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Review/Report of the Conference on the History of the Book in Venice for the SHARP Newsletter (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing)

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The Books of Venice
Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti
Venice 9 – 10 March, 2007

Venice ... lay open on the waves, miraculous like St. Cuthbert's book, a golden legend on countless leaves.

John Ruskin
Preface to St. Mark's Rest
April 25, 1877

The circumstances of creation and circulation of Renaissance books from Venice formed the basis of the recent cooperatively funded conference organized by Craig Kallendorf of Texas A & M and Lisa Pon of Southern Methodist University. SHARP was one of the collaborating organizations and received much gracious publicity. Other partners were The Bibliographical Societies of the United Kingdom and the United States and the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation.

Collaboration and civility featured in the lively portrait of Renaissance Venice that Marino Zorzi of the Marciana Library conjured in his keynote address. Venetian Renaissance civility extended to Greek, Hebrew and Muslim scholars and merchants, and Reinhard Flogaus of Berlin's Humbolt University suggested that such a climate of mutual respect might explain Aldus Manutius's pioneer printing of short Orthodox prayers and hymns as "stowaways" in his Greek and Latin Horae from the opening years of the sixteenth century. Rosa Salzberg of Queen Mary College, University of London transfixed the audience with her revelations about popular performers and vernacular pamphlet printing in early sixteenth century Venice and Florence. Salzberg described a lively street culture where ambulant vendors commented on contemporary life in performance and then sold printed texts of their songs and dramas from temporary sites located near St. Mark's Square. Kevin Stevens of The University of Nevada at Reno used his discovery of Venetian book invoices from 1563 to decode the ways book dealers and Venetian printers circumvented censorship by means of mutually understood abbreviations.

Close study of single books or authors concerned a number of scholars at the conference. H. George Fletcher of the New York Public Library investigated the manuscript corrections in Aldus's Strozzi of 1513 while Renzo Baldasso of Columbia University articulated a case for Erhard Ratdolt's innovative use of metal strips in printing the geometric diagrams for his 1482 Euclid. Lisa Pon built a convincing argument for Sansovino's son as author of the hagiographic single volume Vita di Jacopo Sansovino, and in honor of her Harvard professor, Henry Zerner, Pon delivered her lecture in Italian. Michael Eisenberg of the City University of New York brilliantly demonstrated the ways the language of music determined the form of Claudio Merulo's texts printed in 1567 and 1571.

Cooperative interactions of manuscript illuminators, scribes, printers and book collectors ca. 1470 to 1520 were investigated by Lillian Armstrong of Wellesley College, Helena Szepe of the University of South Florida, Nicholas Barker of The Book Collector, and Elizabeth Ross of the University of South Florida. We learned from these papers that

the boundaries between pen and press were flexible and constantly shifting in Renaissance Venice.

Book circulation from Venice to the rest of Italy using many different kinds of documentation including private auction records and library statistics informed the papers by Don Skemer of Princeton, Bettina Wagner of Munich's state library, Christina Dondi of Oxford, Neil Harris from the University at Undine, Patricia Osmond from Iowa State, Ennio Sandal of the University of Verona and Daniele Danesi of the City Library in Siena. The conference concluded with a printing demonstration by Peter Koch of the University of California, Berkeley and a ceremonial presentation of Koch's recently printed version of Joseph Brodsky's Watermark.

The Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti is housed in the mid fifteenth century Cavalli Franchetti Palace which was renovated at the end of the nineteenth century by Camillo Boito a neogothic architect. It is located directly across the bridge at the front door of the Accademia Museum within view of the domed church of Santa Maria Della Salute.