

10-2022

Review of Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City

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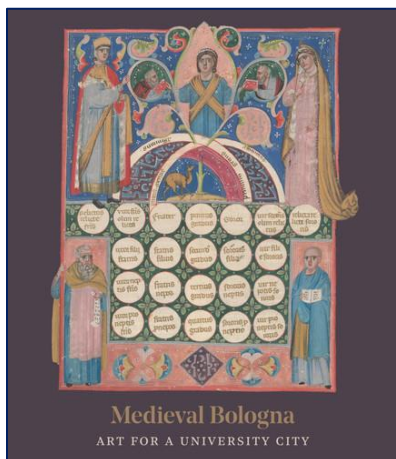
Recommended Citation

Azzarello, Stephanie. "Review of Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City." *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 8, 2 (2022): 203-212. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol8/iss2/10>

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PEREGRINATIONS

JOURNAL OF MEDIEVAL ART AND ARCHITECTURE
VOLUME VIII, NUMBER 2 (AUTUMN 2022)



Review of *Medieval Bologna: Art for a University City*. London: Paul Holberton, 2021, edited by Trinita Kennedy. Hardback, 280 x 240mm, 224 pages, 165 illustrations, ISBN: 978-1-911300-81-6

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In the catalogue, *Medieval Bologna. Art for a University City*, Trinita Kennedy has captured, in micro, the grandeur of the exhibition, which it accompanies. The exhibition—of the same name—ran from November 5, 2021 until January 30, 2022 at the Frist Art Museum in Nashville and was conceived as means of presenting to visitors some of the many beautiful 13th-and 14th-century Bolognese artworks, currently in American libraries, private collections, and museums. The catalogue offers readers the opportunity to revisit this wonderful exhibition repeatedly with the guiding help of seven essayists, each of whom brings insights about these objects from their vantage point within the art world. Among them are curators, a conservator, professors, and museum educators, yet these roles are themselves not mutually exclusive. The catalogue is

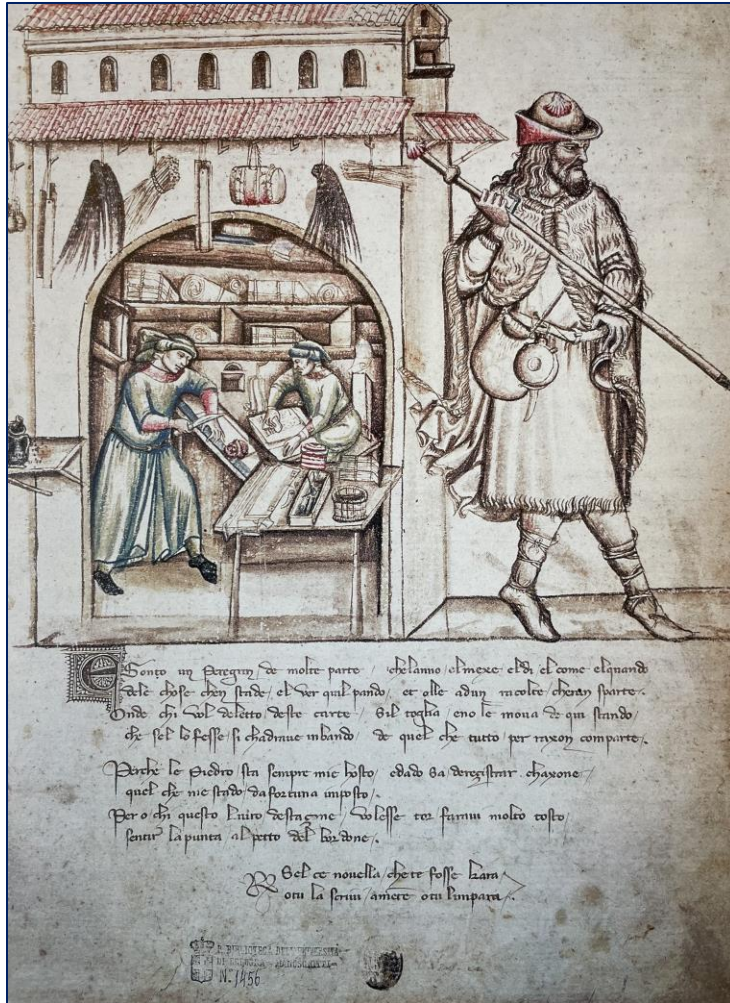


Figure 1 Pietro and Floriano da Villola. *Cronaca Villola, Parchment Maker's Workshop*, 14th century, Bologna, Biblioteca Unversitaria, MS 1456, fol. 4r.

lavishly illustrated and its high production value only further serves to emphasise the quality of the essays, the beauty of the objects discussed within, and the dedication with which the exhibition was conceived and curated.

The ‘book’ is not only the object at the center of both the exhibition and this catalogue but also serves as the framework for unpacking educational, social, economic, and religious life in Duecento and Trecento Bologna with each essay focusing on one of these aspects. The opening essay, by Michael Byron Norris, sets the stage by directly addressing how Bologna, “...a rather nondescript town in the early Middle Ages,” developed into a major hub for book production in Europe beginning as early as the late 12th century. The reader is introduced to the art and practice of book making during this period, which is an important aspect of book history, generally—and one that tends to get glossed over (**Fig. 1**). This essay is also the one that introduces readers to the different



Figure 2 Piazza Maggiore, Bologna, viewed from the west.

kinds of books being made in Bologna and explains what the various purposes were for making these diverse manuscripts. Religious books could be for public or private devotion; academic books were necessary for study; and secular books preserved knowledge. The following essay takes the reader into the physical, built environment of Bologna, which is helpful because, just as the previous essay introduces the purposes of the books, Areli Marina unpacks the physical context in which these books were made and used. Marina looks at the various buildings and spaces that played key roles in the development of the book industry, including those that comprised the communal complex: Piazza Maggiore (**Fig. 2**), the Palazzo del Podestà, the town hall in the civic square of the Piazza Maggiore, the Palazzo del Capitano del Popolo and the Palazzo del Re Enzo. Readers also get a brief introduction to the University of Bologna, which is the oldest in the world. If any subsection of the essay could have been expanded, it should

have been this one, as the dynamics between the University and the ‘book’ are an especially fascinating and relevant topic for such a catalogue.

Nancy K. Turner’s essay on the technical aspects of manuscript painting offers readers a look at the practical side of manuscript making—or codicology. Here, Turner introduces the figures whose jobs were intimately tied to the production of manuscripts, such as the stationers “(‘book-brokers’ who swore an oath to the university)” and explains how they developed a system for duplicating multiple copies of a single manuscript, which could then be sold to students or other interested parties. The language used in this essay is accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with the often-complex processes involved in producing and painting manuscripts. The essay is comprised of six smaller, digestible subsections that cover different facets of manuscript illumination, beginning with the pigments used in the “Bolognese Palette.” This subsection is careful to tread the line between incorporating some science, such as the inclusion of the periodic symbol for tin disulfide (SnS_2) and the scientific names of plant ingredients (*aurum musicum*, *purpurinus*), and conveying this information in a manner that allows lay-readers to comprehend the technical side of production. The language Turner uses is both accurate and accessible for readers who are novices to this aspect of book-making. The following two subsections (“Painting Techniques and the Need for Speed,” and “Techniques of the First Style”) carefully explain how painters in Bologna used varying approaches to painting to distinguish themselves from other regions in Italy. This is peppered with some solid examples from the catalogue plates and figures, which help to literally make visible the techniques being discussed. This essay also explains the artistic

Figure 3 Nicolò di Giacomo di Nasimbene (Nicolò da Bologna). *Novella in Decretales*: Frontispiece for Book 5: Court Scene. c. 1355–60. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 331.



impact of Giotto on Bolognese manuscript painting of the early 14th century and on the subsequent generation of painters that followed.

The final four essays cover a social function of manuscripts and their various uses in medieval Bologna, beginning with Susan L'Engle and her discussion of the study of Law and use of legal manuscripts during this period. As Kennedy points out in her video discussion of a professor's tomb monument

(<https://fristartmuseum.org/exhibition/medieval-bologna-art-for-a-university-city/>),

Bologna was primarily known for its teaching of Law and that Bologna was the first European city which provided students with an education in Roman and canon law,

creating a demand for its production of legal manuscripts. The very fine examples of illuminated legal manuscripts discussed are set within the larger historical framework of artists working at that time to produce these books. Not all legal manuscripts contained images—some were just text—but the codices that did include illuminations, tended to combine scenes of religious law and secular law. This could mean that an image of the Coronation of the Virgin was found in the same volume as a court scene (**Fig. 3**). In many ways, the combination of these ‘kinds’ of legal proceedings justified and validated each other as though the divine will of God sanctified the law of humanity, which was in turn modelled on the courts of ‘higher’ justice.

Trinita Kennedy’s essay on the book illuminations of the friars lays out the role the Franciscans and Dominicans played in the religious life of medieval Bologna, and the role that books played in *their* religious life and mission. Drawing on various art objects as comparanda, including frescos (Virgin Embroidering/Madonna del Ricamo)] (**Fig. 4**); funerary monuments (Tomb of Taddeo Pepoli); and altarpiece panels (Virgin and Child Enthroned, by Cimabue) (**Fig. 5**), Kennedy’s inclusion of these additional types of objects gives the reader a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected nature of artistic practices in Bologna; that artists could—and did—work using various media. This highlights the pragmatic function of art, that in addition to being beautiful, manuscripts (and altarpieces, frescos, tapestries, and other objects) served necessary functions in the lives of medieval people, both monastic and lay.

Bryan C. Keene’s essay, devoted to manuscripts for church ceremonies, takes the reader further into the development and use of manuscripts produced in regions around Bologna, reflecting how visual influences of art run in many directions and rarely remain



Figure 4 Vitale da Bologna. *Virgin Embroidering* (Madonna del Ricamo), early 1330s. Bologna, Museo, della Storia di



Figure 5 Cimabue. *Virgin and Child Enthroned with Two Angels*, c. 1286–87. Bologna, Santa Maria dei Servi.

static in one location. Focusing on the Mass and the Divine Office, (with eloquent and succinct definitions), this essay features some of the most exquisite examples of choir book pages produced in Bologna during the Trecento and Quattrocento (**Figs. 6, 7**). More than just expanding the geographic context of these manuscripts, Keene also expands their temporal reach with his discussion on the physical relocation of these books to various locations during the 18th and 19th centuries. With the Napoleonic suppression of the monasteries in the late 18th century, numerous books were looted, sold, relocated, or



Figure 6 Master of Gerona. Choirbook (antiphony): *Christ in Majesty* (in initial A), late 13th century. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS Ludwig VI 6, fol. 2r.

lost, while many others had their images and illuminations excised. These loose leaves would find their way into global public and private collections via auctions and gift exchange, which is the origin of the “afterlives” of these objects. The essay concludes by suggesting a new path forward for Bolognese manuscript production around 1400, asking questions of the illuminations that remain and imploring scholars to take a collaborative approach to the study of these objects.

The final essay by Lyle Humphrey examines the religious-political triangulation of Bologna, Avignon, and Rome vis-à-vis Papal Legate Bertrand du Pouget (1327–34).

Figure 7 Bolognese Illuminator. Abbey Bible: Psalm 97, The Nativity (in initial C) with choirs of Dominicans and Franciscans, c. 1250 – 62. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum, MS 107, fol. 224r.



Focusing on narrative painting, the essay opens with a passage from *Canzoniere* by Petrarch and it is fitting that this last essay should be an exploration of law and religion as these were two of the most important topics studied and taught at the University. The art reflects the political importance of Bologna, during this period, and she notes that, at the highest level of religious authority, these manuscripts were used to influence others with regard to complex political and religious ideology. The catalogue then closes with seventy-one gorgeous plates, each reproduced in excellent colour and quality.

Ultimately, through Kennedy's careful editing and curating, *Medieval Bologna* provides readers with a beautiful view of a thriving 13th – and 14th - century Italian hub of creativity. The high production value of the catalogue reinforces the logical that a book *about* books should be so luxurious. Every detail has clearly been thought through from the dusty rose flyleaf to the glossy gold lettering on the front cover to the elegant typeface used. The quality of the essays is also a shining feature of this catalogue, at times offering new insights into the methodology of art history as it relates to books and at other times probing deeply the style and aesthetics of these objects as a means of better understanding the socio-political and religious contexts in which they were made. This collection of words and images does justice to the rich historical tradition of book production and use in medieval Bologna and makes fresh an area of art history that promises exciting new intellectual pathways for scholars to explore. 🐼