

Media Review

Medicamenta: A Virtual Exhibition with Stories of Diseases and Remedies in Antique Books at the University of Padua (Italy)

Enhancing ancient books? With a virtual exhibition you can.

It is the challenge accepted by the Library of Pharmaceutical and Pharmacological Sciences of the University of Padua (Italy),¹ which presents on the web *Medicamenta* (<http://mostre.cab.unipd.it/medicamenta/en/1/home>).

In the 1920s the library received a valuable collection of richly illustrated ancient books on medical and pharmacological topics from the Botanical Garden of Padua, the world's most ancient botanical garden, created in 1545.²

This heritage was the starting point for building a virtual presentation path, which takes place according to various strands chosen for the interest they can arouse in the visitor, even if extraneous to the discipline, and which illustrates the citations of the texts with over 350 images. Some of these have been selected for a colouring book, online too, both for younger readers and for the curious adult who can have fun giving colour to an illustration that has a few centuries of life, in the manner of the ancient miniaturists. The colouring book was inspired by the experiences of the libraries of Oxford and Trento and of the contest sponsored by the New York Academy of Medicine.³

A timeline permits One to scroll through the main stages of ancient medicine on a bird's flight, from mythological representations to the great classics, Hippocrates and Galen, from the conquests of the Renaissance anatomy, up to the Seventeenth century acquisitions of physiology and the development of the clinical medicine in the Eighteenth century.

The virtual visitor can also follow the evolution of unofficial medicine, expressed by books of 'secrets' and their recipes that recall the witches' potions. This is the cure for epilepsy that can be read in the *Thesaurus pauperum* by Pietro Spano of the Thirteenth century: 'Take the frog and make an incision with a knife on the back, cut the lung and place it in a leaf of cabbage; cook in a pot which has never been used and give the powder to an epileptic when the illness appears, with strong wine, and if there is no healing on the first attempt, administer as many times as necessary and there will be healing without consequences.'

The ancient books on display also show attitudes and historical remedies against the great epidemics of plague, syphilis and smallpox. It is possible to scroll the work of Girolamo Fracastoro dated 1530, who gave the name to syphilis with a mythological tale in which the disease is a punishment of Apollo against the presumption of the shepherd Syphilus; or the visitor can observe the coloured illustrations of the work of Jenner who introduced the smallpox vaccine in 1796.

The chapter on thermalism reproduces the beautiful tables of *De Balneis*, a Venetian anthology of 1553 that collects together ancient writings on the subject, including those on the Euganean baths of Bartolomeo da Montagnana or Jacopo Dondi dall'Orologio.

¹ The exhibition was developed thanks to the passion of its collaborators, from librarians, the curator is Cecilia Furlani, to Andrea Pagetta of the Department of Pharmaceutical and Pharmacological Sciences at the University of Padua, who digitised the books, the support team for *Movio* of the University Library Centre, Lorisa Andreoli and Gianluca Drago, and the scientific supervision of Eugenio Ragazzi, professor in the Department of Pharmaceutical and Pharmacological Sciences at the University of Padua.

² UNESCO World Heritage List: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/824/video>.

³ <http://library.nyam.org/colorourcollections/>.

The anatomical illustrations make show of the body, in particular with the attitude of wonder, expressed with the imaginative diversity of the so-called ‘monsters’ in the baroque masterpiece *De monstrorum caussis, natura, et differentiis* (1634) by Fortunio Liceti. A video illustrates the *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) by Andrea Vesalius, with the extraordinary didactic invention of the overlapping sheets of anatomical parts of the body.

The pharmacy prepares remedies for diseases, and the second section of the virtual exhibition investigates its history, ingredients, techniques and recipes. It starts from the technical skills of the great Arab distillers, accepted and further developed by the Salernitan Medical School, passes through the scientific turning point of the Renaissance, to arrive at the advent of chemistry from the seventeenth century onwards.

One section deals with the profession of the pharmacist and explains historical and normative indications of cultural and ethical preparation, such as that found in the *Compendium aromatariorum* by Saladino d’Ascoli, of the mid-fourteenth century: the pharmacist must not be too young, arrogant or conceited, nor a womaniser, ‘*mulieribus deditus*’ (a wife was instead recommended). He must refrain from gambling, wine and parties, and should be quite ‘*studiosus, sollicitus, placabilis, & honestus, timens Deum, et conscientiam suam. Sit rectus, iustus, pius, et maxime ad pauperos. . . quia habet tractare de vita hominum*’, that is, the most important thing in the world. He must not speculate on the price, nor administer, either for love, for fear or for money, abortive or poisonous medicines, nor adulterate them.

Finally, the theriac could not be absent, which for centuries was the queen of remedies and an antidote with origins that are lost in the legendary history of Mithradates, king of Pontus. Its composition was so complex, for the preparation time and the number of ingredients, including the valuable vipers of the Euganean Hills, that Antonio De Sgobbis in his *Universale theatro farmaceutico* (1682) narrates it as a public show, closely supervised by the licencing authorities.

The exhibition project started with the reconnaissance of the ancient books collection. In the 1920s the Botanical Garden began renovations of the buildings. In an effort to rejuvenate the collections and make room, the historical collection of the library was dismembered: only strictly botanical books were kept at the Garden while the others were donated to other university institutes. Medical books were donated to the brand-new Institute of Pharmacology, which in 1919 inherited a century and a half of history from the *Gabinetto di Materia Medica*; or, better, ‘The history of the Pharmacological School of Padua began with the Chair of Simples which Francesco Bonafede inaugurated in 1533’⁴ at the Botanical Garden.

The Library of Pharmaceutical and Pharmacological Sciences checked the handwritten lists of the transferred books and reconstructed the original collection in the catalogue. This process, apparently simple, turned out to be quite complex, since very few specific documents were available regarding the provenance of the historical material. Technically, an ownership note for each book has been included in the catalogue with the date of donation and the relationship to the owner: Università degli Studi <Padova> Orto Botanico.⁵

Some of the transferred books could also be found in the handwritten catalogue of Giovanni Marsili, who was the prefect of the Botanical Garden of Padua from 1760 to his death in 1795. He was a passionate bibliophile and kept a rich collection of books at

⁴ L. Sabbatani, *L’Istituto di farmacologia della Università di Padova* (La Garangola, 1922), 399.

⁵ [http://catalogo.unipd.it/F/?func=find-c&ccl.term=POS=Orto Botanico+and+WNA=P0208](http://catalogo.unipd.it/F/?func=find-c&ccl.term=POS=Orto+Botanico+and+WNA=P0208).

his home in the Garden. Acquired subsequently, it would constitute the original core of the library. The Library of Pharmaceutical and Pharmacological Sciences reconstructed the original collection of Marsili in the catalogue.⁶

The peculiarities of the collection became clear during the cataloguing of the antique books and gave the idea of the exhibition. The University Library System of Padua recently proposed a series of exhibitions⁷ to enhance its collections and the repository of digitised copies, *Phaidra*.⁸ The exhibitions have been realised with *MOVIO*,⁹ an open source kit for staging virtual online exhibitions developed by the *Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico delle biblioteche italiane* (ICCU).

The work of this digital resource has been a challenge for our institution. Some difficulties were encountered while planning the sections of the digital exhibition, which had to be straightforward in order to be arranged within both a timeline and specific selected topics. After a first screening of the ancient book consistency of our library, books had to be selected which were most representative of the arguments but considered also the criterion of rarity in the general web panorama. Attention therefore has been focused on suggesting to the reader a guided path that could inspire curiosity on specific themes that characterise the peculiarity of the cultural heritage of the Botanical Garden of Padua within the evolution of pharmacological science.

As an aid to a good navigation, we suggest the motto taken by the great Venetian typographer Aldo Manuzio, represented by the anchor and the dolphin: *festina lente* (more haste, less speed).

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⁶ <http://catalogo.unipd.it/F/?func=find-c&ccl.term=POS=Marsili+and+WNA=P0208>.

⁷ <http://mostre.cab.unipd.it/medicamenta/en/61/other-exhibitions-of-the-library-system>.

⁸ <https://phaidra.cab.unipd.it/>.

⁹ <http://www.movio.beniculturali.it/index.php?en/1/home>.