

The Madruzzo Book of
Hours, a Dismembered
Manuscript Illuminated
by Marie Vrelant

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By

Jordi Puig

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



The Madruzzo Book of Hours, a Dismembered Manuscript Illuminated
by Marie Vrelant

Series: Dismembered Medieval Manuscripts: Biblioclasm and Digital
Reconstructions

By Jordi Puig

This book first published 2025

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN: 978-1-0364-4799-1

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-0364-4800-4

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DEDICATION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the outset of this study, I would like to include a personal reflection. On 22 May 2023, I had the privilege of attending a lecture by Professor Carla Rossi at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Her presentation, which examined the deeply troubling practice of biblioclasm for profit, left a profound impression on me. Biblioclasm involves the intentional disassembly of rare books and manuscripts to sell their individual pages and folios as separate commodities. The event was organised by the esteemed musicologist Professor Antoni Rossell, for whom I hold the utmost respect.

It was during this lecture that I first became aware of this profoundly unsettling phenomenon — a practice I had not encountered previously, despite a lifelong commitment to the conservation and restoration of artworks. Rossi's insights shed light on the cultural and ethical implications of biblioclasm, highlighting the urgent need for action to protect these irreplaceable artefacts from such destructive practices.

Moreover, I encountered a passionate scholar facing an incredibly challenging time with exemplary dignity and composure. Professor Rossi was enduring a vicious campaign of hatred and death threats orchestrated by the very biblioclasts she had reported in Italy. Inspired by her courage and dedication, I resolved to employ my expertise to assist her. Being retired, I harboured no fear of threats or defamation; on the contrary, I felt it my duty to support such an important cause.

This book is therefore dedicated to Professor Carla Rossi, a true embodiment of resilience, wisdom, and generosity. Her tireless commitment to pursuing knowledge and preserving cultural heritage inspires all who are fortunate enough to work and learn under her guidance.

You give not only your profound expertise but also your unwavering support, nurturing a love of scholarship and instilling in your students a deep appreciation for the richness of our shared history. Your ability to inspire and encourage us is a testament to your extraordinary character and your passion for teaching. This work would not have been possible without the light you bring to every challenge and your unshakeable belief in your

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students' potential, with deepest gratitude for your mentorship, passion, and
boundless generosity. This book is as much yours as it is mine.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Cândea, 1974: Virgil Cândea, *Inventaire illustré d'œuvres démembrées célèbres dans la peinture européenne, avec un chapitre sur les tombeaux démembrés dans la sculpture française*, Unesco, Parigi, 1974, Verlag Dokumentation, Munich.

[Available online <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000137856>]

Martin & Rossi, 2024: Alex Martin, Carla Rossi, *Digital Reconstruction of a Dismembered Book of Hours Illuminated by Robert Boyvin*, Series Dismembered Medieval Manuscripts: Biblioclasm and Digital Reconstructions, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Puig, 2025: Jordi Puig, *The ReceptioGate Affair: Truth, Defamation, and the Struggle Against Manuscript Dismemberment*, OproM Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15283264>

Rossi, 2022: Carla Rossi, “Bibliocastia a scopo di lucro e culto feticistico dei frammenti di manoscritti medievali”, *Studj romanzi*. Nuova serie. XVIII, Viella, Rome 2022, p. 161-196.

Rossi, 2024: Carla Rossi, *Isabelle Boursier's Book of Hours, a Dismembered Manuscript from Mary Benson's Collection*, Series Dismembered Medieval Manuscripts: Biblioclasm and Digital Reconstructions, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

INTRODUCTION

The digital reconstruction analysed in this study — a meticulous restoration of a dismembered illuminated Book of Hours — represents the culmination of a collaborative endeavour and is among the most significant projects undertaken by the ‘Dispersa Coegi’ team, led by Professor Carla Rossi. Pioneering the WayBack Recovery Method (WBRM), she developed this innovative restoration methodology to facilitate the reconstruction of dismembered manuscripts. By employing a philological approach to images of folios excised from medieval manuscripts, the WBRM enables meticulous and scholarly reassembly of these vandalised works.

This project required immense patience and was expertly overseen by Professor Rossi, whose extensive knowledge provided invaluable insights into the liturgical functions, historical context, and philological significance of Books of Hours. Under her guidance, we examined the recovered folios, shedding light on their liturgical use, the tradition of Flemish manuscript decoration, the standard composition of such texts, and the unique attributes of this particular manuscript.

A thorough historical and artistic analysis of the parent Book of Hours was only feasible following its digital reconstruction, which ultimately led to its attribution to the workshop of the Vrelant couple — a connection that will be examined in depth in this study.

The research team initially comprised Nancy Impellizzeri, Michela Cicalini, and Adrienn Orosz. Over time, they have been joined by myself, Alex Martin, along with seven other scholars, who are currently preparing studies that will be published in this same series. Together, we meticulously monitored every sale of the excised leaves of this precious 15th-century manuscript on eBay for more than two years.

The parent manuscript, known as the Madruzzo Book of Hours, was dismembered by a former German university assistant who relocated to Escondido, California, allegedly to evade legal scrutiny. Since the 1980s, he has gained notoriety as a biblioclast. His actions have led to the permanent loss of unique and irreplaceable cultural artefacts, including medieval manuscripts, incunabula, and rare books. These works, considered

masterpieces of their time, were not only invaluable for their artistic and historical significance but also essential for understanding the cultural and intellectual history they embodied. His destruction of these treasures has caused an irreversible void in the collective cultural heritage.

Biblioclasm is often understood as an act of destruction motivated by ideology—an attempt to suppress knowledge, silence dissent, or erase the cultural identity of a perceived enemy. This understanding is rooted in historical examples such as the burning of the Library of Alexandria, the medieval inquisition's destruction of heretical texts, or the Nazi book burnings, where the symbolic annihilation of books was tied to the domination or erasure of a people or ideology. However, contemporary manifestations of biblioclasm challenge this traditional framing. In the case of manuscript excision for profit, biblioclasm takes on a very different character—one that is not ideological but entirely economic. This form of biblioclasm is a kind of cultural autofagia: it consumes its own heritage for financial gain, fragmenting priceless artefacts not in the name of censorship or ideological purity, but to satisfy the demands of the market.

Unlike ideologically driven biblioclasm, which operates under a (however flawed) logic of higher purpose, commercially motivated biblioclasm is devoid of pretense. Here, there is no outwardly proclaimed moral or cultural justification. Instead, it operates under the cold logic of profit, reducing artefacts of immense historical, cultural, and artistic significance to mere commodities. Each excised leaf, each illuminated miniature, is torn from its original context and sold to the highest bidder, often framed as an aesthetic object or collectible rather than part of a coherent whole. This transformation erases the manuscript's integrity and obliterates its role as a unified artefact of devotion, scholarship, or historical record. It is a fundamentally paradoxical act: the artefact is valued enough to be dismembered for its parts, yet that very dismemberment destroys the integrity that once made it valuable.

The implications of this phenomenon are deeply troubling, as the heritage being consumed is not someone else's, not a foreign adversary's or ideological opponent's, but our own. This form of biblioclasm operates like a form of cultural self-cannibalisation, where the artefacts of our shared history and identity are sacrificed to the short-term gains of the marketplace. It is a practice that reduces human heritage to fragments with price tags, where illuminated manuscript leaves or decorated initials become little more than lucrative collectables for private buyers. The cultural devastation caused by this commodification of history is profound, as it severs our

connection to these artefacts, turning them into isolated, decontextualised objects stripped of the narratives they once embodied.

The failure to confront this phenomenon in broader discussions of biblioclasm is striking. A recent event at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, titled *Détruire le livre* ("Destroying the Book"), held on 26 November 2024, serves as a revealing example of how the topic of biblioclasm is often framed. The event explored the destruction of books across history, examining cases tied to ideological, religious, and political motives, as well as incidents of censorship and cultural suppression. However, despite its ambitious scope and the prominence of the BnF as a leading institution in the study of manuscripts and books, the event notably failed to address the ongoing and deeply troubling practice of manuscript dismemberment for profit. This omission is particularly striking given France's significant connection to medieval manuscripts, many of which originate from its scriptoria or are housed in its collections. Such a discussion would have provided a timely opportunity to draw attention to the modern forms of biblioclasm that continue to threaten cultural heritage under the guise of legitimate trade. Institutions like the BnF hold not only a wealth of knowledge about the history of manuscripts but also a moral responsibility to address the modern forms of biblioclasm that threaten their preservation.

France has compelling reasons to engage with this issue. The destruction and excision of manuscripts often involve French artefacts, and some of the most notable cases of dismembered manuscripts include codices of French origin. Addressing this problem would not only shed light on the scale of the damage but also help foster a cultural dialogue about the importance of preserving manuscripts as unified works. The absence of such discussions at an event like *Détruire le livre* represents a missed opportunity to confront a deeply relevant and ongoing cultural crisis.

This failure to include manuscript excision in discussions of biblioclasm reflects a broader misunderstanding of the issue. Many assume that biblioclasm is a relic of the past, tied to the overtly ideological destruction of books and manuscripts. Yet today's biblioclasm is far more insidious, operating within the frameworks of commerce rather than conflict. It disguises itself as a legitimate trade, cloaking the dismemberment of manuscripts in the language of collection and appreciation. This makes it all the more dangerous, as it erodes cultural heritage under the guise of valuing it.

The modern practice of biblioclasm for profit also raises critical questions about complicity. Auction houses, dealers, and even collectors who participate in the trade of excised leaves are enablers of this destruction. Moreover, the silence of many cultural and scholarly institutions perpetuates the problem. Without public acknowledgment or condemnation of these practices, the market for manuscript fragments continues to thrive, incentivising further acts of dismemberment.

The cultural loss inflicted by this practice is immeasurable. Manuscripts, particularly medieval ones, are more than just collections of text and image—they are cohesive works of art, devotion, and intellectual history. Their destruction severs the connections between their parts, making it impossible to fully understand or appreciate the artefacts as their creators intended. Each excised leaf is a small piece of a larger puzzle that will likely never be reassembled. The destruction of these manuscripts is not simply the loss of physical objects but the erasure of the stories, identities, and legacies they carry.

In this light, the practice of commercially driven biblioclasm reveals a form of cultural indifference. It prioritises short-term financial gain over the preservation of human history, treating manuscripts not as treasures of shared heritage but as disposable commodities. This commodification is a deeply troubling shift, one that demands urgent attention from scholars, cultural institutions, and policymakers.

As the reader will observe, the restoration process of the Madruzzo Book of Hours was labour-intensive, as reassembling the digitally recovered folios into their original order demanded exceptional diligence and perseverance.

The final result gains even greater significance in light of a 2022 report submitted to the Carabinieri's *Corpo Tutela Patrimonio Culturale* (TPC, Cultural Heritage Protection Unit) concerning the dismemberment and falsification of artworks. Following this report, the dealer temporarily erased all traces of the Madruzzo Book of Hours from his eBay profile. (A detailed discussion of this report will follow in the subsequent pages.)

As Professor Rossi wrote in September 2022 in the Italian journal *AboutArt*¹

Al mondo vi sono splendidi capolavori che purtroppo non vengono custoditi nei musei, ma circolano sul mercato privato dell'arte. A volte vengono acquistati da collezionisti colti e appassionati, che li preservano con le dovute attenzioni, altre da personaggi che operano al limite della legalità, senza scrupoli e senza cultura, che si curano solo del proprio profitto.

In the world, there are magnificent masterpieces which, unfortunately, are not safeguarded in museums but instead circulate within the private art market. Sometimes they are acquired by cultured and passionate collectors who preserve them with due care; at other times, by individuals who operate on the edge of legality, without scruples or culture, concerned only with their profit.

Uno di questi è da quarant'anni tristemente noto agli studiosi per essere un biblioclasta compulsivo, che riduce in pezzi i manoscritti che acquista, per metterne poi all'asta i singoli fogli su eBay (dove si nasconde dietro più account), distruggendo per sempre opere uniche, il cui valore storico e artistico supera di gran lunga quello puramente economico

One of these individuals has, for forty years, been sadly notorious among scholars for being a compulsive biblioclast, who dissects the manuscripts he acquires into pieces, later auctioning individual leaves on eBay (where he hides behind multiple accounts), thereby destroying forever unique works whose historical and artistic value far exceeds their mere economic worth.

In the summer of 2022, the scattered leaves of this tiny Book of Hours, produced in Flanders around 1480 to fit into the delicate hand of a woman (measuring just 90 by 65mm), surfaced on eBay. Despite its diminutive size, the manuscript was lavishly decorated, thanks to the use of magnifying lenses typical of Flemish ateliers (Fig. 1).

On 13 July 2016, the manuscript was first offered for sale at Christie's in London as Lot 115, with an estimated value of £30,000 to £50,000. However, it failed to sell and was returned to its owner. The following year, on 6 July 2017, it was re-listed by another British auction house, Dreweatts 1759 Fine Sales. Despite expectations, it was sold for just £27,000, falling significantly short of its initial estimate.

The manuscript was acquired by Hartung & Hartung Antiquariat, who listed it in their catalogue dated 3 May 2022 (Auction 151, Lot 2) with an asking price of €32,000. Once put up for auction in Germany, it was promptly purchased by the biblioclast mentioned at the beginning of this essay and subsequently dismembered.

Many medieval manuscripts of various origins (mainly Flemish, French, Italian, and German) that reached us intact and were then auctioned in Germany — especially by Hartung & Hartung — have been dismembered in recent years.

Building on these preliminary observations, it becomes evident that decisive measures must be implemented to protect Western medieval manuscripts

from the irreparable harm caused by dismemberment. A crucial step in this direction would be the establishment of comprehensive, publicly available lists identifying dealers with a documented history of biblioclastic practices — those who routinely purchase intact manuscripts only to dismember them for profit by selling individual leaves.

Such lists would serve as an essential resource for auction houses, antiquarian booksellers, and private collectors, enabling them to exercise greater diligence in their sales processes. By barring these individuals from purchasing intact manuscripts at auctions or private transactions within Europe, the cultural and historical integrity of these artefacts could be preserved. This approach would not only help curtail the market for dismembered manuscripts but also send a strong message that the fragmentation of cultural heritage for financial gain is unacceptable.

Additionally, auction houses, particularly those in Germany like Hartung & Hartung, must adopt stricter ethical guidelines and vetting processes to ensure that manuscripts are sold to institutions or individuals committed to their preservation. A code of conduct could be developed in collaboration with cultural heritage organisations, scholars, and librarians to prioritise the safeguarding of these treasures. The introduction of legal restrictions or even Europe-wide policies preventing the sale of manuscripts to known biblioclasts could further strengthen these efforts.

Raising awareness among collectors and the broader public is another critical component of this strategy. Many buyers may not fully understand the consequences of purchasing excised leaves, inadvertently fueling a market that incentivises the destruction of intact manuscripts. Educational campaigns led by academic institutions and cultural organisations could highlight the importance of preserving manuscripts in their entirety, both as historical documents and as works of art.

Finally, collaboration between nations, auction houses, and cultural institutions could create a unified framework for monitoring and regulating manuscript sales. By pooling resources and expertise, these entities could establish a shared database documenting the provenance and ownership history of medieval manuscripts, ensuring greater transparency in the market and enabling quicker identification of patterns of biblioclastic behaviour.

Preventing the dismemberment of medieval manuscripts is not simply a matter of preserving physical objects; it is about safeguarding an irreplaceable part of our shared cultural heritage. These manuscripts are

vital not only for their content but also for their materiality — their structure, bindings, and the context provided by their original form. Every excised leaf represents a loss of historical context and diminishes the ability of scholars to study these artefacts in their entirety. By acting decisively, we can help ensure that future generations have access to these treasures in the form their creators intended.



Fig. 1. The Crucifixion, from the Madruzzo Book of Hours. The image was kindly provided to the Research Centre for European Philological Tradition by Dr Eugenio Donadoni, an expert in Western medieval and Renaissance manuscripts at Christie's, London.

Regrettably, the Madruzzo Book of Hours was sold in Germany to the biblioclast referenced at the beginning of this essay. This individual has long been notorious for his destructive practice of dismembering Western manuscripts and selling their leaves at exorbitant prices. A few months after the sale, individual folios from this manuscript began to surface on eBay, auctioned by this biblioclast at exceptionally high prices. In addition, other folios, including the manuscript's original fifteen miniatures, were sold privately.

To better understand the methods employed by this dealer, we purchased a textual folio from his eBay shop. Upon its arrival, we discovered an enclosed note inviting us to participate in private auctions for additional folios, including those featuring the manuscript's principal miniatures. This revealed a broader strategy: the dealer uses eBay as a platform to attract potential buyers, then engages them in private correspondence to promote exclusive opportunities to bid on what he describes as his "best items" — the illuminated folios containing the most valuable miniatures from the manuscripts he dismembers.

Each month, the dealer curates a catalogue for his "special clients", offering these illuminated folios for private bidding. The prices for such folios frequently exceed three thousand dollars, illustrating the lucrative nature of this destructive practice. We were able to access a limited number of these catalogues before being excluded from the dealer's client list. This exclusion occurred after he discovered that our research centre had undertaken the digital reconstruction of the manuscripts he had dismantled, an initiative designed to counteract the cultural loss resulting from his actions.

This case exemplifies the ongoing and systemic challenges posed by biblioclastic dealers, whose practices not only fracture historical manuscripts but also undermine efforts to preserve and study these irreplaceable artefacts in their entirety.

Is the dismemberment of a medieval manuscript and the sale of its leaves on the private art market a crime?

The answer is indeed affirmative. The ILAB (International League of Antiquarian Booksellers) upholds a fundamental policy on this matter. According to this policy (see point 22), "Members are committed to the preservation of historical materials and should not break complete and intact copies of books or manuscripts". However, this safeguard is easily bypassed when dealers operate outside ILAB's membership. The absence of affiliation with ILAB may suggest a lack of professional integrity, yet the reality remains that platforms like eBay offer no oversight. There, dealers shielded by pseudonyms can sell almost anything without accountability. The biblioclast in question, for instance, operates under the alias TuscanyBooks, and though his online shop enjoys positive reviews, it more closely resembles a butcher's counter than a true art gallery.

The activities of the German biblioclast who acquires illuminated medieval manuscripts in Europe, dismantles them, and sells individual leaves on

eBay, represent a multifaceted legal and ethical violation. This individual not only dismembers historical artefacts of immense cultural and scholarly value but also engages in practices that contravene both eBay's policies and international laws protecting cultural heritage.

Violation of eBay's Policies

The actions of this dealer constitute a flagrant breach of several critical policies established by eBay, particularly those aimed at ensuring the ethical and legal trade of artefacts and cultural items.

One of the most pertinent is eBay's Artefacts, Cultural Heritage, and Grave-Related Items Policy, which explicitly prohibits the sale of manuscripts and similar artefacts that are over 50 years old unless the seller can provide proper documentation, including verifiable provenance. Provenance is crucial in the world of historical artefacts as it provides a traceable record of ownership, ensuring that items have not been illegally obtained, stolen, or exported in violation of national and international laws.

It is pointless to stress that this dealer never reveals the true provenance of the excised leaves, which he passes off as "fragments" from some unspecified manuscripts. He falsifies their origins, and even when a client requests clarification, he fabricates entirely fanciful provenances out of thin air.

This policy reflects a broader commitment to preventing the illicit trade of cultural heritage, which remains a pervasive issue in global markets. Without such safeguards, online platforms risk becoming facilitators of a trade that not only robs cultural items of their rightful context but also undermines efforts to preserve historical legacies for future generations.

In addition to violating policies related to artefacts, the biblioclast also engages in practices that directly contravene eBay's Terms of Sale Policy. These terms strictly prohibit sellers from soliciting buyers to conduct transactions outside the platform. This rule exists for multiple reasons: to maintain transparency in transactions, to protect both buyers and sellers from fraudulent practices, and to ensure compliance with taxation and consumer protection laws. When transactions occur outside of eBay's ecosystem, they escape the oversight mechanisms designed to ensure legitimacy and fairness. This leaves buyers vulnerable to scams, as they lose the protection offered by eBay's guarantees, such as refund and dispute resolution processes. Simultaneously, sellers bypass the requirement to document sales, potentially avoiding taxes and legal accountability.

The biblioclast's solicitation of buyers for off-platform auctions is particularly egregious because it undermines the very structure that ensures trust and security in online marketplaces. By encouraging buyers to participate in clandestine, unauthorised transactions, the biblioclast creates a shadow market that is inherently opaque and unregulated. In this space, accountability is entirely absent: the origins of artefacts are obscured, and there is no mechanism for verifying whether these items were acquired, handled, or sold legally. Furthermore, this shadow market operates outside the reach of taxation authorities, creating an economic loophole that deprives governments of legitimate revenue. More significantly, it promotes a culture of secrecy and illegitimacy in the trade of historical and cultural artefacts, further eroding public trust in the online trade of such items.

The implications of these practices extend beyond legal and regulatory concerns. The lack of oversight in off-platform transactions not only enables but also encourages unethical behaviour. Buyers who participate in such auctions are often complicit in the perpetuation of an illegal or quasi-legal market, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Meanwhile, sellers like the biblioclast exploit the gaps in regulation to maximise profits at the expense of transparency, fairness, and the ethical treatment of cultural heritage. By circumventing eBay's policies, the biblioclast effectively defrauds the platform, undermining its ability to enforce its own rules and maintain the trust of its users. More broadly, this behaviour contributes to a wider problem in the cultural market, where the fragmentation of oversight and regulation allows for the unchecked destruction and dispersal of artefacts of immense historical value.

In summary, here are the major violations committed by this dealer (who, having 100% positive feedback on eBay, falsely presents himself as reliable).

Legal Transgressions

The biblioclast's actions also constitute several legal offences:

Destruction of Cultural Heritage: The act of dismantling medieval illuminated manuscripts is a flagrant violation of cultural preservation laws in many jurisdictions. The legality of the initial purchase does not necessarily absolve the biblioclast of the consequences of their subsequent actions, especially if those actions undermine cultural heritage protections or involve misleading practices in the sale of excised leaves.

Even when acquired legally, cultural artefacts are often subject to national and international regulations that extend beyond the point of purchase. For instance, UNESCO's 1970 Convention and related laws in many European countries place restrictions not only on the acquisition but also on the export, modification, and resale of cultural property. These laws are designed to ensure that artefacts remain preserved as integral objects and are not removed from their historical context. If the biblioclast exports leaves or resells them without proper documentation or adherence to such regulations, they could still be in violation of these laws.

Additionally, the dismemberment of manuscripts, while not explicitly illegal in all cases, still conflicts with laws aimed at preserving cultural integrity, as we are about to see. Certain jurisdictions have specific protections for cultural objects, particularly those deemed nationally significant, even after legal purchase.

Legality does not negate the ethical dimensions of the biblioclast's actions. Manuscripts are cohesive artefacts that were often created with a deliberate artistic and intellectual unity. Dismembering them for financial gain prioritises profit over the preservation of historical and cultural significance. While the purchase may have been legal, the act of dismembering manuscripts undermines their value as historical artefacts and deprives both scholars and the public of the opportunity to study and appreciate them in their original form.

Even if the initial purchase is above board, the biblioclast's subsequent behaviour—such as misrepresenting the provenance of leaves, failing to disclose their source, or fabricating origins—may constitute fraudulent or deceptive practices. Buyers on platforms like eBay are entitled to accurate and transparent information about the items they purchase. Misleading claims about the origins of manuscript leaves or their historical context exploit the trust of buyers and tarnish the market for cultural heritage items.

Illicit Trade of Protected Items: The sale of individual manuscripts leaves without proper documentation and export permits likely violates laws in the country of origin. Many nations, particularly in Europe, have strict controls on the sale and export of cultural heritage to prevent the loss of significant artefacts to the global market.

Tax Evasion: By conducting clandestine sales outside of eBay, the biblioclast likely avoids paying taxes, including value-added tax (VAT) and

income tax, which are legally required for transactions involving the sale of goods.

Furthermore, the biblioclast's solicitation of buyers to engage in secretive auctions fosters a culture of illegitimacy in the trade of cultural heritage. Such practices not only obscure provenance but also encourage further illegal activities, making it harder for authorities and researchers to trace and recover lost or stolen items.

National Laws and Penalties

Currently, there is no overarching supranational law within the European Union specifically designed to prevent or penalise the dismemberment of illuminated manuscripts. This legislative gap presents a major problem, as the fragmented legal approaches across member states hinder coordinated efforts to prevent the destruction and dispersal of these invaluable cultural artefacts. As noted by Virgil Cândea² in a 1974 UNESCO publication:

Illuminated manuscripts represent a unique and deeply troubling case in the unfortunate history of dismembered artworks. The challenges associated with their reconstitution are among the most formidable, and the achieved results thus far have been rather limited and frequently unsatisfactory (Cândea, 1974, p. 188).

Without a comprehensive European framework, the protection of medieval manuscripts remains vulnerable to exploitation by those who operate in legal grey areas. Strengthening international cooperation and establishing unified standards would be a significant step toward addressing the challenges articulated by Cândea, ensuring that these unique artefacts are preserved as complete works for future generations.

For years, Carla Rossi has been leading a personal campaign advocating for a unified legislative approach across Europe, a stance that has unfortunately drawn significant hostility. Let us now briefly review the current state of medieval manuscript protection in various European countries.

Italy

In Italy, the dismemberment of medieval manuscripts is unequivocally classified as a criminal offence under the Cultural Heritage and Landscape Code, which provides one of the most comprehensive legal frameworks for the protection of cultural heritage in the world. Article 10 explicitly defines protected cultural assets, including privately owned collections, with Article 10(3)(c) specifically encompassing medieval manuscripts. Article 20(1)

further prohibits the destruction, damage, or misuse of cultural assets in ways that compromise their historical or artistic value, while Article 30(3) obligates private owners to ensure their preservation. Violations are severely penalised under Article 169, which prescribes imprisonment from six months to one year and fines ranging from €775 to €38,000 for unauthorised actions such as the destruction, removal, or modification of cultural property.

Unlike older legislation, contemporary Italian law applies broadly to any artefact deemed part of the nation's cultural heritage, without relying on fixed lists of protected items. This comprehensive approach reflects the Franceschini Commission's Declaration I (1964), which established that all artefacts with archaeological, historical, artistic, or documentary significance are part of the nation's patrimony. This forward-thinking framework is particularly necessary given Italy's unparalleled wealth of cultural assets and its status as the custodian of a large portion of the world's medieval manuscripts.

Indeed, Italy's legislative framework is potentially the strongest in Europe, and the destruction of manuscripts through dismemberment typically occurs outside its borders. Italy's manuscripts, however, are often stolen and trafficked to countries with weaker protections or more permissive markets. Notable examples include the theft of manuscripts from the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Guardiagrele, where precious liturgical books were illicitly removed, and the infamous looting of the Girolamini Library in Naples. In the latter case, rare books and manuscripts were systematically stolen and dispersed, with some ending up in foreign auction houses, illustrating the international dimension of the problem.

These incidents underscore the paradox Italy faces: while its laws are robust, enforcement challenges and the demand for rare manuscripts on the global market make the country's cultural heritage vulnerable to theft. Manuscripts stolen from Italy are often smuggled abroad, dismembered, and sold piecemeal, particularly in nations with less stringent regulations or ineffective enforcement mechanisms. For instance, Germany and the United States have become hubs for such activities, highlighting the critical need for international cooperation to combat illicit trade and safeguard the cultural heritage of Italy and beyond.

Italy's example demonstrates that strong legislation is essential but insufficient on its own; proactive enforcement, public awareness, and international collaboration remain vital to address the persistent threats to its invaluable cultural heritage.

France

France enforces its heritage laws through the *Code du Patrimoine*, which protects a wide range of cultural assets, including manuscripts. Under this code, manuscripts of significant cultural interest may be classified as “monuments historiques”, thus protecting them from alteration or dismemberment. Violations of these protections can result in fines and other penalties, particularly in cases where manuscripts are taken out of the country without proper authorisation.

Given that over 60% of manuscripts destroyed for profit are of French origin—often exquisitely illuminated works produced by renowned ateliers for distinguished patrons—one might argue that France could strengthen its commitment to safeguarding its manuscript heritage. Much of this cultural legacy was already irreparably diminished during the Revolution and, more recently, in the devastation of the Second World War.

Germany

Germany and the United Kingdom are *terra nullius* in this regard (as Professor Rossi often emphasises in her lectures). It is no coincidence that these two nations are precisely where biblioclasts operate with impunity.

In Germany, the *Kulturgutschutzgesetz* (Cultural Property Protection Act) of 2016 provides a framework to protect cultural assets. This law requires that significant cultural items, including manuscripts of historical importance, be registered if they are to remain within the country. Exporting or altering these items without official approval is prohibited, and penalties include both fines and potential jail time. The law also obliges the owner to preserve the integrity of such items, making dismemberment a direct violation.

United Kingdom

The United Kingdom’s approach is guided by various laws including the *National Heritage Act*, the *Treasure Act* (1996), and the *Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act* (2003). These laws criminalise the trafficking of cultural artefacts, including manuscripts, and apply strict penalties for the illegal handling or dismemberment of historically significant works. The *Treasure Act* further applies when manuscripts are classified as treasures due to their historic value, requiring that they be reported and protected accordingly.

Spain

In Spain, the *Ley del Patrimonio Histórico Español* (1985) enforces stringent regulations for items considered national treasures, such as medieval illustrated manuscripts. Manuscripts can be designated as “Bien de Interés Cultural” (BIC), which provides them with protection against dismemberment and mandates preservation. Penalties for breaching these laws include fines and potential criminal charges, particularly if items are altered or sold without government approval.

Netherlands

The Netherlands protects its cultural heritage under the *Erfgoedwet* (Cultural Heritage Preservation Act), which mandates that culturally significant items, such as illustrated manuscripts, cannot be altered or removed from the country without proper permission. Fines and legal consequences apply for any dismemberment of registered artefacts, and cultural heritage authorities closely monitor these items to prevent unauthorised transactions or modifications.

Portugal

In Portugal, the *Lei do Património Cultural* similarly protects items of historical significance, including manuscripts. Classified items must be preserved in their original form, and any attempt to alter or dismember them can lead to serious legal penalties, including fines. The law also restricts exportation, requiring permits for any item considered part of the national heritage.

Sweden

Sweden’s *Kulturmiljölagen* (Cultural Environment Act) enforces protection over valuable historical items. This includes any manuscripts deemed part of the national cultural heritage. Altering or damaging such items is illegal, and penalties are imposed for those who attempt to export or dismember manuscripts without authorisation.

As becomes immediately clear, the problem lies in defining what constitutes a cultural asset of national significance, with considerable responsibility resting on the discernment and ethical judgement of those operating within the private art market.

Prof. Fabio Massimo Bertolo addressed this issue in his lecture, *The Market, Philological Research, and Illegality*, delivered on 5 April 2023 for the Research Centre for European Philological Tradition. Prof. Bertolo has consistently alerted the Italian state to manuscripts circulating in the private market that hold significant national interest — such as the *Offiziolo* by Francesco da Barberino — and has actively advocated for the state to acquire these works first, ensuring they are preserved in public museums rather than in private collections.³

The manuscript object of this reconstruction

The small octavo *Madruzzo Hours*, created for an Italian patron, was erroneously attributed by Eugenio Donadoni, a Christie's expert, to a Flemish artist known as the Master of the Wodhull-Haberton Hours.

While identifying the manuscript's intended recipient — or one of its owners — was relatively straightforward, as it still retained its original binding featuring a fabric cover embroidered with the Madruzzo family's coat of arms (Fig. 2) at the time of sale, the greater challenge lay in attributing the hand of the illuminator.



Fig. 2. The Madruzzo Hours, with its embroidered fabric binding, before it was dismembered. Image kindly provided by Christie's, London.

Donadoni, renowned for his precision and expertise as one of the most refined specialists at the British auction house, may have acted with undue haste in his analysis.

The Madruzzo family was a distinguished patrician lineage from Trentino, a region in northern Italy situated at the crossroads of Austria and Switzerland, renowned for its strategic position in the Alps. The family's origins trace back to the 12th century, with early members playing a significant role in the political and feudal structures of the region. By the 14th century, the lineage was succeeded by the lords of Castel Nanno in the Val di Non, who adopted the Madruzzo name and continued the family's ascent to prominence.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Madruzzo family achieved widespread renown, particularly through Cardinals Cristoforo Madruzzo (1512–1578) and his nephew Lodovico Madruzzo (1532–1600). Both held the prestigious and politically powerful position of Prince-Bishop of Trent, combining secular authority with ecclesiastical leadership. Cristoforo, in particular, played an important role during the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a cornerstone event of the Counter-Reformation, hosting and influencing many of its sessions. His diplomatic skills were instrumental in navigating the complex relationships between the Habsburg Empire, the Papacy, and local Italian states.

The family's coat of arms reflected their illustrious heritage and alliances. It incorporated elements from the original Madruzzo lineage alongside symbols from allied families, including the Castel Nanno branch. The heraldry often displayed motifs such as eagles and castles, symbolising their dominance in the region and connections to imperial authority.

The Madruzzo family's influence extended beyond ecclesiastical and political realms. They were patrons of the arts and humanist scholarship, contributing to the rich cultural fabric of Renaissance and Baroque Italy. Their princely court in Trent became a centre for intellectual and artistic exchange, attracting scholars, artists, and musicians.

Despite their prominence, the family's fortunes declined in the late 17th century, leading to the eventual extinction of the direct Madruzzo line. However, their legacy endures in the architectural and cultural landmarks of Trentino, such as the Palazzo Madruzzo in Trent and the enduring historical memory of their pivotal role in one of Europe's most significant religious councils.

At the centre of the shield was the emblem of the original Madruzzo family, known as the “ancient Madruzzo” blazon: a red shield with two vertical stripes. Surrounding this central motif was the heraldry of the second, “modern Madruzzo” family, presented in a quartered design. The top left and bottom right quarters displayed the Nanno family’s arms, represented by silver and blue bands; the top right and bottom left quarters featured the Sporenberg family, with a black shield bearing a silver mountain of five peaks, surmounted by a red chevron. The entire coat of arms was crowned.

For additional examples of the Madruzzo coat of arms, see the bindings of printed books commissioned by Count Gian Federico Madruzzo (1531–86), now held in the University of Amsterdam Library (OTM: Band 2E9) and at the British Library (c46a33) (see Fig. 3).⁴

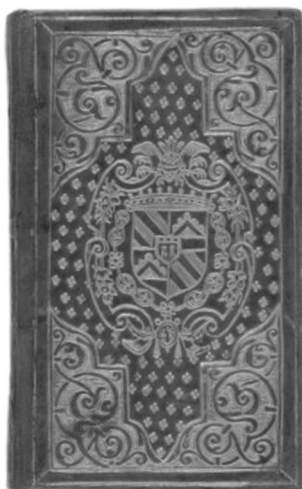


Fig. 3. *Julii Obsequentis prodigiorum liber*, BL, London, c46a33, c. 1550–1600, cover produced in Paris for Gian Federico Madruzzo (1531–1586). Copyright © The British Library Board, kindly provided with permission.



Fig. 4. The Madruzzo Book of Hours, detail of the Madruzzo family coat of arms. Image kindly provided by the Organisation pour la Protection des Manuscrits Médiévaux.

The dismembered manuscript originally comprised 239 folios, featuring fifteen miniatures in the Flemish style. In this tradition, the recto of the folio containing the miniature was left blank, with the main illustration painted on the verso. This layout created a harmonious effect when the book was open, as the miniature on one page faced a corresponding text page, which was illuminated on the recto at the beginning of a new section (see Figs. 5 and 6).



Figs. 5 and 6. The Madruzzo Hours. Above, the *Annunciation* at the beginning of the Matins; below, the *Visitation* at the beginning of the Lauds (Hours of the Virgin).

We are grateful to Mr Donadoni for kindly providing us with a selection of privately taken photographs, which he captured during his study for the expertise he prepared for Christie's.

All the images of the folios containing the manuscript's iconographic programme have now been recovered, enabling a comprehensive digital reconstruction. The remaining challenge lies in securing access to any additional folios that may surface in the future, particularly those still held privately. The dealer, in September 2022, acknowledged possessing further excised folios, offering hope that they might become available for acquisition or documentation, thus enhancing the completeness of our project.

Like all of our projects, this remains an ongoing effort, as the recovery of even a single new digital image — whether a text folio or a miniature — is of tremendous significance in restoring dismembered manuscripts.

For the textual comparison, we have primarily relied on a Book of Hours for the use of Rome, produced, like the Madruzzo Hours, in the Flemish ateliers for a Trentino patron. This manuscript is currently held in the Biblioteca Comunale di Trento, catalogued as BCT1-1761 (F d 24), and titled *Officium beatae Mariae Virginis secundum usum Romanum; Hore Sancte Crucis; Hore de sancto Spiritu; Missa beate Mariae Virginis*.

It is particularly noteworthy, that in the 15th and 16th centuries, the leading families of Trento often commissioned their Books of Hours from Flemish ateliers rather than Italian ones, a trend that speaks to the prestige and artistic connections of the region at that time.

The manuscripts digitally reconstructed by our team of experts are fully accessible to scholars, offering a browsing experience akin to that of digital versions of codices housed in museums or libraries. This is achieved through precise graphic reconstructions of the covers and bindings, often based on auction catalogues. The Madruzzo Hours can be accessed by visiting www.oprom.eu/Madrruzzo.

The Madruzzo Hours raise intriguing questions regarding the identity of its original owner, the workshop responsible for its creation, and its subsequent provenance. In this edition, we aim to delve into these mysteries, offering insights and potential answers, while also addressing the ethical issues surrounding the destruction of such treasures of Flemish illumination for profit.

In fact, the dismemberment of Western manuscripts poses a profound ethical challenge. What is being lost is not merely irreplaceable artistic treasures—recoverable, if at all, only through digital reconstruction—but also the intricate web of human stories surrounding these works. These include the illuminators who crafted them, the patrons who commissioned and cherished them as personal and devotional objects, and the families who held them as symbols of shared cultural and spiritual heritage.

In the pages that follow, I will explore how those who dismantle such manuscripts are not merely destroying invaluable pieces of cultural history. These biblioclasts, far from being simple traders of antiquities, are often complicit in illegal activities, profiting from the systematic destruction of cultural artefacts. Their actions extend beyond the physical dismemberment of manuscripts; they metaphorically ‘dismember’ those who strive to oppose them. This includes targeting scholars dedicated to the reconstruction and preservation of these works, employing harassment, defamation, and

intimidation to undermine their efforts and discourage further advocacy for cultural heritage protection. In doing so, they perpetuate a cycle of destruction that threatens not only the artefacts themselves but also the integrity of those committed to safeguarding them.

The so-called “Receptiagate”: A Fabricated Scandal and Character Assassination to Discredit a Scholar Exposing Biblioclast Dealers

As previously noted, the events surrounding this matter began in the summer of 2022 when Prof. Carla Rossi filed a formal complaint with the Italian TPC (Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage). Her complaint exposed a criminal network of 26 art dealers and their collaborators, including Swiss university professors and British consultants working with auction houses, who were implicated in the illegal acquisition, dismemberment, and sale of medieval illuminated manuscripts. These practices, which pose significant threats to cultural heritage, were highlighted in her detailed submission.

Many of the medieval manuscripts in question were found to have been stolen in Italy following events such as earthquakes or thefts from churches. A piece signed by Rossi appeared in the online journal *AboutArt*⁵ and brought to light the destructive practices employed by this criminal network. The detailed findings of this article are supported by extensive documentation.⁶

Prof. Rossi has emphasised in numerous publications, including her article in *Studj Romanzi*⁷ and her book on Isabelle Boursier’s Book of Hours,⁸ that the practice of dismembering medieval manuscripts is both illegal and unethical.

The impact of her complaint became particularly evident after 22 December 2022, when a coordinated campaign of hate and defamation was launched against her and extended to her colleagues, students and collaborators. This campaign, which lasted for at least two years, employed a combination of online and offline tactics to discredit her work and professional reputation. A significant feature of the campaign was the dissemination of defamatory articles, allegedly commissioned by parties with vested interests to spread falsehoods about Prof. Rossi, her research centre (the Research Centre for European Philological Tradition, a.k.a. RECEPTIO), and her scholarly activities. These articles appeared in various outlets and were further amplified through digital platforms, ensuring widespread circulation.