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Incunabula: Glimpses of the Dawn of Printing

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THURSDAY APRIL 11, 2019

Incunabula: Glimpses of the Dawn of Printing

By Joan Milligan

In 1475, a young friar at Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan, Vincenzo Bandello, wrote [a book about the Immaculate Conception](#). The University Libraries own a copy of this small volume, its initial capitals elaborately hand-drawn

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with red ink. It is an *incunabulum*, meaning it is one of the world's earliest printed books, produced in 1500 or before.

If you're interested in rare books, you'll be pleased to learn that the Marian Library and the University Libraries' special collections have 31 incunabula.

Years later, one of Bandello's students, Girolamo Savonarola, would become an author as well — and an infamous figure in history. The Marian Library's copy of Savonarola's [exposition on the Ave Maria](#) was printed in Florence in 1496 at the height of the reformist zealot's power. Imagine the hooded priest, believing he was delivering divine prophecies, presiding over a bonfire of "sinful" art and books, while just down the street, a printer was busy making more copies of *his* book.

Incunabula are not necessarily our prettiest books. The designs on the bindings might be worn away or damaged with worm holes. Pages may be torn or water-stained. Even so, they are valuable books due to the exciting time at which they were printed and are fascinating to see.

To Florence's north, nearly 200 printing presses were going strong in Venice in the 15th century. Printers flocked to this city, known for the freedoms allowed to the press. As a testimony to the city's cultural and intellectual mix, the binding of [Sermones aurei de sanctis](#) by an influential Dominican monk, Leonardus de Utino (1473), contains an old page of Hebrew text. Because parchment was expensive, printers often used whatever discarded scraps they could find to create the binding. Included in this Latin text are two of the earliest printed examples of Italian poetry.

Two other books in our collection that were published in Venice are *Li miracoli della Madonna, or* [miracles of the Madonna](#) (1490), and a [1494 copy of medieval sermons](#) by the prolific Franciscus de Mayronis.

Many of our incunabula come from Germany, where Johannes Gutenberg invented his movable-type printing

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press and began the publishing revolution. Bibles were popular. We have one printed by Anton Koberger, who also published the famous *Nuremberg Chronicle*, retelling human history as found in the Bible. It was one of the first books to illustrate the text. Our [Koberger Bible](#) (1485) is also illustrated and has been hand-tinted with colors that remain vibrant today.

We welcome you to stop in and have a look at [legends of the Blessed Virgin's mother, St. Anne](#), or a [medieval "book of grace," *Liber gratiae*](#), or even [one on the trial of Satan](#).

The Marian Library is on the seventh floor of Roesch Library; see its website for [hours and directions](#). For information, [send an email](#) or call 937-229-4214.

[University Archives and Special Collections](#) are on the second floor of Albert Emanuel Hall; hours are 8:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday and by appointment. To schedule a visit, email archives@udayton.edu or call 937-229-4256. Scheduling your visit is highly encouraged.

— *Joan Milligan is special collections cataloger for the University Libraries*

Incunabulum, 1476

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A close-up of the first page of "Speculum Beatae Mariae Virginis" (1476, Augsburg), now attributed to Conradus de



Saxonia. At the time of printing,

it was believed this was by St. Bonaventure, as you can see in the title.



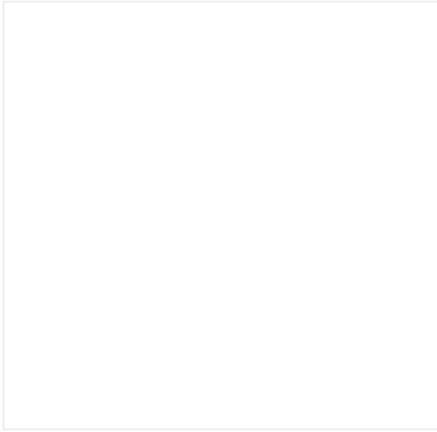
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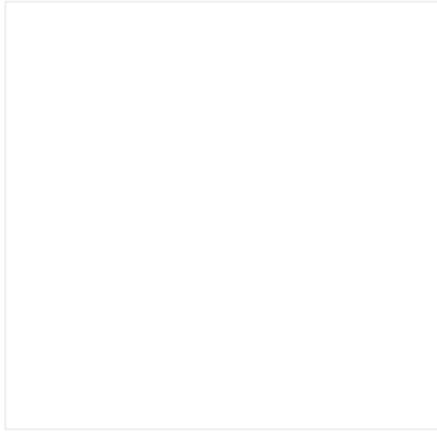
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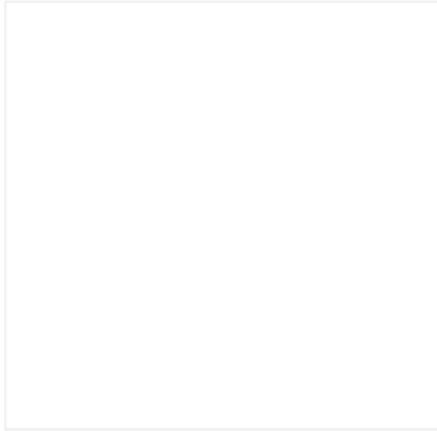
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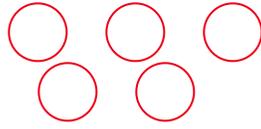
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