

ON SPACES, SURFACES, AND THRESHOLDS IN LATE MEDIEVAL VENETIAN PRINTED BOOKS: THE FIRST-TEXT PAGES IN THE 1477 DIGEST OF JUSTINIAN AND THE 1493 MALERMI BIBLE

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Introduction

Book V Chapter II of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831) carries the Latin title "Ceci tuera cela," glossed by the narrator in the English translation as "This will kill that. The book will kill the edifice... The press will kill the cathedral." Invoking this sentiment in his 2007 paper "On the Threshold: Architecture, Paratext, and Early Print Culture," director of the Warburg Institute William Sherman concludes that: "If the printed book brought an end to the age of the cathedral, one of the ways in which it did so was by becoming the building."

This paper follows Sherman's delightfully idiosyncratic historicization of the material relationship between architectural and bibliographical history into investigating what Renaissance scholar Lilian Armstrong declared "the most important composition developed to decorate the

opening of Venetian incunables... the so-called ‘architectural frontispiece’” (late-fifteenth-century Venice being “the most important center for printing in all of Europe”). It juxtaposes “one of the least well-known artistic phenomena” of late medieval Italian book history with one of its most misunderstood: the hand-illuminated architectural front page with the front page decorated by a printed architectural woodcut. In comparing the first pages of the 1477 *Digest of Justinian* (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) and the 1493 *Malermi Bible* (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4)—particularly through the lens of literary critic Gérard Genette’s notion of paratext—the paper argues against the misrecognition of hand illumination and printed ornamentation as fitting into mutually exclusionary categories of art (elite object) and artifact (mass object) respectively. Instead, to quote late Professor of Bibliography and Annmary Brown Memorial librarian Margaret Bingham Stillwell, it argues for acknowledging the unique creative features of the printing



Figure 2. *Digestum novum* by Justinian [with the *Glossa ordinaria* of Accursius] (1477), Venice, Nicolaus Jenson, ink printed on parchment (Gothic type), illumination by Benedetto Padovano, 425 x 287 mm, folio 2r. Gotha, Landesbibliothek [Mon. Typ. 1477, 2° 0013], https://dlib.thulb.uni-jena.de/rsc/viewer/uflb_derivate_00012162/Mon-typ-1477-2-00013.tif.

process and the printed surface as “a contribution to the history of art.”

Part I

The first-text page of the 1477 edition of *Digestum novum* (Fig. 2) contains the opening passages of “the last section of a fundamental text of civil law,” compiled by order of 6th century CE Byzantine emperor Justinian. An architectural setting frames and backgrounds the entire text. It comprises a two-tiered symmetrical structure: the top is supported by two fluted Ionic columns with gilded shafts as well as delicate bas-relief upon their capitals and bases, while the bottom is supported by two polychromatic pilasters with Corinthian capitals as well as shafts and bases richly sculpted in mid-relief. The supports are rendered with absolute care for three-dimensional naturalism: powerful shadows line the fluting of the upper columns and grow compressed as their curve turns away from the viewpoint of the beholder, while



Figure 1. *Digestum novum* by Justinian [with the *Glossa ordinaria* of Accursius] (1477), Venice, Nicolaus Jenson, ink printed on parchment (Gothic type), illumination by Benedetto Padovano, 425 x 287 mm, folio 1v. Gotha, Landesbibliothek [Mon. Typ. 1477, 2° 0013], https://dlib.thulb.uni-jena.de/rsc/viewer/uflb_derivate_00012162/Mon-typ-1477-2-00013.tif.

thin contours of light and dark express the designs on the bottom pilasters, expressing the delicate luminosity of an engraved marble surface. Though the dark spaces between the text passages at the bottom indicate that the lower level is empty, the upper level contains a semi-interior space whose left-hand walls are foreshortened in line with the newly developed laws of linear perspective.

An elaborately articulated and gilded entablature crowns the monument—an element mirrored between the tiers and on the very bottom with slight variations as to the choice of ornamental molding. Jewelry-like pieces also hang along the center, beside the top columns, from the bottom capitals, and on the top of the entablature—here, being placed so high that a few pearls are not recorded in full. A silver strip of relief runs between the bases of the bottom flanking pilasters and the gilded plinth. On top stands a little boy—whom, despite being dressed, Armstrong describes as a “putto.” He peeks from between the two columns of the text proper, holding the coat of arms of the book’s owner, Peter Ugelheimer of Frankfurt. The silver strip contains his motto, “MIT ZITT”—from the German, “with time”—and a green roundel with the signature of Benedetto Padovano, the miniaturist-illuminator of the page.

Just as the text is set in an elaborate architectural frame, the frame is set in an elaborate natural landscape. It stands on a grassy field ornamented with floral motifs; behind it extends a mountainous Mediterranean landscape with lakes in the bottom right corner. The scenery closer to the viewer is captured with warm yellows; as the terrain recedes, it fades to greens and blues, in line with the rules of aerial perspective. Most of the natural background, nonetheless, is dominated by a blue sky, whose substantial patch extends within the borders of the architectural frame. Additionally, the page is peopled by innumerable figures and creatures, biblical, mythical, and natural alike. Nude adults and colorful cherubs are symmetrically resting on top of the entablature, while birds are swimming or strolling around the lake. Moreover, wingless putti are playing around the monument—notwithstanding, their gilding introduces ambiguity as to whether they are living or sculptural, especially given the analogously gilded appearance of the anthropomorphic initial beside the upper interior space. Furthermore, a hectic, if not violent, scene of animals, satyrs, and people unravels in front of the monument, with the two nude figures sitting at the base also casting shadows upon it. Lastly, the upper architectural space comprises a scene with a stone-carver at work, a crowd of scholars outfitted predominantly in red, and figures who Armstrong believes to be a builder and the Emperor Justinian himself, particularly on account of the latter’s unique gilded robe.

Evidently, Padovano was one of those Venetian book miniaturists who were “extraordinarily successful at keeping up with the latest developments in painting, such as the use of perspective and light, narrative realism, and the revival of Antique art.” He revels in imaginative all’antica combinations of classical architectural features and “the Albertian illusion of three-dimensional space,” producing the impression that an entire world could emerge out of the edges of his illuminated page. His illusionistic approach to contextualizing the text proper provides only further proof of this. He

contours the lines and columns of the legal discourse with a wrinkly, tonally modelled border, rendering it into multiple fragments of *trompe l'oeil* parchment superimposed upon the meticulous naturalistic setting. The passages and its letters thus cease being two-dimensional marks upon a flat plane, and become part of a three-dimensional object within a deeply naturalistic picture. Additionally, numerous pieces of red string tie the different parts of the parchment together, as if protecting the layout of the page from an imminent gust of wind—except for the one piece fooled around with by one of the satyrs on the grass. Lines that mirror the horizontal patterns upon the crowning entablature are also imprinted in the top corners of this page-upon-a-page, suggesting it is physically attached to the frame. Consequently, this first-text page is splendid not only in its use of gold leaf and expensive pigments (or its inclusion of jewel-like ornament upon its surface), but also in its resplendent rendering of a detailed and persuasive three-dimensional space.



Figure 4. *Biblia Italiano* [trans. Niccolò Malermi] (1493), Venice, Guilelmus Anima Mia, Tridimensis, and Antonio da Trino, ink printed on paper (Roman type), 300 x 200 mm, folio b1r. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [VcBA 11003467], <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/Inc.II.905>.

The first-text page of the 1493 edition of the Italian translation of the Bible by Niccolò Malermi (Fig. 4) frames the opening passages of the Book of Genesis with a woodcut architectural border. Though the text is not flanked by columns or pilasters, it is supported by a base richly articulated with a variety of dentils and floral moldings as well as crowned by an equally elaborate entablature. The base rests on a foundation containing a piece of complex relief sculpture. With its sea-like ground, siren-like or nude figures, and agricultural elements, the scene balances Edenic and mythological connotations. Nonetheless, given the exclusively linear technique of the woodcut, there can be found no illusionistic indication as to whether the piece would have been sculpted in low, mid, or high relief. This foundation is standing on a ground containing sketch-like motifs of grasses and stones, although it is not accompanied by a rendering of a natural scenery or sky to contextualize the rest of the structure.

A symmetrical flow of zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, architectural, floral, and purely decorative ornaments constitutes an ornamental border growing out of two

classicizing vases that stand beside the foundation. Despite the contours of this border touching those of the monument, the woodcut's designer did not exploit any pictorial devices to render the two

features structurally interdependent. For instance, there emerges no sense of physical grounding or gravitational weight to the border, as the vases do not rest on the grass along with the foundation, but rather on the bottom of the frame that encloses the entire pictorial surface. Indeed, instead of extending to the page's edges, the ornamental setting is contained within a multi-lined border of its own. Notably, this frame-for-a-frame involves one of the few instances of naturalistic overlapping upon the page, as the wings of the putti at the top (as well as one of their held vessels) are rendered in full, and thus as if in front of the overarching frame. Another such suggestion of spatial depth unravels on the monument's base, with two wingless putti sitting upon it and holding up a (blank) coat of arms whose tip covers up a tiny part of the mythological relief. However, none of these elements cast any shadows.

The Genesis passages, delineated generously with a rectangular double contour, could be argued to appear engraved into a marble plate set into the architectural frame. However, the difference in intensity of the black ink between the text and the monument subtly ensures their separateness—a feature potentially indicative of the frame having been impressed upon the page only after the printing of the text, rather than in a mode that is simultaneous and integrated with the printing process. Either way, moreover, the letters preserve their status as functionally legible impressions upon a flat surface. Meanwhile, the historiated initial depicting a scene of the enthroned God surrounded by a myriad of musical cherubs, though set apart with a neat square frame, is placed against a plain black background, with all the figures distinct and disambiguated from the represented letter.

The monochromatic simplicity of the picture, its absolute lack of tonal modulation or perspectival thinking, as well as typographic insistence upon its finitude within the scope of the page revels in what Armstrong terms “the inherent flatness of the printed page.” It as well reflects the medieval mode of thinking about architectural figures within books that medievalist Christine Sciacca defines by “flexibility.” In her words,

Architecture permeated the medieval world so deeply that artists not only reproduced the various types of buildings that surrounded them but also cut and pasted various architectural elements into compositions for purely decorative purposes... These bits of buildings did not make sense as stand-alone structures, rather, they were exploited for their aesthetic value....

That is, the unknown author of this 1493 woodcut perceived architectural features as infinitely extractable, abstractable, and rearrangeable aesthetic devices.

Part II

These two first-text pages technically qualify as neither title pages nor frontispieces. That is because, beside titles (Fig. 2: “Incipit liber.xxxix.digestorum...”; Fig. 4: “GENESIS”) and the above described ornamentations, they also include passages from the main body text of the books they



Figure 3. *Biblia Italiano* [trans. Niccolò Malermi] (1493), Venice, Guilelmus Anima Mia, Tridinensis, and Antonio da Trino, ink printed on paper (Roman type), 300 x 200 mm, folio a4v. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana [VcBA 11003467], <https://digi.vatlib.it/view/Inc.II.905>.

decorate. Nonetheless, the 1477 Digest of Justinian and the 1493 Malermi Bible both have pages that qualify as frontispieces (Fig. 1 and Fig. 3). The Digest frontispiece compliments the rich polychrome and meticulous three-dimensionality of the first-text page. It portrays an all’antica (specifically Roman) triumphal arch. The arch is accompanied by four engaged and fluted Corinthian columns and elaborated with relief sculptures, which are articulated across diverse degrees of tonal modulation, generating illusions of bas- and mid-relief alike. The arch stands against a colonnaded wall to a “distant” classicizing cityscape; its buildings mirror Padovano’s successful execution of foreshortening along consistent orthogonals throughout the arch. Four figures populate the scene, holding up multiple iterations of the Ugelheimer coat of arms. Nonetheless, this frontispiece is also enclosed in a rectangular frame, subtly diminishing the page’s domination by its in-depth spatial treatment, especially in comparison to the edge-caressing miniature on the first-text page. In contrast, the relationship

between the frontispiece and the first-text page of the Malermi Bible is even more intimate, as they share the exact same architectural frame. Inside the frame, printer Nicolaus Jenson placed labelled woodcut vignettes of the first six days of creation, separated by a floral-sculptural pattern distinct from but complimentary to the forms of the outer border. From a bisected void to a populated paradise, each vignette conveys an increasingly complex design. Notwithstanding, each is set in an identical double frame whose shape and rigidity explicitly mirror that of the historiated initial upon the first-text page.

Significantly, both these frontispieces directly precede their respective first-text pages. This means that the book structure composes each pair into a spread (Fig. 5a & 5b)—a diptych that constitutes the reader’s first impression of the book and their first interaction with the text proper. The harmonious aesthetics of these two spreads thus become respectively integrated into serving the



Fig 5a & 5b. *Digestum novum* by Justinian (1477), 1v–2r (top)
Biblia Italiano [trans. Niccolò Malermi] (1493), a4v–b1r (bottom)

traditional role of the frontispiece—a role understood in joint bibliographical and architectural terms as an “intermediary or transitional” site between the exterior and the interior, endowing a (literary or physical) space “with an elaborate entrance.” Drawing on this symmetry between books and buildings in “*Ut Architectura Poesis*” (2021), literary critic Alastair Fowler defines the frontispiece as offering “entry or initiation” into a deliberately designed space, modulating the mindset of the reader through a kind of aesthetic foreshadowing. He even expands the definition of the book’s frontispiece into the framework of “metaphor... introducing through its words and images the substance of the book to follow,” ultimately positing that it can be understood as “the ‘soul of the book.’”

In this liminal yet fundamental designation, the architectural frontispiece constitutes a quintessential threshold. “Threshold” is a key word through which Gérard Genette defines his notion of paratext: “the paratext is neither on the interior nor on the exterior: it is both; it is on the threshold; and it is on this very site that we must study it, because essentially, perhaps, its being depends upon its site.” Paratext defines all verbal and visual, peripheral yet integral elements which “enable[] a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers.” It includes tables of contents and prefaces, but also title pages and typographic decisions—any feature of the book that designates the “circumstances” and “methods” of its access, that “offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.” It is a preliminary and “‘undefined zone’ between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward

side (turned toward the world's discourse about the text)." However, despite ascribing to paratext such elaborate power over the text's reception, Genette simultaneously believed it to be "only an assistant, only an accessory of the text... A threshold exists to be crossed."

As such, the frontispiece spreads of the 1477 Digest of Justinian and the 1493 Malermi Bible both offer cohesive pictorial worlds that constitute the preliminary sites of invitation for the readers of their books, while also initiating them into the text proper. Their straddling of titles, opening passages of their respective texts, as well as spatially confounding visual frames renders them exemplary liminal spaces, "neither on the interior nor on the exterior" of the book, dependent upon this site yet at the same time producing the conditions of possibility for that site's existence. Indeed, both spreads have elements corresponding to the "substance" or "soul" of their respective texts: the first-text page of the Digest depicts an intricate vignette with the Emperor Justinian, while the first-text page of the Bible begins with an initial of the enthroned God the Creator. In sum, both sets of opening pages serve as "elaborate" powerful architectural gateways into their respective texts, across metaphorical and literal terms.

However, especially given this literary and bibliographical insistence on the significance of the architectural frontispiece as a spatialized and facilitating piece of paratext, it must be noted that the kinds of spaces and accesses established by the 1477 Digest and the 1493 Bible are remarkably different. The opening spread from 1477 insists on understanding the surface of the page as a pictorial surface conducive to three-dimensional naturalism. The first-text page includes an imposing monument in the front and a far-reaching landscape throughout the back—distinct planes that nonetheless interface thanks to relationships of depth established via disseminated figures and their shadows. It produces a meticulous illusion of depth that tempts the reader to contemplate what could lie beyond the cut edges of the physical leaf of parchment. Moreover, the *trompe l'oeil* treatment of the text proper directly undermines its communicative centrality as the opening passage of the decorated book. Padovano fragmented its integrity into three pieces of parchment whose edges are so shriveled, they sometimes obscure parts of the printed letters. The scholar in red sleeves and leggings standing on the rightmost side of the upper vignette performs the exact same role, with his hand obscuring the start of one of the lines. Indeed, the very representation of the text proper as a superimposition onto an already existing architectural-natural environment, with pieces of red string barely holding the torn-up parchment slips together, frames the point of the page's existence as a mere and fragile addition. By occupying the large hole in the middle of the text proper, the vignette with the scholars and Justinian only accentuates this framing. This is despite the fact the scene constitutes the spread's only visual linkage to the contents of the Digest: the rest of its aesthetic signification is reserved for the many reproductions of its patron's coat of arms as well as the playful battle scene at the monument's base. The latter's meaning, Armstrong notes, "remain[s] unexplained by the text or known tastes of the owner" as they cannot be interpreted in their conventional sense of serving as a "contrast[] to the serenity of the printed word

above them... pronouncing the triumph of the written word over the battle below,” given the representational violence with which the illuminator has treated the integrity of the opening passages above.

Even from behind, this 1477 paratext dominates the pictorial and semantic status of its text proper with integrity and “sophistication,” despite the text being added onto the page much before the miniature. On the other hand, the opening spread from 1493 understands and reveals the leaf of parchment onto which it was printed as a communicative and “unified flat surface.” Delineated by a self-sufficient rectangular frame, it actively resists the established possibilities of black-and-white tonal modulation and three-dimensional construction within the woodcut technique. Like the pages of English mannerist books examined by art historians Margery Corbett and R.W. Lightbown in *The Comely Frontispiece* (1979), the frontispiece spread “maintains its character as graphic art.” This character is reflected by the way the architectural frame contextualizes the text proper, with all the words and letters remaining legible and the text block retaining its rectangular integrity. The monumentality of the paratextual frame thus contributes to the dignity of the text rather than undermining it. This effect is magnified by the historiated initial: instead of introducing a rupture or “occup[ying] a somewhat ambiguous position” between text and paratext, it fills in a clearly delineated space with its fittingly flattened aesthetic and an iconography relevant to the surrounding text. As such, rather than undermining the significance of the text proper by incorporating it into a deconstructing illusion of depth, this first-text page more so incorporates architectural elements (implicitly derived from three-dimensional reality) into a flexible pictorial language of abstract surfaces. This unnamed woodcut illustrator thus ventures beyond the burden of naturalistic rendering, and thus imagines a different surface for an imaginatively ornamental world. Not seeking to represent a building, the page instead becomes one on its own pictorial terms.

These aesthetic contrasts between the first-text pages of the 1477 *Digestum novum* and the 1493 *Malermi Bible* constitute a difference along an axis that Corbett and Lightbown describe as spanning between “rigid... architectural drawings” and “fanciful, even fantastic, essays on architectural themes,” with the former treating architecture as more of a matter of content, and the latter understanding it as more of a matter of form. This difference—alongside the pages’ liminal status between frontispieces, title pages, and first-text pages—exemplifies Sherman’s characterization of the incunabula period as a “formative” period for the “paratextual apparatus.” Indeed, it is in these first fifty years of printing that this apparatus “underwent many of its most profound and lasting transformations,” enabling various interpretations of its proper form and function to “coexist” even within one region—in this case, Venice.

Architectural frames for books do not originate from the end of the fifteenth century: “The early flowering of this form of decoration is to be found in the illuminated manuscripts of the [early] fifteenth century.” However, “the architectural title-page’ as an identifiable and increasingly common

type” does date from this transitional moment in book production when copies could be decorated either by hand or by press. It should be no surprise, then, that the focal point of this paratextual development was located in late-fifteenth-century Venice, where the printing industry “grew with amazing rapidity,” with the number of editions rising from around 130 in the year 1474 to around 3500 by the end of the century. Although, as Armstrong notes, by the 1490s this sheer growth demanded the transition into mechanical modes of embellishment (as exemplified by the 1493 Malermi Bible), Venetian printers “resisted decorating their books with woodcut borders” throughout the first few decades of the incunabula period. Instead, they opted to increasingly employ their miniaturists and illuminators to ‘finish’ these thousands and thousands of new books by hand (as exemplified by the 1477 Digest of Justinian), even though “the technology of printing woodcuts simultaneously with the text was well developed” by the 1470s. Meanwhile, title-pages as such were “very seldom used in manuscripts before the date of their introduction in printed books.” Notably, the first official printed title-page was also produced in Venice, accentuating the significance of the region to the development of early modern paratextual scaffolding even further.

As such, although incunabula historian and bibliographer Margaret M. Smith traces the practice of understanding the book as a building to one of the Olympian Odes of the ancient poet Pindar, literary critic Lina Bolzoni’s *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press* (2001) persuasively argues that it is “in the age of the printing press—more so than during the age of writing—the text is perceived as a set of places, as something that is positioned in space.” This may have had to do with the freshly concretized spatiality of the book in the face of the permanent presence of the printing chase and the physical endurance of metal type, whose final products were then mass-disseminated thanks to the mechanical procedures of the press. In conceptual and in material terms, this would have fundamentally contrasted with the individual, free-form, oftentimes meditative practices associated with manual transcription and hand-illumination.

However, it would be a mistake to reduce these first-text pages to their historical or material status as transitional precursors of the modern paratextual elements examined by Genette. In their unique pictorial and representational languages, they constitute remarkable instances in which “it is by no means clear where the paratext ends and the text begins, or where the paratext crosses the threshold and interrupts or even undermines the text it is supposedly serving, instances where the text is subordinate to the paratext rather than the other way around.” The first-text page of the 1477 Digest of Justinian, after all, integrates the text proper into its illusionistic space only to assert the truth of its own three-dimensionality. It reduces the printed text to the status of a “fringe,” not only controlling the mode of its reading, but rendering it auxiliary in the face of this self-sufficient and all-encompassing setting, which violates the integrity of the text proper at each possible corner and crevice. Meanwhile, the visual language of the first-text page in the 1493 Malermi Bible meets its printed opening passages on the same superficial plane; however, the vignettes on the preceding frontispiece prefigure the

description of the first six days of creation in a nearly nonverbal mode. Arguably, this communicates the pre-human—and thus, pre-verbal—state of the world throughout the opening passages of Genesis more effectively than the text itself. Moreover, the image of God reiterated throughout this spread enables this preliminary space to ensure a necessary level of spiritual veneration.

As such, the surface-level differences between the hand-illuminated first-text page of the 1477 *Digestum novum* and the woodcut on the first-text page of the 1493 edition of the Malermi Bible are facilitated but not necessitated by the material differences between their respective processes of production. Rather, the two works deliberately engage in “different levels of pictorial reality,” both of which nonetheless entail equally remarkable constructions of the relationship between typographic surface, pictorial space, the site of the book, and the world of the text. Contrary to the claims of Corbett and even Sherman, a late-fifteenth-century woodcut frontispiece such as the one upon the opening pages of the 1493 Bible is not simply an example of a “crude,” “economical,” under-elaborated, or easily manageable design enclosed in a mass object, nor a mere derivative of architectural combinations from a hand-illumination (e.g. the 1477 miniature). It expresses its own distinct understanding of the page as an aesthetic site, facilitated by its incorporation of what renowned historian and curator A.M. Hind dubbed “one of the most beautiful of the outline borders of the time.”

Conclusion

As such, while this paper would agree with Sherman’s closing remark that late medieval architectural paratexts “took a wide range of textual edifices across the threshold and into even the humblest home,” it has sought to highlight and diversify the sheer width of this “range.” The first-text pages of the 1477 *Digest of Justinian* and the 1493 Malermi Bible, especially when seen through the lens of Genette’s paratextual frameworks, exemplify that hand-illuminated and mechanically decorated front pages of Venetian incunabula initiated remarkably distinct readerly experiences—however, not simply on account of the exuberance of the manuscript tradition or the material limitations of the printing process, but rather because of the attunement of their respective producers to their unique features and purposes. In so attending to the artistic value of the printed surface with the same rigor as that of the handmade one, we allow ourselves to expand our understanding of just how much medieval art history as a discipline can still discover, care for, and grow.

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