

# Wonders of Nature at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana

Marie LEZOWSKI

## ABSTRACT

The Biblioteca Ambrosiana, which opened to the public in 1609, is one of Europe's first public libraries. Its founder, the cardinal and archbishop Federico Borromeo (1564-1631), sought to recreate a "temple to the muses" in Milan, one that was devoted, on the model of Alexandria, to scholarly reading and writing by bringing together books, scholars paid by the library and a printing press. The spearhead of Catholic culture in seventeenth-century Europe, the Ambrosiana was neither an observatory nor a place for scientific experimentation. However, its collection of objects and books, along with its publications, shed light on the wonders of creation. Federico Borromeo reinterpreted the humanist "chamber of wonders" in the context of the Counter-Reformation.



Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Ms. D 140 inf., Al-Ġahiz, Tractatus de Animalibus (Kitāb al-hayawān), f. 10r. fifteenth century, acquired by the Ambrosiana before 1631.



Jan Brueghel, *Allegory of Fire*, between 1608 and 1610. Source: Wikimedia Commons <https://goo.gl/u6NRfb>

On December 8, 1609, one of Europe's first public libraries was inaugurated in Milan, the Biblioteca Ambrosiana. Its creator, the cardinal and archbishop of Milan Federico Borromeo, brought together a collection which was universal in its aims: manuscripts and print in all languages, along with the objets d'art and curiosity objects that make up a museum. Paid scholars called "doctors" worked there full-time; the vast reading room was open to the scholars of Europe, from as far away as the Levant. Finally, a printing press disseminated the works of doctors throughout the Republic of Letters.

During the years of its creation, Borromeo had not yet clearly determined the role he wanted to give the natural sciences at the Ambrosiana. He followed with great interest the beginnings of the Academy of the *Lincei* ("Lynx-eyed"), which was founded in Rome in 1603 to promote the sciences of observation. Fascinated since childhood by the spectacles of nature, he was an avid reader of treatises of astronomical popularization, and had several telescopes for his own use. He admired the work of the Dane Tycho Brahe, who in 1576 founded the observatory of Uraniborg, which also had a library and printing press. During the months in which it was founded, Borromeo dreamed of a planetarium for the Ambrosiana, where mechanisms could reproduce the movement of stars—a dream that never got past the planning stage. However, the role ascribed to the natural sciences gradually diminished. The "doctors," who were clerics discharged from the duties of ministry in order to read and write, were all theologians and philologists specializing in poetry, history, liturgy, and Eastern languages. Borromeo planned on calling a mathematician to the library, but ultimately abandoned the idea.

These hesitations highlight a major contradiction characteristic of science in Counter-Reformation Europe. While remaining open to the spirit of investigation, Borromeo was highly attached to the authority of Aristotle, who was the basis for the medieval natural philosophy that was being shaken by the new empirical method. In his province of Milan he led the fight against superstition, witchcraft, and magic, as requested by the Council of Trent (1545-1563). He nevertheless believed that the natural sciences were always at risk of drifting towards alchemy and necromancy. A member of the Sacred Congregation of the Index, he censured books that went contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church, and followed the positions of Rome in matters of astronomy: despite his obvious interest for the work of Galileo, with whom he was in correspondence, he distanced himself when the Index began to examine his works with suspicion, before breaking off all correspondence in 1627. In the end, the Ambrosiana was neither an observatory nor a place for scientific experiments.

Nature was nevertheless highly present in the scholarly and philological publications produced by the Ambrosiana's printing press. In the research program given to doctors by Borromeo, study of the wonders of

creation was one path for gradually rising towards God and theology, the highest branch of knowledge. When doctors explored nature in their work, they were pursuing the medieval and humanist tradition that associated study and contemplation. For example, the poet Benedetto Sossago excelled at evoking landscapes, the historian Giuseppe Ripamonti at planting the decor for high drama, the theologian Antonio Rusca in offering detailed descriptions of the geography of hell, with sketches as support. Like Pico della Mirandola, they read the signs of providence in the cosmos. The same spirit is present in the collection of still lifes brought together by Borromeo for the library's museum: bouquets, spectacular landscapes, and a synthesis of creation commissioned from the Fleming Jan Brueghel (1568-1625) in four paintings, the *Allegory of the Four Elements*.

For external readers, whether they were from Milan or Europeans passing through, the library offered a mine of scientific treatises (medicine, botany, zoology, astronomy, etc.) written in all languages, from Antiquity to the early modern period. They were for the most part acquired during the founding years between 1605 and 1614. Repeating the gesture of Ptolemy's envoys from the Library of Alexandria, Borromeo's emissaries travelled across Italy (Bobbio, Naples and Southern Italy, Venice and Genoa), the Holy Roman Empire (Innsbruck, Frankfurt), Flanders (Leuven, Brussels, Antwerp), France (Paris, Lyon), and the Iberian Peninsula. The harvest of scholarly treatises was rich in the Levant, Greece (Corfu, Zante, Thessaly, Macedonia, and Crete), Tripoli (Syria), Jerusalem, Egypt, Cyprus, and Aleppo. For instance, the Ambrosiana acquired the *Book of Animals* (*Kitāb al-hayawān*) by 'Amr bin Bahr Al-Ġaḥiẓ (?-869), a work that surpassed Aristotle in its bold comparisons between animal and human behaviour, as well as in its reflection on the evolution of species.

For the seventeenth-century reader, accessing these treasures entailed overcoming two major obstacles which were common to many libraries. The first was to determine whether the library had a given work, as the Ambrosiana did not print catalogs of its collections, unlike the Sorbonne (1550) or the University of Leiden (1595). The second was to reckon with the rules of the Index, as heretical, heterodox, or immoral books were forbidden from being consulted or were censored. In 1664, a student of Trinity College traveling through the continent, Philip Skippon (1641-1691), consulted at the Ambrosiana a treatise on botany by Conrad Gessner (1516-1565), whose "magical and superstitious" passages had been crossed out with quills. Readers would also have had difficulty finding the latest scholarly works, for that was not the library's primary mission, which was first and foremost turned toward philological learning, in other words the publishing of ancient texts.

Among the naturalist works of the Ambrosiana, prominent place was given to knowledge of the New World, the Levant, and the Orient, which were being revealed to Europeans at the time. Borromeo wanted to know the populations of America and Asia, as well as the medicinal virtues of plants, stones, and ointments. This enthusiasm was specific to a period and a society: Milan was a breeding ground for missionaries, church fathers who diffused the Catholic faith in the West (Americas) and East (Asia) Indies. The library accompanied this collective ardour by acquiring numerous accounts of missions and topographical descriptions, such as *De Christiana Expeditione apud Sinas* by the Jesuit Nicolas Trigault (1577-1628), published in Antwerp and Augsburg in 1615. Moreover, the missionaries who crisscrossed Europe in search of funds and recruits regularly passed through Milan, such as the Flemish Jesuit procurators Trigault and Johann Schreck in 1616 for the mission to China. Borromeo gave them a telescope from his collection, which made its way to Chongzhen (1611-1644), the last emperor of the Ming Dynasty. In return, some of the works and natural objects from the Ambrosiana came from mission lands. The Jesuit Diego de Torres Bollo (1551-1638) sent from Paraguay a book from China, an ointment, and a few bezoars, which can be seen today in the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.

More than the "freemasonry of the telescope" (Lucien Febvre), the Ambrosiana's horizon was a Catholic Europe in expansion. Nature was studied there according to the constraints and contradictions specific to early modern Catholic science: appetite for universal knowledge, but illustration of the Catholic faith; generous collections lavishly acquired, but with a framework and research conditions limited by constant concern over orthodoxy.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

BUZZI, Franco, FERRO, Roberta, eds., *Federico Borromeo fondatore della Biblioteca Ambrosiana* (Milan/Rome: Biblioteca Ambrosiana/Bulzoni, 2005).

CATTO, Michela, SIGNOROTTO, Gianvittorio, eds., *Milano, l'Ambrosiana e la conoscenza dei Nuovi Mondi (secoli XVII-XVIII)* (Milan/Rome: Ambrosiana/Bulzoni, 2015).

LEZOWSKI, Marie, *L'abrégé du monde : une histoire sociale de la bibliothèque Ambrosienne, v. 1590-v. 1660* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015).

---

## Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/humanism-enlightenment/europe-knowledge/wonders-nature-biblioteca-ambrosiana>