

EXHIBITS

# The Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture

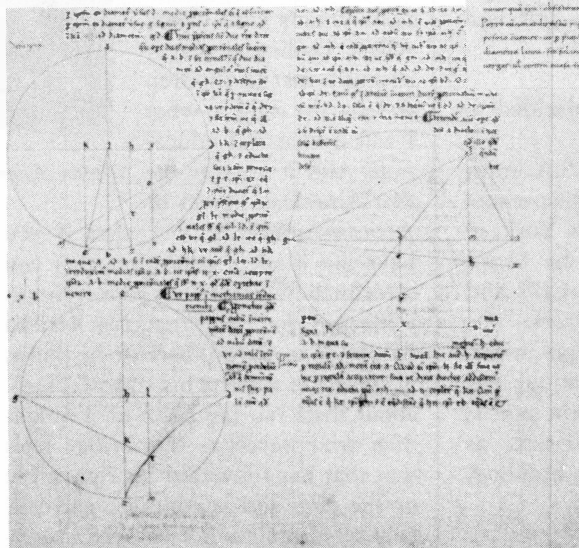
In early January 1993, an exhibit of more than two hundred items chosen from the collections of the first modern research library, the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, opened at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The exhibit, entitled "Rome Reborn: The Vatican Library and Renaissance Culture," demonstrates that the Vatican was at the center of the explosion of learning and culture associated with the Renaissance rediscovery of ancient Classical learning in the aftermath of the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1437-45). The manuscripts, books, maps, and other items are selected to show an aspect of Vatican policy that is not well known—the decision of the Renaissance Popes, starting with Nicholas V in 1451, to vigorously promote the revival of antique learning, especially Greek science and art.

The exhibit, by laying evidence before the public in the form of the Library's original manuscripts and books which launched modern science, Renaissance perspective, and polyphonic music—some spectacularly illustrated by great Renaissance artists such as Ghirlandaio—puts to rest the fundamental myth of the Enlightenment, that Renaissance learning and creativity in the arts and science were somehow "secular" accomplishments in opposition to a "reactionary" Church.

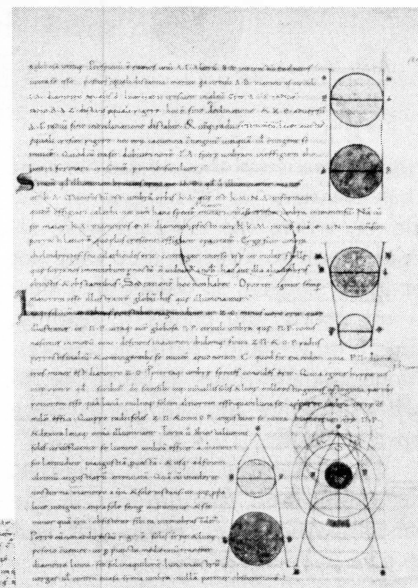
The items in the show, selected and catalogued by non-Vatican linked American scholars, include the first translation from Greek into Latin of certain works by Archimedes, which was sponsored by Pope Nicholas V (the Pope who publicly announced that Nicolaus of Cusa was made a cardinal). In 1453 Cusanus dedicated his *On Mathematical Complements*, a critique of Archimedes, to this Pope in gratitude for the translation. The works of Archimedes survive at all only by virtue of three manuscripts,

two of which are now lost, but were translated into Latin in the Papal court and preserved later in the Vatican Library. There is also an elegant series of manuscripts of mathematical and optical works by Euclid, Ptolemy, and others, as well as a tenth-century Latin version of Plato's *Timaeus* with wonderfully colored diagrams.

A copy of Apollonius' *Conics*, all but unknown in the West until the fifteenth century, is displayed in the exhibit. Besides containing a parchment manuscript of Euclid's *Elements* dating from the ninth century, there is an incredibly beautiful copy of Eu-



Vatican Library/Library of Congress



Vatican Library/Library of Congress

Assembling Greek scientific works. Above: Plato's *Timaeus*, Latin translation and commentary by Calcidius, tenth century. Left: Works of Archimedes, Latin translation by William of Moerbeke, c.1270.

clid's *Optics* from 1458 on parchment with a miniature illustration of a street lined with buildings painted in true Renaissance perspective.

The Renaissance artist Piero della Francesca (d.1492) researched his great geometrical works on *Perspective* and the *Five Regular Solids* from manuscripts in the Vatican Library. A beautiful edition of his work on the *Five Regular Solids* in Latin from the 1480's is opened to a page showing an icosahedron inscribed in a cube facing a cube in an octahedron. In terms of

astronomy, the exhibit contains the oldest and best manuscript of early Greek astronomical works, as well as Ptolemy's famous *Almagest* on a parchment edition from the ninth century. There are also Arab and Persian astronomical works from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Beautiful and large versions of Ptolemy's maps are laid open.

There is a no less impressive collection of books and manuscripts on the life sciences—medicine, botany, and Renaissance anatomy.

## Music

Contrary to popular misconceptions, the music manuscripts of the Papal choir demonstrate that the Renaissance Vatican choir was at the center of developing, promoting, and encouraging polyphonic music, along with preserving chant. From the fifteenth to the middle of the sixteenth century, the singers in the Papal choir included such great composers as Guillaume Dufay (c.1400-1474) and Josquin des Prez (c.1440-1521), the greatest composer of the late fifteenth century. The polyphonic manuscripts in the Sistine Collection demonstrate that the great



Vatican Library/Library of Congress

*Promoting polyphonic music. Right: Polyphonic hymns and Magnificats, c.1538, by Italian composer Constanzo Festa, who sang in the Papal choir from 1517 to 1545. Above: Constitution of the Sistine Chapel singers, 1545, outlined duties and code of behavior for personal and professional lives.*

composers of sacred music in the Renaissance celebrated God through polyphonic music as part of the liturgy. Much of the polyphony preserved provides musical settings for the ordinary of the mass.

At the point in the mass called the offertory, it became the custom for the singers to perform motets, polyphonic settings of any number of religious pieces. There are also manuscripts of many settings of the Magnificat—the canticle of the Virgin Mary, sung at vespers—and settings of hymns. One source dating from the late fifteenth century is a treasury combining hymns and Magnificats with motets. The Papal singers had their own library, now containing six hundred items, containing everything from documents relating to their daily lives to manuscripts of chant and polyphony.

## Other Gems

Among the stunning other items in the show are several closely associated with the Council of Florence of 1439: such as the first Coptic, Armenian, and Ethiopian manuscripts to enter the Vatican library, a liturgy book which belonged to Isidor of Kiev (who tried to bring the Renaissance to Moscow). A major section is devoted to the efforts of Jesuit missionaries in China to show the coherence between Christianity and Confucian morality. There

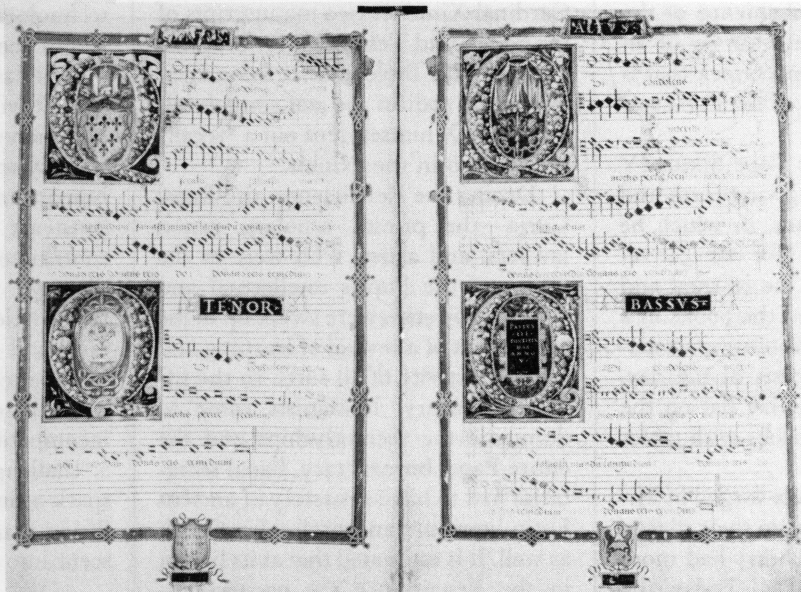
is also an illuminated manuscript of the plays of Plautus, a Latin comedy writer whose works were found in Germany by Cusanus and brought to Rome in 1429. This became the basis for launching secular drama in the Renaissance. Galileo's 1612 drawings of sunspots seen through the telescope; Henry VIII's love letters to Ann Bol-eyn (in possession of the library since the mid-sixteenth century); the Urbino Bible, a two-volume work the size of a coffee table, with spectacular illustrations, dating from 1476; prayer books written on palm leaves, from Sri Lanka.

There is a copy of the twelfth-century Latin translation of Ibn Sina's (Avicenna) medical encyclopedia illustrated with miniatures accurately depicting patient problems. The exhibit contains famed manuscripts, beautifully illustrated, of Euclid, Plato, Homer, Ptolemy, Petrarch, Cicero, Virgil, Thucydides, Alberti, etc.

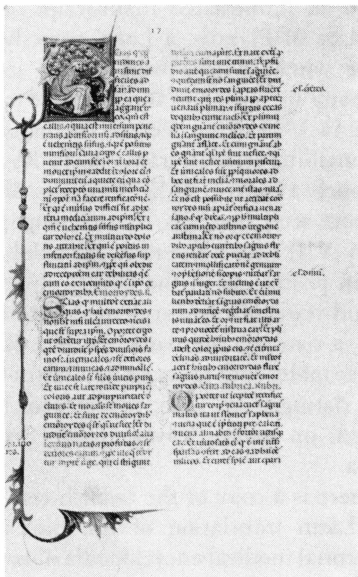
## Revival of Rome

The creation of the Vatican Library, and especially the building of St. Peter's, was an integral part of reviving the city of Rome which began the Renaissance as a collapsed city and cultural backwater compared to Florence. The population had fallen to 20,000 and was dominated by feuding noble families, terrorized by gangs and dev-

astated by malaria and other diseases. When the papacy returned to Rome from Avignon in 1377, the French party at the Papal court elected its own Pope. This Great Schism lasted for thirty-eight years until 1415; in 1409 the situation became worse when the Council of Pisa elected a third Pope. The spiritual authority of the Church was at an all-time low.



Vatican Library/Library of Congress



Broadening knowledge of medicine, geography. Above: Ibn Sina (Avicenna), medical encyclopedia. Right: Map of Chios shows “the tomb of the bard Homer.”



Vatican Library/Library of Congress

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The conception of the library was to throw open the windows and let in some fresh spring air by creating a public or Vatican center of learning opened to scholars of whatever religion, as opposed to a purely Papal or private one. Humanist scholarship, centered on the recovery and explication of Classical texts, was brought to the center of Christendom. Pope Nicholas V (1447-55) described his purpose in a letter to Enoch of Ascoli in 1451: “for the common convenience of the learned we may have a library of all books both in Latin and Greek that is worthy of the dignity of the Pope and the Apostolic See.”

Two decades later Pope Sixtus IV issued a famous Bull giving form and structure to the library, in which he again cited the aim “for the convenience and honor of the learned and studious.” He installed the books in a custom-built suite of rooms, spectacularly decorated by artists of the day. The books themselves lay flat on the *banchi* or wooden benches with tables attached.

Chains were specially forged in Milan to attach the books to their places. By Sixtus’ death the library had more than 3,600 manuscripts. Today the

Vatican Library includes 60,000 or more Western manuscripts, 8,000 books printed before 1500, and vast numbers of non-Western books and manuscripts.

Borrowers recorded the books they took and returned in simple notebooks. The Washington exhibit contains the entries by Pico della Mirandola, when he borrowed and returned the works of the famous English Franciscan Roger Bacon. The library lent Cardinal Ximenes two manuscripts of the Greek Old Testament for his great edition of the Bible in three languages. When the codices did not come back, Pope Leo X himself sent out a “recall” notice, also in the exhibit.

During the Renaissance, the Papal Curia—the priests, scholars, canon lawyers, and artists who were at the center of the Pope’s intellectual and artistic projects—were swept up in the excitement of a revival of learning and creative activity of all sorts. In the fifteenth century, humanists came to dominate the secretaryships and the entire Papal bureaucracy. Papal secretaries had to have a mastery of ancient Latin literature and preferably Greek as well. It is estimated that at its height in the Renaissance the papacy em-

ployed more than one hundred humanist scholars.

### The East, Near and Far

The strategic outreach of the Vatican during the Renaissance is represented in two other sections of the exhibit. One section displays treasured manuscripts from Isidor of Kiev to the Bulgarian Czar, from an early Cairo edition of the Gospel of Luke in Arabic, to an Ethiopian Psalter to early fragments of Arabic manuscripts in Spain. An edition of the Gospel of Matthew in Persian is displayed next to a Gregorian *Calendar for All Eternity* in Armenian. The other section is a most intriguing record of the great Christian humanist missionaries in East Asia.

Beginning in the 1540’s, Italian, Portuguese, and later Spanish, German, and French missionaries carried Western ideas and technologies to the Orient. Saint Francis Xavier landed in Japan in 1549. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) established a mission in southern China in the 1580’s. The exhibit contains a rare and beautifully executed Chinese portrait of Matteo Ricci, the most famous of all the Jesuit missionaries to East Asia, a manuscript letter of appreciation to the Church from Japanese officials in 1621, and an extensive collection of maps of Asia from the Vatican Library. Printed Chinese translations of Western science and technologies from the early seventeenth century are also on display.

The lasting cultural impact of the exhibit will be to bury in the cemetery of dishonesty the attempt of twentieth-century academics to replace Christian humanism with their invented false construct of “secular humanism.” It contributes considerable evidence to disprove the false dichotomies between science and religion, between faith and reason, and the overall Enlightenment myth that Classical learning, art, science, and Christianity are incompatible. And in so doing, it poses a challenge to Christians today to spark a similar Renaissance capable of lifting mankind out of its current descent into a New Dark Age.

—Warren A.J. Hamerman