

# What the Corsini Scenari can tell us about the *Commedia dell'arte*

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In the Palazzo Corsini in Rome there is a unique collection of illustrated manuscripts containing *commedia dell'arte* scenarios.<sup>1</sup> This collection raises a number of yet unanswered questions.<sup>2</sup> In the following article, an attempt will be made to provide solutions to these problems by means of an analysis of the manuscripts, the text of the scenarios and especially of the illustrations prefacing each piece. The aim in the first instance will be to determine the date of these scenarios, and the purpose of their production in this form. Are they original, or are they copies of an earlier collection? This analysis aims to bring forward new knowledge about the Corsini manuscripts in order to determine their value as source material in the study of the early phase of the *commedia dell'arte*.

The manuscripts in the Palazzo Corsini contain altogether 100 scenarios in two gilt-edged volumes bound in red leather. Both volumes are embossed with the coat of arms of Cardinal Maurizio di Savoia on both the front and back covers. It can thus be ascertained that the scenarios were in his possession and were bound during his period of office as cardinal, from 1608 to 1642.<sup>3</sup>

Maurizio di Savoia was born in Torino on 10 January, 1593. In 1608, when he was only fifteen, he was proclaimed cardinal by Pope Pius V Borghese. Later in 1621 he was transferred from the church of Santa Maria Nuova to St. Eustachio. He was a lover of art, literature and philosophy, and in 1626 he founded an academy, named "Desiosi", dedicated to these three disciplines. The finest and most renowned artists of that age from Rome, Florence and Venice moved in his circle, names which still resound today: Agostino Tasso, Guido Reni, Albani, Guercino, Domenichino. He employed

several of these artists to adorn his palace in Rome, Palazzo di Montegiordano.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that the Corsini scenari are older than their binding. They bear the marks of hard use; many of the pages have holes in them, and are all extremely tattered, with frayed, worn corners. The pages are yellowed, in contrast to the better preserved endpapers. There are several different watermarks in the paper. In the manuscripts themselves, however, one dominates: a dove within a circle (Fig. 1). This is familiar from the period around 1589, and is known to derive from Rome.<sup>5</sup> Another watermark, which appears twice in the manuscripts, shows a crown with a star above it (Fig. 2), and can be dated to 1570.<sup>6</sup> The third watermark, of a kneeling saint (Fig. 3), is known to be from the period around 1591.<sup>7</sup> There is a variation of the kneeling saint (Fig. 4) in the endpapers, which are presumably contemporary with the binding. This variation appears in Rome in the period around 1638.<sup>8</sup> It has not been possible to date the last two watermarks (Figs. 5 and 6) which are found in these volumes. They are also in the cover papers and thus certainly of fairly modern date, from one of the most recent restorations. Thus, the watermarks seem to confirm that the actual scenarios are older than their binding.

The one hundred scenarios are all enumerated at the bottom of the reverse side of the last two pages. They are not, however, placed here in numerical order: first comes no. 5, then no. 7, then nos. 6, 10, 2, etc. This arrangement of the scenarios indicates that they had previously been collected in a different order, and, even more important, that they had probably existed as single booklets.

The scenarios in the Corsini manuscripts represent a broad selection of scenic genres, with