

MALATESTIAN LIBRARY

Around the middle of 1440s the local Franciscan friars found that their library was too small for their codexes. So they asked to the Lord of Cesena *Malatesta Novello* (great lover of books and humanism) for the funds to build a new *libraria*. The works were directed by *Matteo Nuti* from Fano (a scholar of Leon Battista Alberti who elaborated originally the model of Michelozzo for the Convent of St Marc in Florence) and lasted from 1447 to 1452. Two more years were necessary for the setting of the codexes and the realization of the walnut door: in the day August 15th, 1454 the new *studium* was eventually open to the public.

First Italian civic library, i.e. belonging to the Commune and open to everybody, it was entrusted to the friars. This fact (which is summarized by the presence of two keys) is thought to be essential for the main record of the Malatestian Library: it is **the only one in the world**, of the type called humanistic-conventual, which has preserved structure, fittings and codexes since its opening, i.e. for more than 550 years. When Novello died and the Signoria too, the library could live thanks to his far-sightedness and only during Napoleon's time (1797-1814) ran seriously the risk to be dismantled.

The Malatestian Library must be tasted little by little, with the certainty to approximate a monument which is unique in the world. The exterior can hardly be admired, being so hidden inside the complex of the former convent and the buildings of 1800's. Only from the Cloister of St Francis and the lodge of Ghini Palace (Corso Sozzi) you can admire the astonishing simplicity: in bricks, with a front adorned by rose and inscription, and sides with gothic windows and amazing cornice of terracotta.

You have to get up to the first floor (the ground floor should have brought dangers of floods) and walk through two corridors, till the vestibolo which shares the "Aula del Nuti" and the Piana Library. Here is preserved the magnificent parade mace which Pious VI presented to his home town. We are now in front of the Malatestian Library, an ambient which neither men nor time have ever been able to damage.

The first portal is made of stone and presents a dedication in the architrave and double coat of arms at the sides (grate and three heads). It was realized by **Agostino di Duccio**, who also made the tympanum with the coat of arms which Malatesta Novello loved more, i.e. the Indian elephant (also in the square above). Linked to the legend of Scipion the African as ancestor of the family, the animal shows an inscription citing "**ELEPHAS INDVS CVLICES NON TIMET**" (=the Indian elephant does not fear mosquitos), which is perhaps an ironic motto against the enemies Da Polenta (Lords of Ravenna, an area with many marshes, at those times). On the right, a memorial tablet to Nuti (the date is 1452). The wonderful walnut door dates back to 1454 instead, and was engraved by Cristoforo da S. Giovanni in Persiceto, with coat of arms of the Malatestas (wild rose, three heads, chequered bands and grate) which are alternated to decorative motives.

Inside, the library shows its geometricity, typical of our first, finest Renaissance. The aula has basilical shape ("temple of culture"), with three naves which are divided by

ten rows of white, local stone columns, with coat of arms on the capitals; the campates are so eleven for each aisle (the twelfth could not be done because of the sinking of a boat carrying codexes), pole vaulted. On the contrary, the central nave is barrel vaulted and ends with a rose under which is the gravestone of Novello. Along the ground, the inscription (“MAL(atesta) NOV(ellus) PAN(dvlphi) FIL(ivs) MAL(atestae) NEP(os) DEDIT”).

The fittings is composed by 29x2=58 desks or pluteus, with coat of arms at the sides. The light comes in through the 44 Venetian style windows, which were perfectly studied for the reading (it is believed that neither candles nor electric lights have ever been put on inside). The colours of the Aula del Nuti are those of the family: green (which does not mak the eyes tired) of the walls; red of the desks and of the ground; white of the columns.

And now the greatly precious 340 *codexes*, which are linked to the desks by hand-made iron chains. This fact both for preventing them from being stolen, and for assuring them the same position (every book is known as: D or S, right or left, for the row; a Roman number for the desk; an Arab number for the position in the desk). The Latin manuscripts of the Malatestiana are said to be *the last glimpse of a world which was disappearing*: the use of Latin in literature and the manuscription were being substituted in those years by vulgar and press.

A medieval codex took months of work and the presence of at least four men, in the *scriptorium* of the Lord (in Cesena, at the Palace): there was the man who obtained the parchments from the skin of the sheeps, the man who assembled them, the writer, the illuminator, the bookbinder, etc. Among the writers who used the “littera antiqua” and left space for the illuniator, some names have to be kept in mind: the prolific Giovanni da Epinal, Jacopo della Pergola and Francesco da Figline, also first keeper of the library (in "littera moderna" wrote, on the other side, Tommaso da Utrecht and Mathias Kuhler). The illuminator, as already said, decorated the front of a codex and some capital letters inside, always using natural colours. The value of some illuminations of the Malatestian Library is enormous (school of Ferrara, Bologna and Lombardya) and the great Taddeo Crivelli is likely to be author of some of them (*De Civitate Dei* and *In Evangelium Johannis* by St Augustine).

The language of the manuscripts is, for the most part of them, Latin, with rare examples in Greek and only one in Hebraic and Italian vulgar. The 340 books can be divided into three funds. 50 codexes belonged to the friars before 1447, and concern religion, from philosopy to theology and Biblic hexegesis (among them, the oldest codex, an *Etimologie* by St Isidoro (S.XXI.5) of the IX cent.) The "Malatestian fund" includes 120 codexes, which were written in Cesena, bought by Novello or presented to him; the arguments are various, from the Greek and Latin classics (most of all, historians like Ceasar, Tito Livio, Erodoto, Plutarco, Plinio il Vecchio, Polibio) to the Fathers of the Church (*Epistolae et sermones* by St Girolamo (D.XI.1-3), *De civitate Dei* by St Augustine (D.IX.1), which was copied by Jacopo della Pergola and illuminated by Crivelli, *In Johannis Evangelium Sermones* by St Augustine (D.III.3), which Giovanni da Epinal wrote and Crivelli decorated). The third fund includes the books which the doctor of Malatesta Novello, Giovanni di Marco, left him when he died

(about 100 codexes concerning sciences and medicine, with *Historia Naturalis* by Plinio (Francesco da Figline) (S.XXV.5) and *Etimologiae* di S. Isidoro (X-XI cent.) (D.XXIV.1).

In June 2005 UNESCO included the Library in the Memory of the World Register, the first in Italy.