

LATE MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

1350-1525

IN THE HOUGHTON LIBRARY

Roger S. Wieck

THE DEPARTMENT OF PRINTING AND GRAPHIC ARTS

Harvard College Library • Cambridge, Massachusetts



LEONARDO ARETINO BRUNI, *Epistolarum libri octo*

Italy, Florence, ca. 1440-50

Vellum, 100 leaves, 33.6 x 23 cm. Gilt white-vine title-page border and 7 large gilt white-vine initials attributed to Filippo di Matteo Torelli.

Leonardo Aretino Bruni (1369-1444), the eminent humanist, contributed greatly to the revival of Greek and Latin learning in fifteenth-century Italy. His translations into Latin of the works of Greek authors were especially important in making these texts accessible to the Latin scholar. His own writings include a *History of Florence* (for which that city granted him citizenship and exemption from taxes), biographies of Dante and Petrarch, and ten books of elegantly written letters, eight of which are contained in this handsome manuscript.

Both the decoration and the script of this volume are characteristic of those manuscripts produced in the Italian Renaissance. The script, called "humanistic," is the clear, readable handwriting developed by the humanist Poggio Bracciolini among others. The decoration, named "white-vine," consists of stems and foliage left uncolored and unshaded against a multicolored background of red, blue, green or yellow. Both the script and the decoration were based on models from Romanesque manuscripts of the eleventh and twelfth centuries that, in turn, revived Carolingian types of the ninth century. Because of their association with antiquity, humanistic script and white-vine decoration were used for classical and humanistic texts all over Italy throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The elaborate title-page border in our manuscript, attributed to the Florentine illuminator Filippo Torelli by A. C. de la Mare (on a visit to the Houghton Library in 1974), represents a later stage of white-vine illumination. Classical nude putti and birds have been introduced as a playful addition to the vines. Similar manuscripts also incorporate coats of arms, portraits and small scenes in roundels.

Finally, as indicated by an inscription on what was originally a pastedown in our book, "VESPASIANVS LIBRARIVS FLORENTINVS VENDIDIT," this manuscript was sold by the famous book dealer and stationer of Florence, Vespasiano da Bisticci. Vespasiano, originally a procurer of books for scholars and a merchant of writing supplies, expanded his business when the humanistic movement spread throughout Western Europe. To meet the demands of kings and princes, popes and cardinals for manuscripts, Vespasiano employed many different scribes who worked in their own homes or shops.

BINDING: Late xviiith-century French purple morocco, gilt.

PROVENANCE: Sold by Vespasiano da Bisticci of Florence; possibly bought by Cardinal Jean Jonffroy, Bishop of Arras and later of Albi, 1461; Chardin (his sale, Paris, 1825, lot 2128); bought by Sir Thomas Phillipps (MS 862); bought by the Library (Hofer Fund) from William H. Robinson Ltd. in 1947.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: *Houghton Library Report* 1946-47, 3; Harvard College Library, *Illuminated & Calligraphic Manuscripts*, 26, no. 84; Bond and Faye, *Supplement*, 251; Walters Art Gallery, *2,000 Years of Calligraphy*, 64, no. 46, illus.

