of Rare Books of the Library of the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (XVI-XIX centuries) from print to online” – was developed by the Library, thanks to a co-financed grant from ISS and the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, MIUR).

This project (2008-2010) allowed the release and the diffusion of the Collection through its online cataloguing and the publication of a Catalogue of the whole collection in the series *I beni storico-scientifici dell’Istituto Superiore di Sanità* (vol. 1 and vol. 2) (4). For this purpose, the Working Group of the Rare Book Collection of the ISS Library was created in 2009, composed by ISS librarians who are expert in the study, preservation, cataloguing and enhancing of this special collection.



Fig. 3. Francisco Javier Balmis (1753-1819). *Specifico antivenerico* ..., 1795.

The Working Group reached the goal of promoting and sharing this notable heritage, hidden to the audience, through the online cataloguing and digitalization of the whole collection, the promotion of events, national and international conferences, exhibitions, guided tours, publications etc. In 2012 the Group created a specific website dedicated to the Fund to give it more visibility (www.iss.it/biblioteca-chi-siamo-fondo-rari) (5).

Throughout the years, the interest generated by this initiative has led to the collaboration with other Italian cultural institutions and, in particular, with two new-born Italian interactive multimedia museums: the Museum of the History of Medicine (Museo di Storia della Medicina, MuSME) in Padua (6) and the Museum of the Italian National Institute of Health (Museo ISS) in Rome.

The Library cooperated with both these museums for the production of the White Book, a multimedia product in browsable format composed of digital video images taken from a specific selection of ancient volumes of the Fund. The MuSME White Book contains about 150 images of medicine and officinal botany (*Figure 3*) while the White Book in the ISS Museum has a different content consisting of 299 digital images covering: medicine, botany and zoology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and mineral waters.

The cooperation with these two museums has been a challenging experience that could offer in the future further occasions of collaboration with other important cultural institutions.

From the beginning of the Project, the Library had set itself the aim to complete the full text digitalization of the whole Rare Book Collection and finally achieved this goal thanks to an agreement with the Sapienza University of Rome, through the Google Books Project (7). Nowadays the digitized volumes are searchable via Google's search engine and their full text is available for viewing and downloading.

Conclusions

The advancement in technology allowed more people to access and share the historical and cultural heritage, which aligns with the mission of organizations such as libraries and museums to disseminate knowledge. Digitizing rare and antique materials, a task taken on by many institutions globally, has resulted in a wider access and availability of these materials to all users worldwide (8).

The ISS Library initiated a digitalization program for its Rare Book Collection many years ago, with the aim of providing public access to the full text of a valuable historical collection of scientific significance. Despite being a long process, the digitalization has greatly increased the accessibility and visibility of these rare documents, allowing users to freely access the entire collection.

For the ISS Library, whose primary role is to support Italian researchers, this experience has been both a challenge and a great opportunity to try a new task, involving ancient books that are typically reserved for storage libraries. The journey towards full-text digitization involved several steps and some challenges, but it was driven by the enthusiasm of the Working Group and the positive feedback received over the years (9).

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