

ABSTRACT

Nestore Leoni (1862–1947) was a talented manuscript illuminator, once famous both inside and outside Italy although little known to contemporary scholars. Italian academics and critics from different backgrounds commented on his work while he was alive: from their writings comes everything we know about him. Nevertheless, such commentators hardly addressed the ontological characteristics of his artifacts, which were inspired by an ancient artistic practice but at the same time fully engaged in the modern visual culture. The dual identity of his works severely challenged the early modern art history interpretation method. Only after the 1930s did scholars develop an appropriate hermeneutical approach, owing to expertise gradually achieved by then in the realm of contemporary art critics. I problematise the critical reception of this artist's work through a preliminary critical overview of Italian artistic sources of the early twentieth century, considering them from a revisionist perspective, and offering their first translation.

keywords

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Disowning Contemporary Art:

The Historiographical Reception of Nestore Leoni's Transnational Work between 1890 and 1936

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Foreword. Modern Italian illuminated manuscripts: peculiarities and developments of a typology to be explored

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century illuminated manuscripts are fascinating subjects for modern art historiography because of their dual nature (Beckwith 1987; Hindman et al. 2001; Coomans and De Maeyer 2008): although they were made to simulate medieval and early modern codices, they have extremely typical meanings and functions linked to their historical context, making them completely distinct from the ancient models. The result of an articulated recovery process induced by the rise of nationalism in early-nineteenth-century Europe, modern decorated manuscripts have material and cultural traits taken from the coeval *Zeitgeist* and so essentially originate in modern issues.

Codices produced during the long period of the medieval revival were not made for private and ecclesiastical purposes as was previously the case. Rather, these decorated books were mainly designed or commissioned to commemorate solemn anniversaries and national celebrations, honouring cultural heroes and the history of nation-states. Specifically, such codices were treated as miniature memorials, according to a nineteenth-century practice that spread well beyond European borders (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990; Thiesse

1999; Passini 2013; Berger and Conrad 2015). For these reasons, these artworks can be analysed according to a multi-perspectival approach, which is complementary to the history of illumination and falls within the broad remit of heritage studies and cultural history, viewed through the specific lens of a critical history of modern art.

Throughout nineteenth-century Europe, the making of the national cultural heritage in *Risorgimento* Italy engaged officials, intellectuals, collectors, and artists in a long-lasting enterprise, which began in the Romantic era and would have been completed only with the decline of fascism. The modern public institutions for heritage conservation — museums, libraries, archives — took shape at the turn of the mid-nineteenth century to house and frame a national heritage that had not existed before. Conservation of artistic and documentary heritage was demanded in order to represent an authentic national history, which was also disseminated through public celebrations and programmes for an *ante litteram* valorisation. At the same time, private collecting was increasingly oriented towards gathering books and documents whose contents were related to the country's history. Those interested in adding memorabilia, artworks and other items of national historical significance to their collections selected illuminated manuscripts for their historical value and material preciousness.¹ In general, collecting items connected to national history was understood as a way of supporting the invention of a national cultural identity. For the soon-to-be-established state of Italy, strengthening its legitimacy and ideological aura in the years to come was extremely important.

The entire artistic activity of Nestore Leoni, a modern artist who was born in a peripheral area of central Italy in 1862 and died in Rome in 1947, overlays the acute phase of this national identity-building process, in which he made significant contributions for the history of art.² However, knowledge about the artist's work still needs to be developed and consolidated, and gauging his contribution to art history can be problematic due to the international breadth of his activity and, conversely, the extremely limited international bibliography available about his works.³

Over the last fifteen years, some authors have critically investigated Nestore Leoni's work to reveal its cultural, technical and stylistic aspects in relation to the still little-explored subject of the nineteenth-twentieth century revival of illumination.⁴ On this subject in particular, a recent contribution by Daniele Guernelli is extremely interesting, as he examines the revival of decorated addresses on parchment in Rome, where Leoni lived and worked, through several case studies (Guernelli 2024).⁵

While these publications pioneered the study and historicisation of this artist's illuminations, establishing a starting point for all subsequent research, this essay

¹ On the collection of manuscripts and autographs during Italian nation building, see Laganà 2024: 81–126.

² Nestore Leoni (1862–1947), VIAF ID 310502178. The only English biography is available in the *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. Despite its tendency to be more of a hagiography than a biography, Orestano (1936) is instead the main reference assumed in this essay about Leoni's life. I have approached it through a critical reading and a problematisation of the author's style and historiographical content in light of his political views.

³ Apart from the *Benezit Dictionary of Artists* mentioned in the previous note, international publications dedicated to this author are very rare. One contribution in English and one in French were written by Toniolo 2024b and Ascoli 2007, respectively.

⁴ For a more detailed look at the Italian bibliography on Nestore Leoni, see Toniolo 2024a; Toniolo 2023; Toniolo 2022; Micheli 2020; Guernelli 2013a; Guernelli 2011; Ascoli 2007; Talamo 2003.

⁵ About Nestore Leoni, see pages 184–187. A previous overview on the modern revival, circulation, and collection of illuminated addresses in Italy is mentioned here as Guernelli 2013b.

⁶ The Statuto Albertino is the main subject of Guernelli 2013a. The artwork is now kept in the Museo del Risorgimento of Turin. The high-resolution *incipit* reproduction is available on Google Arts & Culture: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/testo-miniato-dello-statuto-albertino-nestore-leoni/0AFemZMBSwrXvg?hl=it>.

⁷ The group of thirteen illuminated panels, owned by the agent Emil Offenbacher from 11 December 1952, was sold by Christie's the 28 June 2006, in lot 612 for 54.000,00 USD. See: <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-4747970>.

⁸ The acquisition of the Constitution of the Republic of Argentine illuminated by Leoni is demonstrated by the *Diario de Sesiones della Camara de Senadores* of the Argentinian Senate, concerning the XXXVII *Sesion ordinaria* held on 14 September 1910. This document is quoted and translated by Orestano 1936: 139–142. According to Toniolo 2024b, note 6, it is kept in Buenos Aires, Palazzo Leloir, Circolo Italiano.

⁹ Federica Toniolo analyses the *Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria*, and *I fasti del Valore e del Sacrificio* in Toniolo 2021; Toniolo 2022; Toniolo 2023; Toniolo 2024a and Toniolo 2024b. See the reproductions and the brief description provided by the Ministero italiano della Cultura on the institutional website: <https://www.soprintendenzapdve.beniculturali.it/?s=i+volumi+miniati&submit=>.

¹⁰ Many parts of these works by Leoni are reproduced in Angeli 1930. Images and full text can be consulted online: https://emporium.sns.it/galleria/pagine.php?volume=LXXII&pagina=LXXII_430_194.jpg. Francesco Ascoli published a list of Nestore Leoni's known works, which at the time consisted of a dozen titles. See Ascoli 2007: 203–204.

primarily addresses issues related to art criticism and historiography, focusing instead on the reception of Leoni's work by contemporary critics and the methodological tools available to them at that time, attempting also to provide the first translation of coeval Italian sources. The main aim is to retrieve the fragmentary insights offered by Italian literature on the modernity of Leoni's work in order to examine this issue against the backdrop of research specifically conducted not so much into the material aspects of the works, but rather into the critical literature disseminated in the first half of the twentieth century in its intertwining with nationalist issues.

Indeed, Leoni can be viewed as a 'transnational nation-builder', an epithet which may sound like an oxymoron, but reflects the fact that he cannot be considered simply as an artist with an international reputation. Given the nationalist content of the contemporary sources on Leoni's art and the nationalist meaning of his own artworks, he can be addressed as a nation-builder both inside and outside Italy's borders, since he consciously participated in the comunitary—and transnational—process of constructing national cultural identities through the making of illuminations for Italian and non-Italian patrons. His codices often took on the task of accompanying transnational — and even transcontinental — initiatives for celebrating anniversaries and public festivities: for example, the decoration of the Statuto Albertino (1898)⁶; the *Magna Charta of the United States of America* (1901) (Wright 1916; Orestano 1936: 38–41)⁷; the Constitution of the Argentine Republic (1910)⁸; Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1916), illuminated on the anniversary of the British writer's death (Orestano 1936: 66–67); the *Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria* (*The Tale of War and Victory*) and *I fasti del Valore e del Sacrificio* (*The Glories of Courage and Sacrifice*) (1932)⁹, made during the fascist period to praise the military valour of Italian soldiers in the 1914–18 war.¹⁰

For several years, Italian art criticism has been engaged in writing twentieth-century art history. Many Italian scholars are interested in understanding the evolution of theories of modern art history in the period encompassing the two World Wars, seeking to understand how nationalism and wartime interruptions affected the course of artistic practices and their meanings (Fossati 1971; Dantini 2018; Carli 2021; Acquarelli et al. 2021; Billiani 2021; Laganà 2023). In this methodological framework, reading the critical literature on Nestore Leoni's artworks, which is completely unknown outside Italy, is a compelling task.

Reviews, articles, and essays dedicated to Nestore Leoni between 1889 and 1936 provide helpful sources for an analytical study of the critical reception of his work and allow some insights into Leoni's nineteenth-century models and new achievements in twentieth-century art historiography.

To give just a few references, in 1889 the artist was mentioned with a short biography in De Gubernatis and Matini's *Dizionario degli artisti italiani viventi*

(*Dictionary of Living Italian Artists*), taken here as a *post-quem* quotation. In 1936, Francesco Orestano published *Il libro eterno nell'arte di Nestore Leoni* (*The Eternal Book in the Art of Nestore Leoni*), namely the first — and last — monograph on Leoni's art and biography. Early-twentieth-century Italian historiography, which took place within this chronological period, finds a political and identitary connotation in his art, although within the framework of still immature contemporary art hermeneutics (De Gubenatis and Matini 1889; Orestano 1936).

Several years ago, Francesco Ascoli identified a methodological problem in the historicisation of Nestore Leoni's work:

L'oeuvre de Leoni fut considérée par ses contemporains comme le produit d'un génie italien solitaire. Malgré les hommages et les éloges à son égard, son art ne lui survécut pas. Leoni chercha toutefois à fonder une sorte d'école et à former des élèves, mais il ne publia pas de manuel et n'écrivit pas pour défendre et promouvoir l'enluminure. On garde de lui l'image d'un artiste modeste et d'un artisan laborieux, sans doute anachronique, car il ne parvint à rendre vie durablement ni à calligraphie ornementale ni à la miniature (Ascoli 2007: 204).

Although Ascoli hoped for the publication of a volume that would clarify the critical history and artistic career of this master, this essay attempts, in its conciseness, to highlight the reasons for this lack of acknowledgement. In other terms, the historical sources analysed here serve to show how scholars initially failed to grasp Nestore Leoni's modernity, which would only be recognised in the 1930s. While critics had long persisted in treating Leoni's works as if they were genuine antique decorated manuscripts celebrating Italian glorious ancient memory, some significant changes in art theory following the rise of formalism have allowed specialists to see the innovations they entailed and their unique expression.

Tackling this problem involves extensive research into the history of art history of the period and requires a thoughtful critical approach supported by coeval sources and literature. Analysing the rhetorical and textual contents of historical sources, this essay attempts to deal with an undeniable contradiction: on the one hand, this research aims to shed light on Leoni's fame, which coeval historiographers openly attested; on the other, it argues for the subdued signs of the slow and challenging comprehension of his work in the realm of contemporary art criticism.

Nestore Leoni, coeval but not a modern artist: a critical overview on late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Italian historiography (1889–1936)

The approach adopted in this essay is therefore twofold: it translates and comments on historical literature, and addresses the methodological gap that prevented early twentieth-century scholars from properly interpreting Nestore Leoni's work. Sandra Hindman is among the scholars who have dealt most thoroughly with the methodological problems associated with the neo-Gothic revival of manuscript decoration, which are also relevant to this article. Ten years ago, referring to the contemporary scenario of illumination studies, she stated:

Medieval-like books and manuscripts from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries tend to get lost in the shuffle. They are not taken seriously by medievalists, because they postdate the Middle Ages; and they are not assimilated in a history of "modern" book production, because they are anachronistic (Hindman and Light 2015: 4).

Actually, even though this gap has been partly filled by recent research, the challenge of placing modern manuscripts in a defined methodological framework seems to date back to when these artefacts were still widespread in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while Nestore Leoni was working.¹¹ Not only is it necessary to recognise the persistence of this indeterminacy, but also to ascertain that the issue goes beyond the field of book history and extends to the realm of art history. Leoni's case is exemplary because it overlaps with a period of systematic redefinition of the historical-artistic method. Indeed, at the beginning of the twentieth century in Italy, art history had only recently been acknowledged as a university discipline, and for at least the next fifty years, including the post-war period, scholars were engaged in developing an art-historical method that would include the history of illumination within the broader field of the history of painting (Laganà 2025).

In this time frame, illuminated manuscripts were made mainly for civil commemoration, not just religious purposes. As for many illuminators of the time, the books Leoni decorated were designed not really to be read but to be admired. Furthermore, although Leoni created several diplomas on parchment and books of hours, most of the artist's works were intended for public rather than private patronage, so they were immediately museumised. The contrast between how illuminated

¹¹ Further research is currently being conducted by an international research group, which is organising a conference entitled *Les arts du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance du XIXe siècle* at the Institut national d'histoire de l'art and Musée de Cluny-Musée national du Moyen Âge in Paris. See: <https://arthist.net/archive/49556>.

manuscripts were received in medieval and early modern times and their treatment in the modern period have had clear consequences on the critical reception of these artefacts and, as a result, on art historiography, causing late nineteenth and early-twentieth-century-scholars to hesitate in approaching interpretation of Leoni's art: while they searched the illuminations for traces of ancient models, they did not see how much modernity dwelt in them.

The simultaneous development of modernism in painting — from the Romanticism of the Purists, Nazarenes and Pre-Raphaelites, to Symbolism and the avant-garde movements — complicated the historical context in which Nestore Leoni and other modern illuminators worked, absorbing widespread influences and stylistic contaminations that further distanced their work from the field of expertise of decorated manuscript scholars (Hindman and Light 2015: 26–27).

These concerns emerge with crystalline evidence from the sources, a selection of which will be analysed below. For this purpose, starting from the already mentioned *Dizionario degli artisti italiani viventi* could be helpful. The authors included Leoni as an artist and a distinguished member of the national community as well: the text undoubtedly has patriotic motivations. In the preface to volume I, De Gubernatis explains the aims of his publication with a mythological description of the nation, an approach perfectly compliant with the growing Italian nationalism of the day: 'To the artists of Italy. I dedicate my work to you; writers and artists, we must form, and, truly, we are one family. The same tradition unites us, the same light of heaven warms us; we are of one country, and we love its glory equally' (De Gubernatis and Matini 1889: 5).¹²

In 1889, Leoni had only been making illuminated manuscripts for a couple of years. After the mid-1880s, indeed, he had encountered Abbot Canon Anziani, Prefect of the Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana in Florence, who challenged Leoni to attempt becoming a professional illuminator in light of the fact that he was already a geometer (and thus already possessed considerable technical drawing skills) (Orestano 1936: 28). From one standpoint, it seems significant that the artist was already included in the roster of national artists so soon after completing his debut works, as this illustrates his privileged position in the network of the coeval art system.¹³ From another, the dictionary entry needs to be understood as a first partial presentation of the artist, albeit in the significant context of a book published to help write and disseminate national cultural history (De Gubernatis and Matini 1889: 259–260). The brief description portrays him as an artist highly regarded by experts and by patrons of the highest rank, such as the German Emperor Wilhelm II, the minister of King Umberto I of Savoy, and, among others, a 'professor', who can be recognised only by his surname Barabino. This is

¹² All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated. The original texts can be found at the end of the article.

¹³ The Commemoration of William II of Germany, the Miniature on porcelain for the Marquis Torrigiani, the Parchment commissioned by the Società Filarmonica Fiorentina for Mistress Hastreiter, and the Cover of Dante's *Vita Nuova* commissioned by Cav. Civelli are known to be dated before 1890. These works are also named in this order and without their current location by De Gubernatis and Matini 1889: 259–260.

perhaps Nicolò Barabino (1832–1891), a painter little studied today but largely known to coeval public patrons (De Gubernatis and Matini 1889: 260).¹⁴

Only a few years later, Leoni caught the attention of leading Italian academics and accessed a broader domain of critical studies, namely, the art journals. At the beginning of the twentieth century, these were a new feature in specialised Italian publishing, succeeding the long tradition of miscellaneous cultural periodicals. Issue IV of *L'Arte. Periodico di storia dell'arte medievale e moderna e d'arte decorativa* (Art. Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Art History and Applied Arts), which was published at the end of 1901, quoted Adolfo Venturi's introductory speech for the inauguration of the exhibition of the American *Magna Charta* illuminated by Leoni, held at the offices of the Associazione Stampa Romana (Roman Press Association) in July that year (Venturi 1901).¹⁵ Venturi's prologue dwells amply on the high quality materials and the taste of the fifteenth-century-inspired iconography. However, his purpose is not merely descriptive; rather, he acknowledges the monumental value of Leoni's work and contemporary illumination in general. In other words, he ascribes to the author and the technique the task of celebrating and fixing in historiographical memory the importance of a document that witnesses the national history of the United States of America. To understand the issue explicitly, it is helpful to consider a short part of the speech's conclusion:

The scholar and the artist went hand in hand, the mathematician and the artist mingled, the chemist and the artist studied together to obtain the mastics for gold and discovered the secrets of the technique of the beautiful ancient times. All to adorn, frame, the portraits of the distinguished men of the United States of America and form like the golden book of that nation (Venturi 1901: 36).

In addition to appreciating the artistic quality of the piece, Adolfo Venturi emphasises its cultural value, classifying it as 'the Golden Book' of the American nation. This is how he implicitly gives the work a monumental function, assigning it the task of preserving and transmitting memory.

The allusion to the monumental significance of Leoni's illuminated manuscripts becomes explicit in a critical text by Guido Biagi (1855–1925). Biagi was the director of the Biblioteca Mediceo Laurenziana (1889–1923) in Florence and a friend of the artist. He founded the Museo Laurenziano del Libro e della Miniatura (Laurenziano Museum of Books and Illumination), to collect manuscripts, autographs, and other documents (Fasano 1967). The artwork Biagi speaks of is dedicated to Elizabeth Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, that Leoni decorated in 1913, albeit given as undated by the primary bibliography. At the bottom of the article,

¹⁴ Nicolò Barabino (1832–1891), VIAF ID 49496265; Getty ULAN 500050764. In the last thirty years, no monographs dedicated to Barabino have been published. The biographical profile published in the 'Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani' dates back to 1963. See Di Genova 1963.

¹⁵ Wright (1916) provides the artwork's material, stylistic, and iconographic description. Venturi's aforementioned introductory speech (1901) is also published in Orestano 1936: 122–125.

Biagi writes a concluding formula that is not only praise but also a precise appraisal of the author's distinctive art:

And truly intense and sweetest joy, indeed cumulus of joys, is to contemplate the work of Elisabeth Browning illustrated by Nestore Leoni: equal joy is felt perhaps by those who breathe the fragrant air of a garden in May, where vivid aspects of beauty were scattered, and listen at the same time to delightful music. But to enter that *hortus conclusus* and enjoy it, one must have a fine sensitivity for the various arts that intersected in forging such a precious monument (Biagi 1936: 147–150).¹⁶

What does such rhetoric point to? Rather, what effect does it produce? Instead of interpreting the modernity of Leoni's work, he makes an ekphrastic description of it, completely disengaged from critical and historiographical motivations. Biagi limits his analysis to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of such a 'monument' without delving into the material and conceptual aspects determined by the work's contemporary dating. Besides the form, the author should have considered both the artist's skills in technical drawing and new technologies of illumination making, and the totality of political and social motivations that made it a monument (Orestano 1936: 21).

It seemed impossible to consider Leoni's work as contemporary art production owing to the antique origins of manuscript illumination, which always prevailed over the other specific aspects of Leoni's work in the critics' reviews insofar as coeval critics were used to studying contemporary paintings, sculptures, and architecture, while the investigation of illuminated codices remained the prerogative of scholars of antiquity. Hence, experts in medieval and Renaissance art judged and described Leoni's works through the philological and palaeographic methods that characterised the early years of the history of illumination in Italy. Consequently, all the meanings of Leoni's artworks that would be most relevant from the perspective of contemporary art critics were obscured; it would have been more appropriate for these critics to deduce and order in a defined theoretical framework the interlacing with coeval culture and arts.

A broad aversion to seeing the contemporary soul of Leoni's work is evident in later writings and documents. Some of these show how, while still living, the artist was already 'universally' considered the successor of Oderisi da Gubbio (1240–1299), a celebrated master illuminator of the medieval age (Angeli 1921b; Biagi 1936: 148).¹⁷ Today, in Leoni's codices, scholars and connoisseurs find not only patterns from the medieval and early modern period — such as Celtic style decorations and Paolo Uccello's battles — but also stylistic influences from Horace

¹⁶ The transcription of the text can be found in Orestano 1936: 147–150.

¹⁷ The letter from Treasury Minister Luigi Luzzatti to Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti (dated 23 December 1903) and Giolitti's reply (undated) are reproduced in Orestano 1936: 133.

Vernet, Bartolomeo Pinelli's Neoclassicism, Purism, and the ornamental style of *Art Nouveau* (Toniolo 2023; Toniolo 2024a). Although the artist performed an in-depth exploration of ancient techniques, the iconographies of his works often evoke coeval themes and portray nineteenth-century people, such as kings, politicians, and men of letters. Most of the visual sources Leoni looked at for inventing his figures and compositions were institutional photographic portrayals, postcards, stamps, magazine articles, and even photographs taken by amateur soldier-photographers, as if Leoni wanted to give his work a documentary value, like a scattered *reportage* to be handed over to history (Toniolo 2021: 232; Toniolo 2022: 387–389; Toniolo 2024b: 372–375).¹⁸

As already shown in the most recent literature, the *Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria* display an interesting example of this, namely the gold reproductions of photographs taken in the trenches of the First World War framed in illuminated borders. The one on f. 63 of the manuscript reproduces a photograph taken in 1917 and kept in the Fototeca dei Civici Musei di Storia dell'Arte in Trieste. Although studies on the techniques adopted by the artist have not yet clearly revealed the process by which these works were created, this example supports the hypothesis that Leoni must have been familiar with modern image reproduction techniques, such as photomechanics and zincography (Toniolo 2024a: 208–210, Toniolo 2024b: 372).¹⁹

In contrast, the bibliography of the first half of the twentieth century generally demonstrates that at that time scholars agreed in acknowledging Leoni's illuminations mainly for his ability to assimilate and improve ancient iconography and ornamental patterns. They unanimously overlook their remarkable semantic, stylistic, and technical topicality. The contemporaneity of Leoni's work was often recognised more in the updating of typology or adaptation to the present nationalist taste than in the radical revision of the object's cultural meaning, purpose, aesthetics, and production. They could not yet see that Leoni's illumination was no longer a fine artifact made to delight a particular patron, flaunt his wealth, or glorify the religious text; rather, it was an original and modern medium for the building of national history and, in this sense, a monument to the nation.

Indeed, Carlo Siviero (1882–1953), a well-known Neapolitan painter who was to become director of the Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome at the end of his career, in reviewing Leoni's solo exhibition at the XI Biennale di Venezia (1914) titled *Arte dell'alluminare* (*The Art of Illumination*), highlighted the modernity of the artist's style, noting the originality of his formal achievements²⁰:

Let suppose we were allowed to illustrate each stage worthily on the path of Leoni's art. In that case, we should record as many victories and achievements

¹⁸ Unfortunately, there are no public domain images available on Nestore Leoni's work, which has yet to be extensively studied. All those accessible online are collected in this article footnotes and can be viewed in high-quality resolution through several links.

¹⁹ Nestore Leoni, *Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria*, Padua (Italy), Museo Storico della Terza Armata, without shelfmark; inventory number F9487, Trieste (Italy), Fototeca Civici Musei di Storia dell'Arte. For further details on modern reproduction techniques applied to illumination, see also Hindman and Light 2015: 6–7.

²⁰ Carlo Siviero (1882–1953), VIAF ID 96403982; Getty ULAN 500097931. As for Leoni's solo exhibition, see *Catalogo della XI Esposizione Internazionale d'arte della città di Venezia, 1914*: 63–64, and Archivio Storico de La Biennale di Venezia — ASAC Dati at the following links: <https://asac.labiennale.org/attivita/arti-visive/annali?anno=1914>; <https://asac.labiennale.org/persone/390060>. See also Toniolo 2024b: 366–367.

in the search for renewed forms and expressions of the art of illumination nowadays as there were works that in the course of these twenty-four years Leoni accomplished [...] Is he [...] an imitator? No. The elements that constitute the decorative expression that Nestore Leoni imposes on his creations sometimes seem to be motifs that we have already encountered. Still, deeper penetration and the link that is soon established between those sheets rich in marvellous greens and robust reds and mysterious blacks and melancholic purples and candid whites and varied forms reveals to us a personality that immediately imposes itself and claims the artist's place next to the greatest illuminators (Siviero 1914).²¹

In 1914, after all, the Biennale had already been one of Europe's most important centres for the presentation and reception of contemporary arts for two decades. After participating in the exhibition, Leoni finally entered the official art sphere. Notwithstanding exhibitions during the same period in some of the most significant international museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, most of his work consisted of public and private commissions (Orestano 1936: 41–46). As evidenced by the documentation preserved in the Historical Archives of La Biennale di Venezia (ASAC Dati), the artist participated in the Biennale by presenting Shakespeare's *Sonnets* in a solo exhibition, along with Petrarch's *I Trionfi* and some panels of Dante's *Vita Nova* — then still being executed — inspired by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century iconography.²² Although appreciated in the great Venetian exhibition, Leoni's illuminated manuscripts were an exception among the artworks of the present, which *connoisseurs* of ancient illumination observed with only mild interest.

The effort made by scholars to address the contrast between antiquity and modernity implemented by Leoni's work emerges clearly from the words of Diego Angeli (1869–1937), a writer who, at that time, was appreciated for his nationalist and interventionist views. In the *Marzocco*, a literary magazine published in Florence from 1896 to 1932, he wrote on the edition of the *Vita Nuova* illuminated by Leoni for the centenary of Dante's death in 1921²³:

Not enough has been said about the illuminator Nestore Leoni in Italy. This singular artist, amidst the twentieth century, amidst such clamour of machines and such facilitation of photographic processes, has been able to renew the miracle of those Benedictines who, during the early Middle Ages, adorned the codices of the old poets with eternal gems and immortal gold. No one, I believe, is today a greater master of style than him (Angeli 1921a).²⁴

²¹ See also Orestano 1936: 151–153.

²² *XI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte della città di Venezia 1914*. See also ASAC Dati — Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee: <https://asac.labiennale.org/persona/390060>.

²³ On the *Vita Nuova* illuminated by Leoni see Guernelli 2024: 184–187.

²⁴ There is a reference to the work made together with the painter Vittorio Grassi (1878–1958), ULAN 500155207, VIAF ID 80282745. See also Orestano 1936: 157–159.

The consonance of Angeli's interpretation with the critical reviews of Leoni's art analysed thus far is based on the purported need to extrapolate the artist's work from its proper historical context to compare it directly with medieval illuminated manuscripts, thereby pursuing a laudatory but completely anti-historical purpose. In the most significant passages, Angeli recalls what Biagi had said in 1890, writing in the *Illustrazione Italiana*: 'Today, it is fashionable to make diplomas and parchments which would like to imitate ancient illuminations but are instead a humiliating testimony to modern inexperience' (Biagi 1890: 269). After all, the genre of praise would have been essential to Leoni's acknowledgment as a nation-builder before and during the increasing of Italian nationalism in the fascist era.

Eulogistic motivations also prevail in an article by Guido Biagi, published posthumously after he passed away in January 1925, just over two years after the establishment of the fascist dictatorship. The article had been written in 1916 to comment on Shakespeare's Sonnets illuminated by Leoni on the third centenary of the Bard's death. It was published a decade later to commemorate Biagi in the *Bollettino d'arte* (*Art Bulletin*), the first ministerial journal dedicated to the activities of Fine Arts Superintendents and scholars. However, the purpose of these editors' initiative was not limited to celebration of Biagi, but also fulfilled a crucial task in fascist Italy: to contribute, including through the means of art criticism, to the regime's construction of a nationalism strongly linked to the art system (Biagi 1925).²⁵

While Leoni's work was to have been featured among many artworks from different countries in a prestigious exhibition that the British government had planned to honour one of their greatest cultural heroes, the exhibition was finally cancelled due to the first world war.²⁶ Referring to that illuminated book, Biagi declares Leoni to be the 'renewer and re-creator' of illumination, that is, the agent of a 'Resurgence [...] [of] the art of illuminating', already recalled elsewhere (Luzzatti 1936: 121):

Leoni's merit is above all that of having been able, with the forms and means of old art, to make a personal work of art, though consonant with and faithful to the decorative traditions of the age from which he wished to draw inspiration while maintaining a perfect correspondence between the text and its decorative content. In all his works, which are truly magnificent and such as to rival the most precious codices of the golden century of the art of illumination, the artist from Abruzzo must be recognised for this predominant quality, even considering the variety of styles and subjects (Biagi 1925: 518).

²⁵ For further analysis and descriptions of the work and making context, see also Angeli 1921b.

²⁶ Biagi 1925: 513.

Rather than asserting the modernity of Leoni's work compared to the ancient tradition from which it came, the author chooses the neutral expression 'personal

work of art', thus signifying the lack of a possible historiographical classification. In the period under examination here — from 1889 to 1936 — the balance between ancient models and technique and the modernity of style, invention, and purpose of Leoni's artifacts would never have been fully achieved.²⁷ Instead, a process of politicisation of Leoni's work, which seemed to adhere perfectly to the nationalist cultural policy, was advanced in these years.

There are a vast number of edited publications and unpublished papers dated between 1926 and the early 1930s on the *Codici della Guerra. Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria*. They were commissioned as early as 1915 by the Comitato Nazionale per la storia del Risorgimento (the National Committee for the History of the Risorgimento) and completed in 1932 (Orestano 1936: 70–78, 88–100). The work was the most arduous enterprise the artist had ever undertaken, having been called upon to recount the history of the Italian protagonists of the 1914–18 war (Toniolo 2021: 231–23; Toniolo 2022: 385–390; Toniolo 2024a: 207–212). Despite enduring extremely high human and material losses and incomplete acknowledgment concerning the diplomatic recovery of its territories, Italy was an ally of the Entente and won the war. This is why fascism, as a colonialist and belligerent regime, remembered the 1914–18 war as a moment of national glory.

A selection of these sources is brought together in the last bibliographical reference considered in this analytical review: *Il libro eterno nell'arte di Nestore Leoni* (*The Eternal Book in Nestore Leoni's Art*). The author Francesco Orestano (1936) sought to accompany the essay with letters, articles, and official documents that could testify to Leoni's fame among his contemporaries. The sources are treated without exhaustive cross-referencing, meaning the location of archival documents cannot be deduced from the paratext, and bibliographical references to newspaper articles and other edited materials are incomplete. This prompts one to consider Orestano's volume as a primary source, assuming the contents of the appendix conform to the original texts.

Going back to the group of sources on the *Codici della Guerra*, Carlo Siviero wrote with proud fascist rhetoric, on 14 March 1926 in the national newspaper *La Tribuna*, very interesting testimony:

No monument and, what is more important, no form of art could perhaps stop and express in a work of forthright national physiognomy not only the phantoms of the dream that spring from the fantastic power of a great artificer but also the living and precise documents, the complex objective historical matter, from the preparation to the conclusion of our great war, a gigantic effort made by us with thought and arms, word and action; to give us, in synthesis, with noble symbolic and chromatic commentary, ethical emotion and palpitating

²⁷ See further early-twentieth-century sources on Leoni in the *addenda* of Orestano 1936.

aesthetics of the singular civil and military virtues of our people (Orestano 1936: 172–173).

Beyond Siviero's perspective, which aligns with the rhetorical thrusts of the dictatorship, what is important here is the author's emphasis on two qualities of the codices being prepared. Siviero highlights how powerfully Leoni's illumination can illustrate the historical event; and the author ascribes to the artwork a value that is not only monumental but even documentarian, since it also collects and decorates public acts, such as announcements and deliberations of parliament.

The same themes are taken up by Diego Angeli, who, again interested in Leoni's work, published an article in the journal *Esercito e Nazione* (*Army and Nation*) in December 1930. While remaining poised between artistic criticism and cultural appreciation, Angeli also valued the narrative and documentary function of the artist's illumination. Consistent with Angeli's reactionary inclination, the nationalist issue is also greatly emphasised in his text. He writes:

The simple and unadorned documents of our war surpassed all other forms of higher poetry. And the most Italian painter — most Italian in his art, most Italian in the feeling that had inspired him, most Italian in his technique and subject matter — had found his surest expression in this that will forever remain the finest song of our three-millennia history. And we must truly rejoice that the last of the great illuminators, the sole heir of art that was all ours and that reached the highest peaks by us, wished to dedicate this supreme effort of his passionate and laborious existence, not merely to the exaltation of one man's work but to the glorification of the enterprise of an entire lineage (Orestano 1936: 178).

The gifting of the *Codici della Guerra* to Benito Mussolini in May 1933 represents the culmination of nationalism in Leoni's critical reception. Michele Biancale (1878–1961), a fascist critic and art historian, published a long chronicle of the official delivery. The text includes a description of the work and an introduction to the artist, widely known to the public by then. In the newspaper *Popolo di Roma*, on 16 June 1933, Biancale began his article as follows:

On 24 May, the great two-part Golden Codex that master Nestore Leoni dedicated to neutrality, intervention, victory, and rewards, was offered to the *Duce* for preservation at Palazzo Venezia. The codex title evokes glorious exemplars, eternal commentaries on sacred and profane deeds, and communal and republican constitutions. *Exultets* that are named by the cities that preserve them,

books of famous Hours, Madonnas' Books of Hours, rare specimens dear to the Humanists, the treasures, in short, of poetry, wisdom, and religion deliberated by authors with thoughtful and profound souls, created by an artificer for a Prince or a Pope or an outstanding personage. The Golden Codex, donated by Leoni to the Fatherland, was offered to the *Duce*, asserter of war, restorer of victory, and final clarifier of Italy's work for joint victory. Here, it is that the old and glorious art of illuminating resumes its necessary function, where there is an artist capable of creating an event that is to be perpetuated, a man who, in accepting the homage, guarantees by that simple act the necessity of the work and its destination in the future [...] We would like to ask Nestore Leoni if he would have the spirit to record on equally firm foundations the Codex of the Fascist Revolution in his maturity (Orestano 1936: 182–186).

The delivery of the codices after more than fifteen years of work provides Biancale with the opportunity to name the *Duce* and honour his name and reputation as an admired military general and imperialist, a man symbolic of masculinity, ridiculously compared to the ancient popes as the recipient of such a precious gift as the great two-volume illuminated codices on the glories of the nation in the conflict that was considered the last Italian war of unification. Biancale thus makes the most nationalist comment among the critical writings published on Leoni's work up to that time. At the same time, he is also the one who finally, and better than others, recognises the modernity and independence of Leoni's work from ancient art. With great verve, he states:

Leoni is not a friar who indulges his tedium by copying codices [...] There is no need to transfer Leoni to Gubbio or Bologna to give him a title in his most noble art. [...] You see that it is already not a matter of an illustrator of psalms and antiphonaries. He is the creator of a modern spirit, who chooses the finest poets [...] Nor let it be said that such works were suggested to him by such and such another: this would make Leoni simply a punctual and scrupulous executor, a highly skilled technician and nothing else. Instead, Leoni has a natural inclination to play the role of a poet, which is ineffably congenial to him (Orestano 1936: 183–184).

Remarkably, Biancale would continue this art-historical treatise in another article reported in the appendix of Francesco Orestano's book. It was initially published in the *Nuova Antologia*, a cultural journal well-known in Italy in those years. Opposing many of the authors whose texts have been reviewed here, Biancale insists on the relevance of Leoni's illuminated manuscripts and the historiographical need to appreciate them as contemporary art pieces.

The necessary differentiation of Leoni's art from the ancient illuminators's art leads one to consider it not as an abstract exercise of a solitary contemplator and repeater of past forms but as something current and alive in the spirit. It makes use of procedures that are only in appearance ancient and which can be received under a broader and more inclusive attribute that is art [...] As for art, it has nothing and can have nothing in common with past art, to which it is wont to be reported by unnecessary and outdated mental habit. Art historians are wont to consider illuminators as minor artists, living almost on the fringe of great art, imitators, and repeaters of motifs created by more powerful artistic personalities. This is only true when compared to the illumination art of the same century. But what contemporary art echoes Nestore Leoni's codices? His exegetes have overlooked this, qualifying Leoni as a sapient epigone (Orestano 1936: 187–190).

Biancale even more forcefully declares the artist's stylistic modernity, placing Leoni, later in the text, between the Realists and Pre-Raphaelites and citing Francesco Paolo Michetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti as models for his painting on paper (Orestano 1936: 192).²⁸ Biancale points out the realistic appearance of the figures, the selection of the palette, and the significance attributed to the chromatic selection that was completely disengaged from ancient symbolism. In so doing, he refutes the previous forty years of the bibliography written on modern illumination.²⁹ Although Biancale does not consider how important the Pre-Raphaelite tradition was in Florence and Rome, where Leoni spent his life, this insight represents a significant shift from the interpretations proposed by Venturi, Biagi, Angeli, and others earlier (Parisi 2024a, Parisi 2024b, Acidini 2024).³⁰ The substantial methodological progress of art history and criticism that Biancale's generation was dealing with stood behind this meaningful switching of viewpoint, opening up subsequent hermeneutical developments (Del Puppo 2016).

Biancale's innovative ideas, caught by Orestano, align with the purposes of *Il libro eterno nell'arte di Nestore Leoni*. Albeit it was published almost a century ago, the book remains the most complete historiographical source to study the coeval critical reception of Leoni's nationalist work. Orestano was an Accademico d'Italia (scholar affiliated to the Accademia d'Italia) and the artist's friend. He published the book in Rome in 1936, providing his first biographical summary. At the same time, the publication works as an overview of Leoni's reception in art history, which is *sui generis* within the framework of the modern historiography of art. For these reasons, the text can be interpreted as a biography in its definitive form: although Leoni died more than ten years after the book was published, at the time of publication he had already closed his atelier in Via San Nicola da Tolentino in Rome, thus ending his public career.³¹

²⁸ Probably, Biancale mentions Rossetti referring mostly to his role as an innovator in book illustration and decoration in the 1850s and 1860s.

²⁹ An extensive bibliography on the realistic character of Pre-Raphaelite figures is available. See, for example, Eden 2022, and Brunelli 2024.

³⁰ No studies on the relationship between Leoni and Roman and Florentine collectors and amateurs are yet available.

³¹ The Archivio dell'Istituto Nazionale Luce provides online a short film Umberto Scotti made in 1943 that shows the private activity of Nestore Leoni in his Roman home. The material is available here: <https://patrimonio.archivioluce.com/luce-web/detail/IL5000018308/2/cinque-minuti-nello-studio-nestore-leoni-maestro-miniatura-1.html>. For further insights, see Morelli 2019: 204–205.

Stressing the modernity of Leoni's illumination, and after describing the artist's initial successes in Italy and abroad, Orestano compares Leoni's work and the creation of medieval and early modern illuminated codices. This is all condensed into a long passage that is worth reporting in its entirety:

The work was at that time tripartite: this allowed the artist to proceed with relative speed, especially when the commissions, as in the fifteenth century, were abundant. The tripartition, however, could not avoid the various parts and the text being realised by different artists. The writer provided the beautiful characters' transcription of the text. The decorator dealt with the letters and the friezes without paying any attention to the subject covered in the pages; so he frequently started the work in a given stylistic and chromatic form, using his imagination, which he kept to until the end, whether or not it was in harmony with the text. Finally, the illustrator illuminated within large initials the portraits of the owner or other characters, the effigies of saints, or the desired scenes and possibly added the interlaced squares. Only these last illustrative elements could have some connection with the content of the Codex. The rest, whether it was a Gospel Book, a Psalter, a Book of Hours, or a Treatise by Cicero, did not vary; it was enough to be pleasant and sumptuous. For Nestore Leoni there had to be a correspondence, page by page, between the illumination and the text (Orestano 1936: 50–51).

The comparison of artistic practices aims to attribute to Leoni an ability to decorate manuscripts that nobody had had before in the history of illumination. This is intended to affirm Leoni's definitive emancipation from the ancient tradition, which he surpassed both on the technical and the typological levels. Indeed, similar considerations are expressed explicitly later in the text, in a paragraph entitled 'La nuova tecnica del miniare' (The New Illumination Technique). In this section, the author gives a glance at the updated technique of Nestore Leoni, so it is also helpful to reproduce some of the text here:

How it has been possible to collect and combine so many and so varied components and perform such a massive job with perfect accuracy and extreme speed is one of the secrets of Nestore Leoni's magical technique: indeed, his technique is immensely more advanced than that of the manuscript illumination in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance [...] For the gold, Leoni managed to compose, with repeated tests, a mastic of his invention, not having found any recipes of the Cennini, the Salazar or others useful. His other invention was engraving gold in leaves on the relief areas; in his hands, something never

tried before became a decorative element of significant effect. Undoubtedly, concerning the medieval colouristic technique, which employed vegetable substances and a prolonged grip, Leoni's technique had the advantage of the enormous progress achieved by the colour industry: today, almost all colours are mineral-based, they are much more varied, and, finally, they are easier and faster to use given their ready-made nature as well as better suited to form tempera and combine them with glues, paints, lacquers, and glazes. Above all, he benefitted from numerous and perfected instrumental and mechanical means, unknown in the past and with which it is possible today to achieve a graphic and pictorial perfection superior to that obtained by the ancients and in an incomparably lesser time (Orestano 1936: 54–55).³²

Orestano's observations on the technical updates of Leoni's art are not limited to this. Still, they are also found scattered elsewhere in the book, especially matching the presentation and material description of the artworks.³³ Acknowledging the modernity of Leoni's art takes on crucial significance in the history of the critical reception of Leoni's work. Indeed, such an acknowledgment involves a clear overcoming of that contradiction discussed above in this essay. According to the historiographical sources, the theorists cited appreciated the aesthetic and cultural quality of his decorated manuscripts without considering this quality as dependent on a profound updating of the materials, meanings, and sources. They often even criticised the modernity of contemporary art. Orestano demonstrates the essential aspects of the modernity of Leoni's work, hidden, unseen, or ignored by the previous critics, keeping a rhetorical approach that generally refers to the glorious memory of the Italian illumination of the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, with early modern history seen as a source of pride for fascist nationalism.

In addition to a detailed biographical profile written with the heroic and deeply inappropriate tones of nationalist praise, Orestano provides a case on which to frame his reception and some hypotheses on the origin of modern illumination. The author writes a long and rhetorical introduction to the British Arts and Crafts movement, which opposed the industrial production of artworks and everyday objects by recovering the activities of crafts and design. He considers Leoni's illuminated manuscript an original product of that period, whose reinvention is ascribed only to the individual ingenuity of the artist and regardless of any consideration of the social and historical context: 'No one had ever thought of it before Leoni, for the straightforward reason that the thing in itself was out of the frame of all the technical possibilities of our time' (Orestano 1936: 16). The same concept is repeated explicitly at the end of the essay: 'Nestore Leoni has the imperishable merit of having restored illumination and revived it with modern

³² Toniolo 2024a provides a very rich comment on the modern techniques Nestore Leoni used to create the *Proclami e i discorsi di Vittorio Emanuele II all'esercito e alla nazione*, the *Commentari della Guerra e della Vittoria*, and *I fasti del Valore e del Sacrificio*.

³³ Consider, for example, the description of the *Codici della Guerra*, in which it is said that Leoni decided to use a printer for the preparation of the text and the layout in Orestano 1936: 81.

inspiration, to have given it a current content and meaning, to have relocated it to the top of the art of the book and the incorruptible and eloquent historical document' (Orestano 1936: 110).

From the viewpoint of a revisionist approach to primary sources, some clarifications may be necessary at this stage. Attributing to the artist an absolute responsibility for the modern reinvention of illumination, as Orestano does is obviously inaccurate for at least two reasons: on the one hand, despite being one of the first and most predisposed to experimentation, Leoni is part of a wide group of nineteenth-twentieth-century illuminators active in the European panorama, each of whom somehow improved modern illumination technique; on the other hand, keeping the historiographical discourse limited to techniques means excluding a series of contextual historical and cultural implications that are extremely significant to grasp the inner nature of his language. They will be explained in the conclusions.

Conclusions. Collecting and creating illuminated manuscripts during nation-building: new interpretations of Nestore Leoni's works

For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to take a few steps back in the modern history of decorated manuscripts to provide a relevant critical and historiographical context to Leoni's work. Following a consolidated but still limited scholarly literature, the fortune of illuminated manuscripts in modern times can only be considered the result of an alteration (Hindman et al. 2001: XXIII–XXIV). Owing to the historical consequences of post-revolutionary events in France, a peculiar kind of collecting had spread throughout Europe from the second quarter of the nineteenth century which aimed to gather illuminated fragments, cuttings, collages, and single leaves, which collectors considered as samples of calligraphy and painting. Sometimes they were extracted from the volume they were included in (Fontaine 1836: 17–23; Peignot 1836: 42–45; Lescure 1865: 38–45; Munby 1972; Rionnet 1996; De Hamel 1996; Weick 1996; Camille et al. 2001a: 27–28; Camille et al. 2001b; Guernelli 2009–2010; Guernelli 2011; Mineo 2020). This interest was supported for heterogeneous reasons: taste, an ante-philological approach to manuscripts, the specificities of the antiquity market, and the cultural value attributed to it at that time. First, cutting and collating manuscripts had a real economic advantage, which made the circulation of works more accessible and transport costs cheaper even if the cost of selling a cutting was higher than that of selling intact codices.

Second, cutting also meant selecting the best parts, aiming to enhance the piece, to improve its value, and to transform it into a condensed historical witness.³⁴

The spread of these new ways of acquiring illuminated manuscripts started in private collections, since these practices primarily appealed to the tastes of grand tourists, who were interested in bringing home a valuable yet lightweight souvenir of Italian style (Guernelli 2011: 32–34).³⁵

Subsequent acquisition in public institutions of decorated manuscripts collections in tomes and fragments would soon ratify the medieval revival, as it assisted the invention of national cultures in the Romantic age. Significant national museums and libraries were engaged, over several decades, in forming exemplary collections, such as — to name a few notable cases — that of the Victoria and Albert Museum, established in the mid-nineteenth century, the coeval collection of the British Library, the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, or the Manuscripts section of the Vatican Library, extensively enlarged between the late nineteenth and the second quarter of the twentieth century.³⁶

As the rapid museumisation of the illuminated manuscript progressed, a complementary phenomenon arose. By the end of the century, several forms of mechanical reproduction of manuscripts were available: engraving lithographic and chromolithographic printing, and photography (Roberts 1995; Camille et al. 2001c: 108; Guernelli 2011: 33–34). The popularity of decorated folios, driven by reasons already explored in literature, became established during the twentieth century thanks to the technical reproduction of ancient works, which broadened their dissemination, knowledge, and appreciation.

The new reproduction practices maximised manuscript circulation even outside collecting practices. Illuminated manuscripts assumed several new connotations and began to be seen as historical documents and monuments to the nation, means of rewriting cultural history, instruments of education and worship for the people, and even mere illustrations.³⁷ At the same time, artists believed they could recreate a national artistic tradition by reviving the techniques used to produce ancient illuminations, regardless of the iconography, which could be either Gothic or humanistic (Guernelli 2011: 34–37).

The difference between ancient and modern decorated manuscripts became increasingly evident. Instead of being regarded as an artifact destined for private enjoyment and devotion, which had value as an inseparable set of text and images accurately coordinated to respond to a specific function of use and a particular form of fruition, modern illuminated manuscripts were conceived of as historical evidence, a versatile medium, and an aesthetic object.

The illuminated manuscript's modern reception, acquisition, and reproduction process corresponds to a parallel path of transformation. If, at the beginning of

³⁴ On the habit and the reasons for which dealers and collectors altered ancient manuscript codices by cutting and reassembling the illuminated parts, which spread during the nineteenth century, see Camille et al. 2001b: 66–91.

³⁵ Guernelli 2011 provides a very detailed account of this process in Italy and Europe.

³⁶ Concise but accurate information on the collection can be found on the websites made available by the institutions: <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/illuminated-manuscripts>; <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2014/01/welcome-to-the-catalogue-of-illuminated-manuscripts.html>; <https://manuscripts-france-angleterre.org/polonsky/en/content/accueil-en?mode=desktop>; <https://digi.vatlib.it/?ling=it>.

³⁷ Watson 2001: 203–204 and Guernelli 2009–2010: 34 report a useful list of handbooks on the manual and technical reproduction of illuminated manuscripts, the diffusion of which is indicative of a request for knowledge for the realisation and reproduction of such artwork. The topic is taken up with a rich overview of types in Camille et al. 2001c: 109–142. A notable passage on the manipulation of illumination for a nationalist reinterpretation of national history is reported in Camille et al. (2001c: 164): 'In the context of the history of the collecting and appreciation of manuscript illumination, the fake is perhaps the most significant clue to the vast change in status of illumination in the nineteenth century. As more fakes come to light, we will understand far more completely not only what earlier audiences expected but also what they concocted the Middle Ages to be.'

the century, the illuminated fragment was considered a 'monument of a lost art', by the end of the nineteenth century, once reworked in the form of collages, historical sources, and ornament, it became a typical modern item, made using contemporary techniques and new meanings (Camille et al. 2001b: 101; Guernelli 2011: 31–32).³⁸

In addition, while humanistic taste and the devotional use of the ancient typology were failing, the illuminated manuscript changed its function and turned to the nationalist cult of medieval and early modern art. If one looks at the achievements of better-known international artists in the specific field of manual reproduction and ornamentation, such as Owen Jones (1809–1874), Henry Noel Humphreys (1810–1879), and William Morris (1834–1896), the originality of modern illuminators compared to the ancient typology becomes even more evident (Orestano 1936: 9–12; Camille et al. 2001c: 171).

The nineteenth-twentieth-century revival of the illuminated manuscript Leoni participated in in the Italian area and beyond cannot be considered to be disconnected from this long transformation process. Indeed, it could be said that it is its consequence. Nestore Leoni, in addition to creating works that have become famous in literature for their nationalistic significance and high quality of execution, devoted much of his time to commissioned diplomas for individuals and books of hours, thus seeking both to maintain a direct link with the tradition of religious codices and to meet the demand for decorated folios from collectors. It was through the fame he gained by fulfilling requests from private collectors that the artist was able to reach the peaks of public commissions. Able to satisfy the tastes of the time, which were closely linked to the ongoing process of nation-building, Leoni was a cultured interpreter of his era as well as a masterful artist.

The coeval historiography has revealed Italian scholars' inability to explain the meaning of Leoni's art, the nationalist rhetoric that affects their comments, and the inadequacy of the palaeographic and early modern methods. Therefore, Leoni's work needs to be reconsidered globally. If thought of as the effect of such an articulated historical course, Leoni's illuminations appear to be strongly connected to primary modern historical-cultural factors. The historiographer must see Nestore Leoni as a nation-builder in the proper sense. He should be remembered as an author of an entirely new art genre, derived from the historicisation of a nationalist collecting of books and documents. After all, that nationalist aptitude aimed not to regenerate the ancient illuminated manuscript but to reproduce it masterfully, falsifying through the new medium what illumination had been and inevitably producing an authentic contemporary work of art.

³⁸ The quotation is by William Young Ottley, who compiled the catalogue for the Christie's auction held between May 1825 and May 1826, at which the miniatures stolen from the Sistine Chapel during Napoleon's plundering were presented. These words demonstrate how, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, illuminated manuscripts were the object of an established collecting taste, considered valuable material witnesses of the ancient past. For further details on this, see Guernelli 2011.

Original quotes

Page 12: ‘Agli artisti d’Italia. A voi dedico quest’opera mia; scrittori e artisti dobbiamo formare e veramente siamo una famiglia sola. La stessa tradizione c’invita, la stessa luce di cielo ci scalda; siamo d’una patria, e ne amiamo del pari la gloria.’

Page 13: ‘L’erudito e l’artista si sono dati la mano, il matematico e l’artista si sono affratellati, il chimico e l’artista hanno studiato insieme per ottenere i mastici per l’oro e penetrare ne’ segreti della tecnica del bel tempo antico. Tutto per ornare, inquadrare i ritratti degli uomini insigni degli Stati Uniti d’America, e formare come il libro d’oro di quella nazione.’

Page 14: ‘E gioia davvero intensa e dolcissima, anzi cumulo di gioie, è il contemplare l’opera di Elisabetta Browning illustrata da Nestore Leoni: ugual gioia prova forse chi respiri l’aria profumata di un giardino di maggio, dove fossero sparsi vivi aspetti di bellezza, e ascolti nello stesso tempo una musica deliziosa. Ma per entrare in quell’hortus conclusus e goderne, occorre aver sentimento fine per le diverse arti che concorsero a foggare un monumento tanto prezioso.’

Pages 15–16: ‘Se lo spazio ci consentisse di fermarci a lungo come vorremmo onde illustrare degnamente ogni tappa sul cammino dell’arte di Leoni, dovremmo registrare tante vittorie e altrettante conquiste nella ricerca di rinnovate forme ed espressioni dell’arte dell’alluminare ai nostri giorni quante furono le opere che nel corso di questi ventiquattro anni il Leoni ha compiute [...] È [...] un imitatore? No. Gli elementi che costituiscono l’espressione decorativa che Nestore Leoni impone alle sue creazioni, ci sembrano talvolta motivi che già udimmo, ma una più profonda penetrazione e il legame che presto si stabilisce fra quei fogli ricchi di verdi meravigliosi e di rossi potenti e di neri misteriosi e di viola malinconici e di bianchi candidissimi e di forme variatissime, ci rivela una personalità che s’impone immediatamente e che reclama il suo posto accanto ai più grandi artefici della miniatura.’

Page 16: ‘Di Nestore Leoni, alluminatore, non si è parlato abbastanza in Italia. Questo artista singolare, in pieno secolo ventesimo, fra tanto strepito di macchine e fra tanta faciloneria di processi fotografici, ha saputo rinnovare il miracolo di quei benedettini che durante l’alto medioevo infiorarono di gemme non periture e di ori non caduchi i codici dei vecchi poeti. Nessuno, credo, è oggi più di lui maestro di ogni stile.’

Page 17: ‘Oggi è di moda far diplomi e pergamene, che vorrebbero imitare le miniature antiche, e sono invece testimonianza umiliante dell’imperizia moderna.’

Page 17: ‘Il merito del Leoni è soprattutto quello di aver saputo, con le forme e i mezzi di un’arte vecchia, far un’opera d’arte assolutamente personale, benché consona e fedele alle tradizioni decorative dell’epoca a cui ha voluto ispirarsi mantenendo una perfetta rispondenza fra il testo e il suo contenuto esornativo. In tutti i suoi lavori, veramente magnifici e tali da rivaleggiare con i più preziosi codici del secolo d’oro dell’arte del minio, l’artista abruzzese si riconosce di colpo per questa sua qualità predominante, anche attraverso alla varietà degli stili e dei soggetti.’

Pages 18–19: ‘Nessun monumento e, quel che più conta, nessuna forma d’arte poteva forse fermare ed esprimere in un’opera di schietta fisionomia nazionale non pure i fantasmi del sogno che scaturiscono dalla potenza fantastica di un grande artefice, ma i documenti vivi e precisi, la complessa materia storica obiettiva, dalla preparazione alla conclusione della nostra grande guerra, sforzo gigantesco da noi compiuto col pensiero e con le armi, con la parola e con l’azione; così da donarci, in sintesi, col nobile commento simbolico e cromatico, emozione etica ed estetica palpitante delle singolari virtù civili e militari di nostra gente.’

Page 19: ‘I semplici e disadorni documenti della nostra guerra superavano ogni altra forma di più alta poesia. E il pittore italianissimo — italianissimo per l’arte sua, italianissimo per il sentimento che l’aveva ispirato, italianissimo per la tecnica e la materia — aveva trovato la sua più sicura espressione in questo che rimarrà per sempre il più alto canto della nostra epopea tre volte millenne. E bisogna veramente rallegrarsi che l’ultimo dei grandi illuminatori, l’erede unico di un’arte che fu tutta nostra e che da noi raggiunse le più alte cime, abbia voluto dedicare questa suprema fatica della sua esistenza appassionata e laboriosa, non già all’esaltazione dell’opera di un uomo, ma alla glorificazione dell’impresa di tutta una stirpe.’

Pages 19–20: ‘Il 24 Maggio è stato offerto al Duce, perché sia conservato a Palazzo Venezia, il grande Codice aureo in due parti che il maestro Nestore Leoni ha dedicato alla neutralità, all’intervento, alla Vittoria e alle ricompense. Il titolo di Codice evoca esemplari gloriosi, commentari eterni di gesta sacre e profane, di costituzioni comunali e repubblicane. *Exultet* che si denominano dalle città che le conservano, libri di Ore famosissimi, uffizioli di madonne, esemplari rari e cari agli Umanisti, il fiore, insomma, della poesia, della sapienza, della religione delibato da spiriti pensosi e profondi, creato da un artefice per un Principe o per un Papa o per un personaggio d’eccezione. Il Codice aureo, donato dal Leoni alla Patria, è stato offerto al Duce assertore della guerra, restauratore della Vittoria, chiarificatore definitivo dell’opera dell’Ita-

lia per la vittoria comune. Ecco che la vecchia e gloriosa arte dell'alluminare riprende la sua funzione necessaria, ove ci sia un artista capace di creare, un avvenimento che debba essere perpetuato, un Uomo che nell'accogliere l'omaggio garantisca con tale semplice atto la necessità dell'opera e la sua destinazione nel futuro [...] Vogliamo chiedere a Nestore Leoni, s'egli nella sua vegeta maturità avrebbe l'animo d'impostare su basi altrettanto ferme il Codice della Rivoluzione Fascista.'

Page 20: 'Il Leoni non è un fraticello che indulge al suo tedio copiando codici [...]

Non c'è bisogno di trasferire il Leoni a Gubbio o a Bologna, per riconoscergli un titolo nella sua arte nobilissima. [...] Vedete che non si tratta già di un illustratore di salmi e d'antifonari ma d'uno spirito moderno, che sceglie i più sottili poeti [...] Né si dica che a suggerirgli tali lavori sia stato il tale o il tal'altro: si farebbe in tal modo, del Leoni, un esecutore puntuale e scrupoloso, un tecnico peritissimo e niente altro. Invece a me piace rintracciare un'inclinazione naturale del Leoni in cotesto suo assumere, come motivo di trasposizione in commento grafico-cromatico, un poeta che gli sia ineffabilmente congeniale.'

Page 21: 'La necessaria differenziazione dell'arte del Leoni da quella dei miniatori antichi, porta a considerarla non come astratta esercitazione di un solitario

contemplatore e ripetitore di forme passate, ma come cosa attuale e viva nello spirito, che si vale di procedimenti solo in apparenza antichi, ma che possono essere accolti sotto un attributo più largo e comprensivo che è quello di arte [...] Quanto all'arte, essa non ha e non può avere nulla in comune con quella passata, alla quale per una stanca abitudine mentale si suole riportare. Gli storici dell'arte sono soliti considerare i miniaturisti nell'ambito degli artisti minori, viventi quasi al margine della grande arte, imitatori e ripetitori di motivi creati dalle personalità artistiche più potenti. Ciò è vero soltanto nella valutazione dell'arte miniaturistica che rispecchia quella del secolo in cui essa si svolge. Ma quale arte nostrana echeggia quella che pratica nei suoi Codici Nestore Leoni? È ciò che i suoi esegeti hanno trascurato, qualificando il Leoni come un epigono sapiente.'

Page 22: 'Il lavoro veniva a quei tempi tripartito: ciò che permetteva di procedere

con relativa speditezza, specie quando le commissioni, come nel Quattrocento fioccano; senza per altro che la tripartizione evitasse una forzata discontinuità nelle varie parti tra loro e tra esse e il testo. C'era lo scrittore che provvedeva alla trascrizione del testo in bei caratteri. C'era il decoratore che si occupava delle letterine e dei fregi, senza curarsi dell'argomento trattato nelle pagine; cosicché avveniva frequentemente che iniziato il lavoro con una forma stilistica e cromatica, quale la fantasia gliela suggeriva, egli la mante-

neva sino alla fine, risultasse o no in armonia con il testo. E c'era in ultimo l'illustratore, che miniava entro le grandi iniziali i ritratti del proprietario o di altri personaggi o le effigie di Santi o le scene volute, e aggiungeva, eventualmente, i quadretti intercalati. Solo questi ultimi elementi illustrativi potevano avere una qualche relazione col contenuto del codice. Il resto, o che si trattasse di un *Evangelario* o di un *Salterio* o di un *Libro d'Ore* o di un *Trattato* di Cicerone, non variava; bastava che riuscisse gradevole e fastoso. Per Nestore Leoni doveva esserci una rispondenza, pagina per pagina, tra l'alluminatura e il testo.'

Pages 22–23: 'Come poi sia stato possibile non che raccogliere e combinare tante e sì variate componenti, eseguire un lavoro così immane e con perfetta accuratezza e con estrema rapidità, è uno dei segreti della tecnica magica di Nestore Leoni: certo di una tecnica immensamente più progredita di quella a cui era legata la miniatura dei codici nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento [...] Per l'oro il Leoni era riuscito a comporre, con pazienti e ripetute prove, un mastice di sua invenzione, non avendo trovato praticabile nessuna delle ricette del Cennini, né del Salazar, né d'altri. Altra sua invenzione era anche l'incisione sulle zone in rilievo dell'oro in foglie; cosa non mai tentata in passato e divenuta nelle sue mani un elemento decorativo di grande effetto. Indubbiamente poi la sua tecnica coloristica aveva su quella medioevale, a base di sostanze vegetali e di lentissima presa, il vantaggio di giovare, ed era naturalissimo, dei progressi enormi raggiunti dall'industria dei colori: oggi pressoché tutti a base minerale, inoltre assai più vari nella larga gamma delle tinte già approntate, e infine di più rapido uso, nonché più adatti a formare tempere e a combinarli con colle, vernici, lacche, smalti. Soprattutto egli si giovava nella tecnica del disegnare, di quei numerosi e perfezionatissimi mezzi strumentali e meccanici, ignoti in passato e con cui è possibile oggi di raggiungere una perfezione grafica e pittorica superiore a quella ottenuta dagli antichi e per di più in un tempo incomparabilmente minore.'

Page 23: 'Nessuno vi aveva mai pensato prima del Leoni per la ragione semplicissima, che la cosa per se stessa era fuori del quadro di tutte le possibilità tecniche del nostro tempo.'

Pages 23–24: 'Averla ripristinata e rivivificata con ispirazione moderna, averle dato un contenuto e un significato attuale, averla ricollocata, senza più discussioni possibili, al vertice dell'arte del libro e del documento storico incorruttibile ed eloquente, è merito imperituro di Nestore Leoni.'

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