

## **Something about the recent thefts in the Italian libraries**

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Not only natural disasters, unfortunately, strike our libraries, but also frequent thefts, every time, in different ways. They are terrible calamities for the National documentary Cultural Heritage. It is recognized that in Italy there are the richest collections of printed books and ancient manuscripts than in the world, they are often damaged, even if an efficient security system is running! An occasional user could sometimes also easily by-pass or escape whatever check point in case of a lack from the staff.

In Italy the important collections of ancient and rare books and manuscripts (autographs, music, engravings and so on) held in libraries and archives are of interest not only for researchers, students, and professors, more and more for the international antiquarian market and they became in few cases attractive also for the collectors and the investors recycling dirty money too! Many thefts of selected items are made to order. The market has been enriched steadily with material coming from archives and libraries, just in the last century. A great contribution to this spreading of rare and historic printed or manuscript material has been increased, also thanks to frequent international auctions, periodical books fairs, and exhibitions. Locally, also many monthly small markets offer frequently used books and mixed old documents, often rare items, often in bad condition, without information on their provenance. On the books and documents it's easy to discover a stamp of a library, or archive, still living, or a membership, or a meaningful sign.

All over the world: the antiquarian market is sensibly growing, due to the global international business and the high level of employed networking technology via Internet. The chains of great antiquarian booksellers are well organized to check and discover -or to hide- what the world market can offer to the rich international customers/investors, unique or rare printed books or other type of precious or ancient document to satisfy the collectors private desire.

In Italy there are so many meaningful libraries, it is highly difficult to defend and systematically check all the known registered library collections. The National union catalog, like SBN (Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale), does not include still all libraries and not yet all ancient books descriptions and their locations. Many libraries are very small, but keeping special or historic collections, of autographs, or rare books to be preserved. Unfortunately not all libraries could be connected on line to a network,

because of the costs and for the absence of trained librarians able to preserve locally the ancient books collections and often they hold not accessible funds.

The Ministry of Culture provides for the maintenance of a considerable high number of important historic libraries. Forty six libraries -including the two National of Rome and Florence- are depending on the State, holding collections of ancient books and documents belonged to suppressed convents in past centuries or to clerical institutions , now disappeared, or coming from old important old schools, or from royal and noble families and personalities of culture or science. All together these institutions represent the backbone of the Italian library system, linked to the other historic public libraries depending on the municipalities, and other more than two thousand collections property of institutions, foundations and associations or Universities, or Academic and Churches bodies, last but not least, unknown private people. The central Government passed and renewed in 2004 a new very strong law concerning the preservation and conservation of all Cultural Heritage (including books and archives too), amended recently, concerning the rules to protect and restore the Cultural Heritage material and evidencing penalties in case of a crime and damage to the Cultural Heritage. Also the Regions, like Lombardy, have issued also a lot of recommendations and guidelines to preserve the local material, addressed to libraries, archives and museums.<sup>1</sup>

In Lombardy many courses and seminars on preservation and conservation were held. An Italian translation of the American guidelines on the security in library of ACRL/RBMS (Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections) has been adopted by libraries and archives<sup>2</sup>. Lombardy Region in its recommendations, focused the definition and preparedness of the emergency plan for libraries and how to protect Cultural Heritage, and become more aware of the value of physical objects.

The librarians were formally invited to check the topographic catalogue, if possible directly on site, shelf by shelf, in closed storages, and discover gaps and lacks, or the eventual problem in conservation (like mold, or insects, or other damages to the ancient material). This work was expected to be done at least once in a year (usually in Summertime, and all libraries should do this systematically, room by room or for each collection.

Also recent guidelines on reproduction of books and documents are now available. They are based on international standards to combine the preservation efforts of original documents and books, but also to have new digitalized version of books and a reproduction for the projects of digital libraries. The problem now is that there is not enough money for mass treatments to digitalize many documents and books (both ancient and modern) for the purpose of preservation. The legal deposit of modern current printed books, for example, is not yet considered so critic -even if the acid paper is a sensible risk- nor I could not remember a theft in the last 15 years of legal deposit!

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<sup>1</sup> Raccomandazioni per la tutela dei beni librari e documentari, Milano, Regione Lombardia, 2007

<sup>2</sup> See : ACRL/RBMS (Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections , [http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/security\\_theft](http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/security_theft)

However the sensible continuous progressive reduction of staff in the last five years, is dramatically affecting libraries and archives. Some great historical public libraries decided to close some rooms and storages, and cut few services. In this way, the documents are no more accessible because of their closure, but the thefts are increasing just also because of this reason, for less supervision, and a reduced use of old books, a check of fragile documents not yet reproduced or not yet catalogued.

In few public libraries, but also in most important private ones, like the Ambrosiana in Milan, the books are now well protected, not only in equipped armored spaces. This condition is not only reserved to the most precious or famous works, as Leonardo's Codex Atlantico!. For this consistent unique collection of manuscripts, drawings and sketches few special personalized security containers were built, and active sensors were introduced everywhere.

Also "chips" in the binding, or special labels and electronic codes, checked by the local system of library automation, are now adopted to protect the important documentary Cultural Heritage. Great evidence is given in the mentioned recommendations to the first action to do, linking the book - both already in the library, both the new incoming book- to the library context, in the physical visible way: putting as first step a stamp on it. All the books must have the library's stamp impressed, using a permanent ink (or a dry stamp without ink) at least on the title page, and for books the inventory number-code at the end, and so on. Certainly in the past time they used to mark a page with an ownership note, or with one or more small signs of recognition: now these are useful for the traceability of the book provenance and can help to trace its own history.

Another recommendation, is that the books in a library should be all catalogued, not only inventoried, and possibly well describe. Using a networked database, they can share information, giving added value to the security, when the book has to be recognized. In case of a missed book, it is possible to know if, and where, there is another copy of it, and which information are existing and available regarding it. When the local catalog fails, or there is not a preview printed list, or a card-catalog, the network could support and help to compensate for the lack.

The procedure for reporting a theft to the local authority have been also clarified. In the past sometimes the libraries did not declare thefts for fear of legal consequences, or because they did not realize the disappearance !

In Italian Public Administration the library theft, and in general the damage to all type of Cultural Heritage, since XX century, were under the attention of the Carabinieri. They are a branch of the National Army, directly depending on the Ministry of Culture, having a special body in some regions of the national territory as responsible for the recuperation and the protection of cultural heritage, books included, and operate also abroad. In case of theft, they contact libraries, and the regional "soprintendenze", and the libraries, then they refer to a Justice officer for penalties. They keep a rich database concerning thefts and missed documents of the Cultural Heritage. This important instrument is however not enough to find and

identify stolen books because not all of them could be described inside after the discovery of a theft.

### **A recent case of theft .**

But theft is still a plague . The biggest thefts recently happened in Italy during the closing time of libraries, a lot in the night, or when the staff vacancy were evident, or again in some dramatic cases during the renovation, or the works in a part of the building hosting the library. In some cases the scaffolds and the construction always represent a risk for the collections and also the doors, exceptionally opened for occasional needs, or during the exhibitions, and the transfer of material.

I would like to give only some short information about the case of the impoverishment of the Gerolamini Library of Naples, probably well known to you. It aroused sensation for the criminal way and the large damage done to the historic collection.

I invite you to read the published sentence of the process to the thief, the director, the mind of an activity at international level and also other people involved. The text contains the declarations of the Director, the thief. Also the list of a great number of stolen books is included. Many of them were recuperated, others are going to be still identified in difficult way on the antiquarian market<sup>3</sup>.

The fact: in March 2012 the Professor of University of Florence Tomaso Montanari first brought to light a cultural theft, which then appeared to be limited to the Girolamini Library, based in Naples (is now supposed that more than two thousand ancient books were stolen in last six/seven years; the commercial value is estimated around 2,5 Million Euros). We now know that the Director of the library at the time, named as expert by the Ministry of Culture , widened his trail in plundering through other libraries in Italy as well: Montecassino, Naples Municipal Library, Ministry of Agriculture Library, the Seminary in Padua, and the Ximines Observatory Library in Florence.

Soon after the discovery of the theft the Italian authorities announced that some books from the Girolamini Library were offered in the Auction 59 (May 2012) at a Munich Auction House . The auction house there upon recalled all books from this consignment - a total of 540 titles - and handed them over to the German authorities in Munich, where these books have been stored to this day. Some people who have worked with the director were arrested. The Director must serve seven years of pain: but now is under house arrest. About 1800 books were returned because they have not been sold yet. It is impossible to identify and quantify the book already scattered on the international market. The Director declared not to know the entity of stolen books in few years from the mentioned libraries (and probably others!). He systematically destroyed the card catalogue and the first old inventory of the collection. Unfortunately only some recent funds were catalogued in the national catalog SBN and some incunabula and sixteenth century books, previously included in the national

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<http://www.penalecontemporaneo.it/upload/1374051121TRIBGIP441314girolaminidecaro2.pdf>

recognition, merged in the national catalogue. The books stolen were often restored to eliminate or reduce whatever sign, name or handwritten information, potentially usable to know the provenance of the book, or to ameliorate the book, restoring or changing binding, adding pages coming from another copy of the books, to complete the gaps.

This is a dramatic situation and we need long time to understand, and identify, which were all the stolen books, and we suppose also there is a great eventuality to have negative results, because the books were scattered all over the world. There are not yet efficient instruments available to search those books through!. Only an international cooperation among libraries, serious booksellers, expert bibliophiles, and collectors, could be crucial to discover where they are now, and allow Carabinieri to recuperate them where they are.

Other related tremendous problem were the false ancient books in commerce, extraordinary well produced, like the original: they are so perfect, to confuse also the experts, and the buyers. You can read also on this, how that person could commit this crime ,in few case, reproducing exactly some rare books, only for vanity we suppose, to demonstrate his ability, and also his collaborators', artisan or artists in his idea. This is the case of one or more new copies of 2 famous original books of Galileo Galilei,<sup>4</sup> The behavior of the Gerolamini library staff were appreciated: they had courage in delivering a telephone videoclip, demonstrating the criminal activity, in the night of the Director ordering people to take out periodically a lot of books. The excuse was te restoration: but why did they work during the night? For who and where the books have been held? And other many question were solved.

However the thefts are a continuous dripping, also the users' unhealthy behaviors could damage the ancient books, cutting pages or images, miniatures, or bindings, or making something negative. At the end of 2012 the Carabinieri discovered another strange case happened in Lombardy and Piemonte Regions in 2011-and 2012. One normal user, in three years, cuts quietly thousand decorated pages, tables, plates of ancient books of XVI and XVII century, and also some chapters of single volumes of archeological and art collections, damaging a group of public and private libraries, often cutting also different copies of the same edition. One damaged public library was in Milan, there were in Turin, and in other towns of northern Italy. The libraries did not realized the discovery of a missed volume in an ecclesiastic library in Turin. Starting from this, Carabinieri found the thief, probably a person with a mania for stamps, engravings on general classic contents (heroes, gods, portraits, Roman ruins and so on ). Both offices of the regional soprintendenze concerning the books and

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<sup>4</sup> See : N. Schmidle, A Very Rare Book The mystery surrounding a copy of Galileo's pivotal treatise.

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/12/16/a-very-rare-book>

archives of Lombardy and Piemonte (me too), worked together for at least eight months, contacting the librarians from the damaged libraries to find, if and where, were evident possible lacks in the books, and to solve the question of the provenance, identifying each broken book in different collections. The ruined editions after the confession of the thief, were almost all locally checked. He had classified each group of pictures and pages and its provenance, so it became easier, like in a puzzle, to know first the name of the library touched. Also the presence of stamps of the library, in many cases, helped the recognition. Sheet by sheet, was reproduced and then compared with a complete edition of the damaged books. We needed a lot of patience to do so long work, but at the end, the 90% of cut pages was recognized. Now there is a penal trial open against such a maniac person. He created a great damage, estimated only around about 100.000 Euros for the library collections in Milan. The same in Turin. When, by the Carabinieri intervention, the lost tables and pages, came back to the owning library, probably, a new strong restore will start, paid by the man condemned for this.

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