

*Faster, Smarter and Richer. Reshaping the Library Catalogue* is the title of an International Conference recently held in Rome (27-28 February) and organised by the Vatican Library and the Italian Library Association AIB (Associazione Italiana Biblioteche). The aim of the conference was to explore the future of cataloguing and bibliographic description, within the new scenario in which librarians are called to operate nowadays. Indeed, library catalogues are changing, in so far as they are trying to offer information about more types of documents, and to clarify the relations existing between them as well. New systems aim to simplify the information retrieval by offering the opportunity for users to interact with the catalogue as well. Furthermore, librarians are both concerned with defending their own professional skills and preserving their role within the field of information organization and retrieval.

In this context Paola Puglisi, who is a librarian at the National Library in Rome, presented a paper focused on a subject that she had already explored some years ago: the book-jacket. She took inspiration from what the celebrated scholar G. Thomas Tanselle declared in 1971, when he wrote about the importance of the description of this particular object. Tanselle wished that one day one would retrieve the descriptions of the book-jackets preserved in a library only by checking its catalogue. "The day has not yet come", Tanselle wrote, and Paola Puglisi seems to complete this sentence in a positive way, by looking at the tools offered to cataloguers today. According to Puglisi such new tools invite librarians to consider the book-jackets no longer only as a secondary source of information (not to mention the bad attitude to ignore or even destroy them). To better understand the whole matter, we start with some questions aimed to clarify the importance of the object we are talking about.

*When did the book-jacket appear?*

For a long time the oldest book-jacket we'd heard of was the one designed for *The Keepsake 1833* (a kind of gift-yearbook very popular in the Nineteenth-century England), published in London by Longmans in 1832. However, in 2009, a jacket dating back to 1829 was identified among the Printed Ephemera Collection of the Bodleian Library in Oxford: it was meant for a similar gift-yearbook, entitled *Friendship's Offering*: so, we have reason to think, probably book-jackets first appeared on those kind of books.

*Would you agree in saying that the book-jacket is an extension of the cover? Are we therefore allowed to consider it a typical element of the modern book?*

We'd better state we are talking about book-jackets as related to "modern" publishing, i.e. not before the early nineteenth-century. Hence, although there are some older *incunabula* of jackets, they are not even comparable to the modern ones. Because they are not *printed*, their relationship with the book can't be considered as a publisher's will. In other words, they can't be thought as an integral part of the design of the book they happen to cover. This said, in a sense the book-jacket is an extension of the cover: in fact, it offers space available for paratextual information, as the cover does. According to Gérard Genette's fundamental work *Seuils*, it's an element of the "publisher's peritext". Actually, nearly every remark you make about the cover could also be made about the jacket; but the feature of the book-jacket is its *physical separateness*: this is why, in the past, both textual bibliographers and librarians considered it in a different way (or better they didn't consider it). *Physical separateness* is also the reason why lots of jackets were lost, so that old jackets are quite rare: nowadays, just any book on the antiquarian bookselling has a very different price, it of course depends on the originality of the jacket.

*Is there a different use of the book-jacket in relation to the various contexts? Is the size of the book a determining element for the use of it? Or is the genre of the work, which determines it?*

Of course the jacket is an expense for the publisher; so, as for fiction, a book-jacket is rather designed for the first hardcover edition of a novel, while further editions are likely to be in paperback. On the other hand, you surely remember the series of novels sold with a couple of

important Italian newspapers (as optional supplements) some years ago: although those series were certainly popular editions, the advertising campaign emphasized the presence of the book-jacket on the books as an added value for the buyer. Moreover, it was precisely the book-jacket that distinguished those series from any other similar project. Actually the use of the book-jacket – a part from some publisher whose corporate image has always been connected with its use – seems to be rather linked to national publishing practices: for instance, Anglo-American books are preferably available in hardback edition with jacket; conversely, as for French editions you'll find many novels to be directly published in paperback, just like non-fiction books.

*When did works of art appear on the book-jackets? Who are, in Italy, the publishers who showed the best attitude towards the use of the book-jackets as a work of art?*

In terms of *visual design* many jackets are by no means inferior to the language of some graphic works – although they remain something different because of both their serial nature, and their (usually) professional design, which comes directly from the publishing field. Remarkably you could have stated the same of the jackets designed by Adolfo De Carolis for the publisher Formiggini, in the early twentieth-century, just to make an example. As for the habit of putting on the cover/jacket some artwork reproduction, it was established around the fifties, and since then it produced very different results: from those who seem rather banal, or rough, to others much more sophisticated. Anyway, in this “combinatorial play”, it is the publisher Adelphi that has always excelled, closely followed by Sellerio –without being unjust towards other equally high- quality, though less in evidence, publishing.

*What kind of impressions have you received from the International Conference that we mentioned at the opening of this conversation? What is your feedback in relation to the subject of your paper?*

First of all that I want to say I'm not a cataloguing specialist, and in attending the conference my aim was to spur on the subject of book-jackets those librarians used to drawing cataloguing rules and standards: in fact, looking at them, you could think that the jacket was a useless accessory of the book, not even worth a mention. Besides, not being an expert, the recent thought on cataloguing seemed to me worryingly deviating from the pragmatism in the attempt to include every possible form of documentary items; as well as from the needs of the users of the catalogue. I've got a positive (perhaps unexpected) impression from the conference: theoretical models are really high-developed, and if the information they organize is shown to the user through well-structured, suitable interfaces, you can get good results indeed. In fact, today's catalogues can better display all the relationships that link works, editions, items and all their attributes, as well as authors, publishers, co-workers according to the fitting slogan “from collections to connections”. So, back to our subject, I'm hopeful that the day wished by G. Thomas Tanselle, “when one can learn anything of a library's holdings of jackets by consulting its catalogue”, may be at hand. There are all the conditions for this to be true, librarians just have to settle for book-jackets those good practices, already provided for many aspects of their job.