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Medical Fore-edge Decorations and Paintings

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Fore-edge decorations on manuscripts date back to the 10th century. Decorations can be seen when the book is lying on its side, a custom of the 15th and 16th centuries, and should not be confused with fore-edge paintings. Fore-edge paintings are not visible when the book is closed, but when the leaves are slanted or fanned, a beautiful miniature landscape appears. Fore-edge paintings are usually covered by gold-leaf or marbling.

Fore-edge Decorations

The practice of using the fore-edge of a book for identification originated from necessity, a method of establishing proud ownership. Books of the 15th and 16th centuries were usually large and placed upon their sides with the fore-edge exposed. This edge afforded the owner an area of the book upon which he could inscribe the title, his initials, name, or a favorite painting for identification without removing the book from the shelf and opening it to find out the nature of the work inside. An example of an early fore-edge decoration is the silver-gilt and jeweled binding of the Morgan Library’s Romanesque illuminated missal presented by Abbot Bertold about 1217 to his monastery of Weingarten. Included is a portrait of him standing with his crozier among the patron saints of the abbey.

One of the most outstanding and valuable collections of fore-edge decorations was a part of the famous Pillone Library.1 The books belonged to the Pillone family of Belluno, and were collected during the 15th and 16th centuries. The decorations were painted by the celebrated artist Cesare Vecellio, a cousin of Titian. The collection of 172 volumes are all in their original bindings, and remained together until the 19th century when sold to Sir Thomas Brooke. The earliest volume was dated 1470. Many of the volumes in this collection are classified as incunabula, ie, printed before the year 1500. Cesare Vecellio decorated the fore-edges, during the middle of the 16th century, either with portraits of the authors or with other subjects appropriate to the books. The library was collected over a period of approximately 100 years by two generations of the Pillone family: Antonio and Odorico. Antonio was chiefly interested in the classics, and his son Odorico was particularly interested in philosophy and medicine. Of the original 172 volumes, fewer than a dozen were related to medicine.

Two first editions of medical incunabula from the Pillone collection were written by the famous physician and teacher of Padua, Michel Giovanni Savonarola (1384-1476). These two editions, De pulsibus, urinis et egestionibus (Bologna, Henricus de Harlem and J. Walbeck, 8 May 1487), and Canonica de febris (Bologna, Dionysius Bertchus, 8 Mar. 1487) are bound together in wooden boards, morocco backed, blind-stamped line patterns and small tooled decorations, with two metal clasps. Savonarola is important not only in himself, but as a living link between the 14th century and the Renaissance. Savonarola was physician to Nicholas d’Este. Most of the tracts of these volumes are concerned with fevers and consumption, but also include Savonarola’s well-known writings on all the baths and mineral springs of Italy. Savonarola is credited with the first incunabula on balneology. Savonarola’s work enjoyed great popularity especially in Italy, where it remained in favor until

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well into the 16th century. The main sources of his writings are the Arabic medical classics. The fore-edge decoration by Vecellio is an outstanding portrait of Savonarola with the name M. Sav. at the bottom of the fore-edge (Fig 1).

Another incunabulum belonging to the Pillone Library was written by Junianus Maius, entitled De priscorum proprietate verborum (Venice, Johannes Rubeus Vercellensis February 23, 1490). Maius' work is an important dictionary of words, embracing all branches of medicine and science. The book includes historic Latin medical terms with their explanations. This edition was derived from the first edition of Mathias Moravus of Naples, 1475. This volume has the original binding in full brown morocco leather over wooden boards, and stamped with the decoration of the Belluno workshop with three of the four metal and leather clasps well preserved. The fore-edge decoration by Cesare Vecellio is of the author in a red robe with an ermine collar (Fig 2).

The rare edition of Hugo Senensis' commentary

FIGURE 1 (left). Fore-edge decorations of Michel Giovanni Savonarola in a red robe painted by Cesare Vecellio with initials "M. Sav." for identification, at the bottom of the fore-edge. FIGURE 2 (center). Fore-edge decoration of Junianus Maius in a red robe with a white ermine collar painted by Cesare Vecellio. Across the fore-edge and over the portrait are painted the name "Junianus," and at the bottom the initials "Juni. M." are inscribed. FIGURE 3 (right). Fore-edge decoration of Hugo Senensis in a black robe and turban with a door and columns of a building in the background. At the bottom of the fore-edge are the faint initials "UGO. S." standing for Ugo Da Siena. Beneath the above initials is the abbreviation "AVIC" for Avicenna which identifies the contents of the book, the Canon of Avicenna.
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FIGURE 4 (left). Fore-edge decorations of various birds and animals painted on a faded red background by Cesare Vecellio with the initials "ARIS" (Aristotle) at the bottom of the fore-edge.

FIGURE 5 (center). Fore-edge decoration of Niccolo Leoniceno in a blue robe, trimmed in red against a red, white and blue background. At the bottom of the fore-edge are the initials "Nic. L." (Niccolo Leoniceno) painted in black. The portrait is by Cesare Vecellio, a cousin of Titian.

FIGURE 6 (right). The fore-edge decorations of an unidentified physician with a white beard, red robe and turban against a blue, green, and faded red background was painted by Cesare Vecellio.

Two other rare medical incunabula from the Pillone Library are bound together. The first book is Aristotelis, De animalibus (Venetiis, Iohannes and Gregorius de gregoriis, 18 Nov 1492). This is the second edition of Aristotle’s most important scientific book. Aristotle initiated the scientific classification of animals, outlined a theory of evolution, gave the first scientific account of comparative anatomy as well as presenting important theories of heredity and generation. This volume is bound together with

on the canon of the influential physician of Avicenna is another medical incunabulum included in the Pillone Library. This edition, Expositio in primam fen primi canonis Avicennae, (Ferrare, Andree Galli [Belfortis], August 13, 1491), has the original Belluno binding of wooden boards. The Latin text is followed by a tract on fevers by the 15th century physician, Antonio Cittandini. The fore-edge portrait of Hugo Senensis by Cesare Vecellio is well preserved (Fig 3).
Celsius, Aulus Aurelius Cornelius, *De medicina*, (Venetiis, Ioannes rubus Vercellensis, July 8, 1493). This is the third edition of Celsius (25 BC-50 AD), an important medical historian. *De medicina* consists of eight books, the first four of which deal with diseases treated by diet and regimen. The last four describe diseases treated by drugs and surgery. The third book contains the first adumbration of heart disease which became the canon of subsequent knowledge in antiquity. The works were bound together in half-stamped leather, oak boards, with the remains of the two clasps. The fore-edge decoration by Cesare Vecellio illustrates various animals with the name “Aris” (Aristotle) (Fig 4).

Another volume of Celsius’ third edition, (July 8, 1493), *De medicina*, is bound with Niccolo Leoniceno’s, *In libros Galeni Greco in Latinam Linvam a se Translatos Praefatio Communis, Galeni Ars Medicinalis*, (Ferrariae, per Ioannem Macciochium Bondenum, October 9, 1509). Niccolo Leoniceno (1428-1524) was a medical humanist and professor of medicine at Padua, Bologna, and Ferrara. He was an elegant Latinist and made a famous translation of the Aphorism of Hippocrates, and an accurate translation of the works of Galen. He also wrote one of the earliest tracts on syphilis in 1497, and is esteemed for his correction of the botanical errors in the natural history of Pliny (Leonicenus: *De Plinii et aliorum in medicina erroribus*, Ferrara, 1492). The present work includes Galen’s *In Hippocratis Aphorismos* which replaces his *De Differentiis Februm* contained in the first edition of 1508. The fore-edge decoration by Vecellio is a portrait of Leonicenus in a blue robe, trimmed in red (Fig 5).

The Articella is a valuable collection of text books compiled in the Salernitan epoch. This collection was first edited anonymously, then by Francesco Argilagnes of Valencia, and then by Gregorius a Vulpe of Vicenza which is the volume included in the Pillone Library: *Articella. Ista sunt opera que in hoc preclaro libro continentur* (Venice, June 14, 1513). This edition contains the *Liber Isagoga* of Johannitus; *De pulsibus* of Philaretti; *Libelli Theophili De urinis*; Hippocrates’ *Aphorisms*; the Galenic commentary of Hippocrates’ *Edidemiorum Libri*: commentary on Galen’s *Ars Medica*, and several other medical historic texts. The fore-edge decoration by Vecellio is of an unidentified physician in a red robe (Fig 6).

The 1529 Latin edition of Galen’s works is also included in the Pillone collection with a beautiful portrait of Galen painted by Vecellio on the fore-edge. This Latin edition of 27 of Galen’s important medical texts is illustrated with commentaries by an impressive list of scholars, including Erasmus, Linacre, Copo, Laurentianus, and Leonicenus. Galen (131-201 AD), the greatest Greek physician after Hippocrates, and founder of experimental physiology, “was the most voluminous of all ancient writers, and the greatest of the theorists and systematists.” Galen’s observations, dissections and descriptions became gospel and remained unchallenged for 1400 years (Fig 7).

The *Natural History* of Pliny The Elder (23-79 AD) is also included in the Pillone Library, and was
MEDICAL FORE-EDGE DECORATIONS AND PAINTINGS

When a book with a fore-edge painting is opened to the first page, the slanted surface will lie to the right. On the other hand if the book is opened from the rear displaying the index, the edges to be painted will lie to the left. Most fore-edge paintings are painted on the slanted surface to the right. A few are painted when the surface is slanted to the left. As Weber has pointed out, most of these are inferior, and may have been painted by imitators who had not thoroughly investigated the practice of fore-edge painting.

Examples of medical fore-edge paintings are extremely rare, and the author has found but two. The first is a fore-edge painting of the New College of Physicians on The Iliad of Homer, volume 1, rendered into English blank verse by Edward, Earl of Derby, fifth edition, revised (Fig 9a). These two volumes were published by John Murray, London, 1865. The second volume of The Iliad of Homer has a clear fore-edge painting of the Royal College of Surgeons (Fig 9b). Both volumes are bound in red morocco leather, and were presented to Henry Ward by Sir Matthew Ridley as a prize for Greek and Latin grammar. Henry Ward’s bookplates are on the inside of both front covers.

The artist may paint two entirely separate landscapes, one on each fore-edge slanting in different directions. This is called a double fore-edge painting. Double fore-edge paintings are extremely rare. Of three thousand fore-edge paintings examined by Weber during his lifetime, only 2 to 3 percent were double fore-edge paintings. The originator of the double fore-edge painting is unknown. Weber had never found a double fore-edge painting before the

Fore-edge Paintings

The fore-edge of a book is opposed to the back-edge where the leaves are tightly bound together. Fore-edge paintings are all painted by hand. This art is not new, but has flourished for three centuries. Books with fore-edge paintings are costly and vary in price from 50 dollars for poor copies to several thousand dollars for finer paintings on rare volumes. There is considerable controversy pertaining to the originator of fore-edge paintings, but this art was most likely developed by Stephen and Thomas Lewis. Charles Kelloway, of the Guildhall Library in London, identifies Stephen and Thomas Lewis, brother bookbinders in London, as the originators of the art of fore-edge painting. He refers to nine surviving examples of their fore-edge work. The first signed and dated fore-edge painting is on a Bible published in 1651. The painting consists of a family coat-of-arms and is signed S. (Stephen) T. (Thomas) Lewis in the year 1653.

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latter half of the 18th century, and most were painted between 1785 and 1835. The execution of the double painting was made in Halifax at the time of William Edwards, but most were painted during the time of Thomas Edwards, between 1800 and 1835. Only a dozen or more double fore-edge paintings have been found after the death of Thomas Edwards, the latest dated volume being 1868. As Weber stated, the double fore-edge painting may be designated a "lost art."

This author has obtained only one double fore-edge volume of medical interest. These fore-edge paintings commemorate Edward Jenner, and are painted on a book Poems, Chiefly Scottish by Robert Burns: with an account of his "Life and Character," two volumes in one. The boards are straight grain, green morocco leather, delicately gilt-tooled with fillets and pointilles, inner dentelles gilt with doublures and endleaves of red moire silk (Fig 10 a, b). This book was published at Perth, 1813, in a binding attributed to Charles Lewis; with early book plates of John Montagu, and Nancy Astor (Lady Astor), Cliveden Library, with three inscriptions: 1818, 1852, and 1920 (Fig 10 c). The double fore-edge paintings are fully titled—"The Chantry Cottage, Berkeley, where Edward Jenner lived and practiced" (Fig 10b): "Summer-house at Berkeley, known as the 'Temple of Vaccinia,' in which Jenner did many vaccinations" (Fig 10d).

The Edwardses were craftsmen, bookbinders, and they maintained a famous book shop. Horne attributes unique styles to William Edwards. First, "a new method of ornamenting vellum bindings with exquisite drawings," and another, "the method of gilding upon marbled leaves and decorating the edges of the leaves with exquisite paintings. We have seen landscapes thus executed with a degree of beauty and fidelity that are truly astonishing, and when held up to the light in an oblique direction, the scenery appears as delicate as in the finest production of the pencil."

Weber describes one other extremely rare type of fore-edge painting. To Weber's and the author's knowledge, there is only one example of a two-way painting. The artist painted the edges with the book opened in the middle. One painting is on half of the leaves fanned to the left, and another painting is on half of the leaves fanned to the right.

The technique of fore-edge painting and gilding is of particular interest. The fore-edge is usually scraped and burnished. The pages are then solidly clamped in the fanned out position, and then carefully painted with as dry a brush as possible. The brush is held perpendicularly rather than sideways because of the strong tendency for the color to run sideways. When the paint is dry, the
clamps are removed and the edges slightly burnished before gilding. One method of applying the gold gilding includes a "mixture of red bole or chalk and black lead, well ground and reduced by water to a fluid consistence, after having added to it a few drops of muriatic acid or vitrol. The size used by some is made from the white of an egg in five times the quantity of water well beaten together; but that most generally used is from parchment or vellum shavings boiled in water to extract the gluten. If too strong or thick, add water, then warm it to melt the size. When wanting to gild, watch first whether the paper is sized or not. If not, it will consequently require a stronger size gilding than if it were sized paper. Scrape the fore-edge smooth, and burnish with agate. With a broad flat camel's hair pencil, or a piece of soft sponge, a coat of size is laid evenly on the surface. The gold leaf is cut to required size. Apply gold to surface, then burnish the gold evenly."6

Another method to conceal the fore-edge painting is by marbling the edges. "The marbling is usually done by placing the book edges on a marble pattern prepared in a vat. Colors are floated onto a layer of size in the vat, and the patterns are made by stirring and arranging the colors with combs or with other instruments. The book-edges are then lightly rested on the marbled pattern which is transferred to them in its variegated design."7

This new experience in book-lore may stimulate interest and increase respect for this unusual way of displaying elegance to a book. After whetting the appetite, the selection of an historical menu may encourage further pursuit in this mysterious art.

REFERENCES
1 Hobson ARA: The Pillone Library. The Book Collector. London, Spring, 1958 (pp 27-37)
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