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The Feather Book of Dionisio Minaggio

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Eleanor MacLean

The Feather Book of Dionisio Minaggio

Presentation



- 1 "Dionisio Minaggio Giardinero di Sa Ea Gv. Obnerator del Stato di Milano. Inventor et Feccit l'Ano del 1618." This inscription on the title page can be translated as: "Dionisio Minaggio,

Gardener-in-Chief to the Governor of the State of Milan. Creator and Maker in the year 1618."

- 2 What he had made was a book of designs of birds and human figures, each picture composed entirely of birds' feathers in their natural, undyed colours. The 112 birds consist of the feathers, beaks and claws laid down in true-to-life fashion. 2 The majority of the birds depicted were native to Lombardy although some are no longer common there. One of the birds is identified as being a representation of a Dodo – 3 and indeed a web site on the dodo seems to accept this attribution without question. However, the bird is not particularly well drawn, uses Lombardy bird feathers rather than ones from an actual Dodo and is obviously copied from either a drawing or a description. I suspect it is done from an illustration because the costume and weapon of the Arabian hunter is so accurately depicted. Various other ornithologists who have seen the original have declared the bird to be either a Reunion Solitaire, which is at least a close relative of the Dodo, or a Great Bustard.
- 3 The illustrations of the birds were prepared as follows: The beaks, the claws, and the skin and feathers of the head in one piece, and the body feathers individually, were glued to sheets of paper which were then cut out and attached to support sheets of 12" x 18 ¾" hand-made paper. The eyes of the figures are made of paper. Actually, there are a few non-bird elements in 3 of the pictures -- dried oak leaves in one picture, 4 a snake skin draped in a tree in another and, in a third, the bird is eating a small chameleon, part of whose skin can still be seen. All the captions on the illustrations are in the same hand, presumably Minaggio's, and occasionally, where he has used both Latin and Milanese terms, he has mis-spelled the local dialect. The 156 drawings were originally housed in a large book bound in leather over oak boards with metal bosses and clasps which was contemporary to their creation.
- 4 The Feather Book contains some of the earliest efforts to depict behaviour rather than simply showing the birds sitting in profile (although this standardized format is the norm).
- 5 One of the pictures shows a woodpecker with its tongue (yes it is real) inserted in a tree trunk to collect insects. 6 Two of the illustrations actually – although ineptly - attempt to show birds in flight. 7 In one, the wings are upside down.
- 6 8The remaining 44 images are much more elaborate - natural, undyed feathers arranged to show hunters (some on horseback), 9 musicians, a set of actors from the *Commedia dell'Arte*, and 10 tradesmen (including a knife-grinder and tooth-drawer).
- 7 On the majority of these scenes, there is a large tree providing shade to the characters. These are usually on the left hand side and depict a variety of both flowering and leafy trees. The latter are frequently laurels. 11 Minaggio's portraits are lively and depict a variety of expressions, dress, weaponry and props, all accurately shown in the soft but unfaded colours of the original feathers.
- 8 The backgrounds are not specific locations but are stylized representations and include trees, rivers, bridges, castles, and 12 even a line of laundry hanging out to dry. There are also small figures in some of the illustrations – primarily monks and fishermen.
- 9 Feather art was first introduced to Europe by the Spanish explorers who had traveled to Brazil, Mexico and Peru. The majority of these works (with the exception of Philip II's shield) are ecclesiastical in subject and use tiny feathers to imitate embroidery work. There is some suggestion that Minaggio drew his inspiration from the San Carlo Mitre which is now in Milan Cathedral. But Minaggio uses feathers of different sizes, cut to the appropriate shape and glued to a paper foundation. Minaggio seems to have been the only artist who created primarily secular scenes. What is certain is that no similar collection exists anywhere else and that this represents possibly the oldest preserved bird skins in existence, which makes them of importance taxonomically as well as artistically.
- 10 Regrettably, very little is known about the history of the Feather Book. It must have taken Minaggio, and possibly his assistants, several years to complete. Most of the birds represented are indigenous to the Milan region 13 but a few (such as the parrots) may have been presented

- to the Court as gifts, perhaps by a returning explorer. Due to the considerable political chaos of the time (the treachery of one incumbent and the death of a second, forced Spain to send three governors to Milan in 1618), the archival records in Milan for that year are poor. Some of those that did exist were destroyed in World War II. We know nothing for certain of the book's whereabouts between the time of its completion and its probable location in the early 1700s.
- 11 It seems likely that the Feather Book was commissioned by Don Pedro de Toledo Osorio, Marques de Villafranca, who was the Spanish Governor of Milan from January 1616 to August 1618. He had previously been Admiral of the Neapolitan fleet and was known to have been interested in exotic birds – such as the dodo, South American parrots and migratory Arctic birds which are portrayed in the Feather Book. In August 1618 Don Pedro was recalled to Spain for allegedly conspiring against Venice. If the Feather Book was indeed a commission this might explain both why he is not acknowledged on the title page and why at least one of the *Commedia dell'Arte* figures seems unfinished – no tree and no identification of the characters. Beatrice Corrigan speculated that Don Pedro took the work back to Spain with him but this is entirely conjecture as is, indeed, her suggestion that the work was a commissioned one. Dr. Carlo Violani, ornithological consultant to the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale in Milan suspects that it was a way of making use of feathers left over after birds were supplied to the kitchens – and of providing Minaggio with a means to keep his staff gainfully occupied during the long winter evenings.
- 12 According to A. M. Lysaght in her book *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1971), the book was in the possession of British naturalist Taylor White in the early 1700s (it is almost certainly the item referred to in his will as “my collection of Italian feather paintings”) and came down through his family until his collections were, regrettably, dispersed at auction in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Both his wife and daughter and artist Peter Paillou, who is known to have worked for him, seem to have learned the technique of feather painting from this work.
- 13 The Feather Book was purchased in London in 1923 by Dr. Gerhard Lomer, the McGill University Librarian, from booksellers P. J. and A. E. Dobell who had listed it in their June catalogue that year at a price of £ 175. The catalogue information on the Feather Book is quite sketchy and further research on its provenance has not been undertaken. When we loaned the Feather Book to the Museo Civico di Storia Naturale, Dr. Carlo Violani wrote the catalogue *Un bestiario barocco quadri di piume del seicento milanese, catalogo della mostra* 1988 in which he claims that McGill acquired the volume from Quaritch in 1927 but that is not correct.
- 14 McGill acquired the set for the collection of the then Emma Shearer Wood Library of Ornithology, now expanded into the Blacker-Wood Library of Biology. In 1965, Dr. Lomer wrote a letter explaining that a beak had come loose from the page when they first opened the book on its arrival at McGill. The volume was so tightly sewn that it would not open properly and the thickness caused the pages to bind together. It was therefore decided to take the pictures out of the bound volume and they were individually mounted behind Lucite and on thick, acidic cardboard held together with green cloth tape. At that time, too, the book cover was converted into a box-like case.
- 15 The *Commedia dell'Arte* figures are the best known and most widely written about. In fact, a visiting scholar from Tufts University recently sent me a couple of postcards of 2 of the figures which she had bought in Venice – and which did not contain any attribution - either to Minaggio or to McGill.
- 16 Among other publications using illustrations from the *Feather Book* are: Peter Arnott's *Theater in its time an introduction* (1981); Allardyce Nicoll's *World of Harlequin* (1963); Vito Pandolfi's *La Commedia dell'Arte* (1957-61); Lynne Lawner's *Harlequin on the moon commedia dell'arte and the visual arts* (1998); Annamaria Cascetta and Roberta Carpani's *La scena della gloria drammaturgia e spettacolo a Milano in età spagnola* (1995); Paul

Castagno's *The early commedia dell'arte (1550-1621) the mannerist context*(1992); Cesare Molinari's *La Commedia dell'Arte*(1985) (which unfortunately misspells Minaggio as Menaggio and has caused some bibliographic confusion ever since); and Siro Ferrone's *Corrispondenza dei comici dell'Arte*. As well, 3 of the illustrations of musicians playing stringed instruments were used to illustrate volume 19, issue 1 of *Early Music* in February 1991 – a special issue on the Italian violon school of the 17th century. Nothing else on the birds seems to have been published except for an article on the depiction of the Dodo by Casey Wood in *Ibis* in 1927.

17 In *Kunst Chronik* Heft 3 Marz 1998, Prof. Dr. Harald Zielske published a paper Das McGill-Featherbook (1618) – eine ikonographische Quelle zur Commedia dell'arte? relating the images to those published in *Capricci di varie Figure* von Jacques Callot, 1617. Regrettably I do not have the language skills to decipher his article but it seems to indicate that the poses of the characters, who represent specific actors, may have been copied from this source.

18 In her 1969 article *Commedia dell'Arte portraits in the McGill Feather Book*, Beatrice Corrigan points out that the figures are almost certainly actual portraits of actors appearing in Milan between 1615 and 1618. She states that the ages of the unmasked actors match those of the persons at that time and that, for many of the characters, only their creators had played the part at that early a date. She too notes the resemblance to the illustrations by Callot but states that he seems interested only in the costumes and the movements of the characters and not the actors themselves. Some of the identifications were originally determined by A. S. Noad of the Columbia University School of Journalism in a 1927 letter to Dr. Lomer.

19 14 The title "Lichomezi" (The Comedians) at the top of this picture indicates these 14 drawings were done as a set of portraits of specific theatrical companies performing the Commedia dell'Arte. Leander, our first character, was a celebrated "lover" played by actor Benedetto Ricci of the Fedeli company. Regrettably, he died in 1620 at the age of 28 while on route to Paris to perform with the company.

20 15 The masked Trapelino, one of the "zanni" type of clown, was played by Giovan Paolo who retired in 1630. The more celebrated Baltram, a typical sober Milanese citizen trying to uphold uphold moral rectitude among his disorderly household, was created – and played - by Nicolo Barbieri, an author of both plays and works defending the theatre, who acted up until his death in 1641. In 1625 Barbieri performed at the French court where he was much admired by the king.

21 16 Policianelo, an early version of the Neapolitan character Punch, was originally a satire of a Naples businessman who had tried to shut down the theatre there. The character, created and played by Silvio Fiorello and particularly popular at the beginning of the 17th century, was gradually modified by other authors. This may be the earliest appearance of Policianelo in northern Italy and it is interesting that he was originally an old man with white hair, moustache and goatee. Punch only later came to be shown as hook-nosed, humped and paunched.

22 17 This character, whose left foot has unfortunately disappeared, seems to be Dr. Gracian Camanaz of Budri, from Andreini's play "La Campanaccia". The role of the learned and commanding doctor was written for Bortolomio Bongiovanni and is related to a stock Commedia dell'Arte character known as Gratiano.

23 18 The young Trastulo, here playing the mandolin, represents one of many clown-like characters of the "zanni" type and is probably a portrait of Silvo Fiorillo's son Giovan Battista. The character was a Sicilian servant to Captain Matamor. Ricolina was a servant and this is probably a depiction of the actress Angela Lucchesi.

24 19 Along with two old men and two servants, the "lovers" were the central characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. The secondary roles of Mario and Flavia were played by the celebrated Agostino Grisenti and Margherita Luciani Garavini. Small and neither as beautiful nor elegant as "Florinda," Flavia was her bitter enemy

- 25 20Florinda was a tragedy written by the famous playwright Gian Battista Andreini for his
wife Virginia Ramponi, an actress with the Fedeli company who was renowned for both her
beauty and her talents as a singer and poet.. The play was performed to great acclaim.
- 26 21 Pombino was portrayed by Girolamo Solinbeni of the Gelosi and later the Accesi company.
Very little is known of this character but he may have been a representation of an uncouth
country bumpkin.
- 27 22 Captain Matamor represents the stock character of the bullying swaggering coward, one of
the most famous of Commedia dell' Arte figures. This is almost certainly a second portrait
of the actor-author Silvio Fiorilla, one of the most famous comic actors of his day as this
character and as Policianelo.
- 28 23 Chola Napolitane was a Harlequin clown figure created by Aniello di Maure. Kanvish,
grotesque and acrobatic, he is shown in a distorted caper making the vulgar Neapolitan gesture
against the evil eye. Maure was a particularly gifted actor and dancer.
- 29 24 This picture shows an entire stage scene from a comedy written by Nicolo Barbieri – the
serenading of the love-struck servant Spineta by the masked Schapin (Scapino). The variety
of instruments hanging from the tree indicates that this is a depiction of the musically gifted
actor and instrument designer Francesco Gabrielli and his wife Spinetta, who were members
of the Confidenti company.
- 30 25 These two unidentified figures may represent Virginia Ramponi and her husband Gian
Battista Andreini, whose stage name was Lelio, taking a bow at the end of a performance.
- 31 26 The character Cietrulo is not well documented but may represent an officer of the law.
Bagutino is obviously a variant of Harlequin. It is not known which actors played these roles,
although the characters were associated with the Confidenti company.
- 32 27 Chocholi (Cocolin) better known as Magnifico or Pantolone, was the stock character of
the old man who makes a fool of himself by chasing after a young girl or by his excessive
suspiciousness or miserliness. The actor Federico Ricci, father of the actor portrayed as
Leander, worked with the Fedeli company off and on from 1609 until 1627, by which time he
was so crippled with gout he could barely move on stage.
- 33 In the mid-eighteenth century, some restoration work was done to keep the skin and feathers
supple.
- 34 In 1974 conservationist J. Lariviere, then in Ottawa, restored the picture of the Raven to
demonstrate what could be done with the item and, in 1979 (by which time he had moved to
Chicago), he also restored the title page as a test to see what would be involved in doing a
complete conservation of all the illustrations. 28 The support paper was cleaned of surface
dirt, moisture and glue stains. Although some physical damage was noted to the feathers,
most of the damage appeared in the upper left hand corner. The poor quality paste board
was beginning to contaminate the support paper. The pH reading ranged from 4.2-4.9. The
paper support was removed from the backing board by a dry method and the paper support
was removed from the feather and paper cutouts with distilled water. The paper support was
dry-cleaned, de-acidified in a solution of Calcium Hydroxide, lightly bleached with Calcium
Hypochlorite and further de-acidified to a pH level of 6.5-7.2. It was then backed with strong
Japanese tissue using cooked rice starch. The verso side of the cutouts were moistened lightly
to remove as much of the animal glue as possible. It was suspected that micro-organisms
(although no live ones were detected) from the animal glue might have done some damage to
the beaks. The cutouts were de-acidified by spraying with Methyl Magnesium Carbonate. The
feathers were lightly brush cleaned with Toluene which also acted as a fungicide treatment.
The cutouts were pasted back into position with cooked rice starch. The painting was hinged
on 4 ply 100% rag board and matted with 8 ply 100% rag board. The verso side of the mounting
board was backed with .003 Mylar. The estimated price at that time was \$ 400 US, which
would have made the cost of doing all 155 remaining pictures \$ 62,400 – a figure far higher
than we could afford. I shudder to think what it would cost today. Because of the size of the

mattes used, each of the restored works was approximately 4 inches larger in both height and width than the originals. If all the pictures were done, we would no longer be able to store them on the rolling shelves in the wooden cabinets that were especially constructed to house them in the 1920s. Lariviere recommended that the illustrations be stored in Solander boxes. However, because the pictures are quite heavily used, we instead had the paintings mounted behind glass and reframed.

35 A few years ago, the illustrations in *Un bestiario barocco* were digitized and put on McGill's web site at <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/featherbook/> In the summer of 2003, the images were redone from the original feather drawings and the detail is much more impressive. While the digitization of the images makes the drawings much more accessible to viewers, it also has had the effect of making more people want to see the originals because they rightly recognize that the texture does not show on the web images.

36 29 It has also helped with the identification process – one of our Music Library staff contacted me to correct the identification of the instruments some of the musicians are playing. The mandolin in this illustration had originally been labeled a guitar.

37 Regrettably, the web images also publicizes more widely the damage that has been done to the illustrations. At some time before they came to McGill and while they were still in their bound form, the upper left hand corner of some of the pictures were badly affected by insects. 30 In the illustration of the mounted hunter, for example, I am quite certain that he originally was shown with a falcon on his wrist but this detail has been quite obscured. In 1988, in preparation for the Milan exhibit, the Canadian Conservation Institute recommended that the Feather Book needed to have, at a minimum, the following measures taken for their conservation – the acidic backing materials removed, the extremely shallow mattes replaced with deeper window recesses that did not squash the feathers and the tape holding the glass in place replaced with proper wooden or metal frames. We have replaced two glass panes which had broken over the years but we have never had the funds to properly restore all the works.

38 We know very little of Minaggio himself. Some scholars suspect he was more of a landscape architect than a gardener. He seems to have had considerable knowledge of birds and some education (although his spelling in both Latin and Italian is suspect and he tended to reverse his Ns).

40 We were recently informed that art historian Barbara Conti, in doing research at the Illinois State Archives, had discovered records of payments made to Minaggio by the Spanish Government. While I have attempted to contact Ms. Conti, I have not yet succeeded in doing so. I also suspect that the host institution where she was doing her research may have been misidentified. Indeed, while I still do not know where the relevant papers are located, I have since learned from Dr. Conti that they relate to 3 generations of the Minaggio family - Giovanni, his father and the sons Giovanni Domenico and Dionigi working for the government of Milan between 1585 and 1599. It is possible that Dionigi is Dionisio of our Feather Book - or a member of the fourth generation of the family.

41 The first major exhibit of the collection was in 1943, when it was shown at McGill University's Exhibition Gallery. After the Milan exhibit of 1988, approximately 80 of the illustrations were exhibited at the Redpath Museum at McGill and at the National Museum of Natural History in Ottawa. It was at this time that the tape on 50 of the pictures was replaced with green wooden frames. I also translated Carlo Violani's captions for the illustrations into English and had our translations office prepare the French text. These appear with the pictures on our web site but some of them need to be revised. In 1990, 5 of the *Commedia dell'Arte* figures were sent to the Speed Museum in Louisville, Kentucky for an exhibit "The Mask of Comedy: the Art of Italian *Commedia*

42 Six of the *Commedia dell'Arte* figures were exhibited at the Montreal Just for Laughs Museum for 3 years from 1999 – 2001. In 2003, 2 of the *Commedia dell'Arte* figures were sent to Spain

and Poland for a major exhibit on the "Golden Age of Theatre and Celebration in European Lands of the House of Austria.

43 31 But what really matters is that the Feather Book is a unique compilation of pictures, most in excellent condition, and representing primarily birds - such as this lovely Black-headed Gull.

List of Illustrations

01 Title Page

02 Bullfinch and Kingfisher

03 Although the bird is tentatively labeled Dodo? on the picture, this more likely represents a bustard being hunted by a mounted oriental gentleman with a scimitar.

04 A male Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) confronts a snake in the same tree.

05 A male Green Woodpecker (*Picus viridis*) probes for insects with its tongue.

06 A Little, or Least, Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) flying over a landscape with trees, a rushing stream and several hill-top buildings. It is extremely unusual to

see illustrations from this early a date showing birds in any other than a standing position.

07 This Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*), flying over a village scene, is missing most of its beak.

08 A hunter shooting an arquebus at a duck swimming in the river

09 A boy holding a sheet of music for a man playing a cornett

10 A knife-sharpener uses a foot-pedal to turn a grindstone. Scissors, a scythe and several knives can be seen hanging from branches and sticking into the tree trunk.

11 Standing on a table between an open coffer and his professional insignia -- an enormous tooth hanging from a pole -- a dentist holds up the tooth he has just extracted from a suffering patient, who sits holding a blood-stained cloth to his face.

12 This Amazon Parrot (*Amazona occhrocephala oratrix*) has lost most of its head feathers. The landscape shows a tree, a stream and the remains of a clothesline from which a shirt and an apron are hanging.

13 A Golden Oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) in a tree overlooks a man fishing with a pole. Most of the feathers of this bird's head have been demolished

14 The title "Lichomezi" (The Comedians) at the top of this picture indicates these drawings were done as a set, possibly intended as portraits of a specific theatrical company performing the type of play known as Commedia dell'Arte. . Leander, our first character, was a celebrated "lover" played by actor Benedetto Ricci of the "Fedeli" company.

15 The masked Trapelino, one of the "zanni" type of clown, was played by Giovan Paolo who retired in 1630. The most celebrated Beltrame, a typical Milanese character, was created by Nicoli Barbieri an author of both plays and works defending the theatre. In 1625 Barbieri performed at the French court where he was much admired by the king.

16 It is not known who was playing Policianelo, an early version of the Neapolitan character Punch, when Minaggio drew these pictures. The character, created by Silvio Fiorello and particularly popular at the beginning of the 17th century, was gradually modified by other authors. This may be the earliest appearance of Policianelo in northern Italy and it is interesting that Minaggio depicts him as an old man with white hair, moustache and goatee. Punch later came to be shown as smooth shaven and of indefinite age.

17 This character, whose left foot has unfortunately disappeared, seems to be Dr. Gracian Camanaz of Budri, from Andreini's play "La Campanaccia". The learned and commanding doctor was a stock Commedia dell'Arte role but is not associated with any particular actor.

18 The young man here named Trastulo, playing the mandolin, represents one of many clown-like characters of the "zanni" type. Ricolina was a servant and this is probably a depiction of the actress Ricciolina Antonazzoni

19 Along with two old men and two servants, the "lovers" were the central characters of the Commedia dell'Arte. The roles of Mario and Flavia were played by the celebrated Agostino Grisenti and Margherita Garavini Luciani.

20 The role of Florinda was played by Virginia Ramponi, an actress with the "Fedeli" company. Her husband Gian Battista Andreini, a famous playwright, wrote a tragedy of this name for her which was performed to great acclaim.

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- 23 Chola Napolitane was a clown figure created by Aniello di Maure of whom this is probably a portrait. Cholo is dancing while making clownish facial expressions. This is an example of the clownish character of the Commedia dell'Arte.
- 24 This picture shows an entire stage scene --the serenading of the love-struck servant Spineta by the masked Schapin (Scapino). The variety of instruments hanging from the tree indicates that this could be a depiction of the musically gifted actor Francesco Gabrielli and his wife.
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- 27 Chocholi (Cocolin) better known as Magnifico or Pantolone, was the stock character of the old man who makes a fool of himself by chasing after a young girl or by his excessive suspiciousness or miserliness.
- 28 A Raven (*Corvus corax*), showing some damage to the beak and head, stands in a tree.
- 29 A man, sitting with legs crossed, playing a mandolin.
- 30 Gentleman on horseback. This is one of the pictures which has suffered insect and/or water damage in the upper left hand corner. The unidentifiable collection of feathers at the end of the right arm almost certainly depicted a hooded falcon.
- 31 This Black-headed Gull (*Larus ridibundus*) in breeding plumage is in excellent condition.

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Abstract

Made in 1618 by Dionisio Minaggio, Chief Gardener of the State of Milan, the *Feather Book* consists of 157 collages of birds, hunters, tradesmen, musicians and Commedia dell'Arte figures. The latter are the best known and most widely written about, but the entire collection is of interest. I will discuss the *Feather Book's* creation, contents and construction, along with its history, provenance and acquisition by McGill University. Efforts made to protect and conserve the work will be covered, as will the exhibits and some of the research that has been done on the work.

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