

# A USEFUL, DELIGHTFUL, AND GOOD READING. HOW MARIA AND ANTONIA PONTI CONCEIVED A LIBRARY FOR WOMEN

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## Abstract

In the second half of 19th century, newborn Italy was invaded by innovative ideas supported by democratic, liberal, and socialist intellectuals who wanted to renew social life, economy, and moral values by spreading their ideas both in politics and in everyday life. Right-wing reaction used the same methods of communication and persuasion: the publication of journals and books and their promotion in reading cabinets and public libraries. Maria and Antonia Ponti, two upper-middle-class sisters who married into aristocracy, used their influence and resources to advance the status of women in society. They founded associations and libraries (in Ravenna, Imola, and Bergamo) with the theoretical support of a network of Italian intellectuals, including Corrado Ricci, Vilfredo Pareto, and Maffeo Pantaleoni. The philanthropic actions of the sisters, who combined their Catholic and conservative point of view with the improvement of the condition of women, have handed down a remarkable legacy in the form of books and a collection of laces.

Dopo l'unificazione politica dell'Italia si attesta la diffusione di idee innovative, sostenute da liberali, democratici e socialisti, che miravano a rinnovare la società, l'economia e la morale nella sua componente politica come nella vita quotidiana. In reazione a questa propaganda i conservatori utilizzarono gli stessi strumenti di comunicazione e persuasione: la pubblicazione di giornali e libri a cui seguiva la loro diffusione grazie anche ai gabinetti di lettura e alle biblioteche popolari. Maria e Antonia Ponti, due esponenti dell'alta borghesia, entrambe sposate con degli aristocratici, usarono la loro influenza e le loro risorse per migliorare il ruolo delle donne. Fondarono associazioni e biblioteche (queste ultime a Ravenna, Bergamo e Imola) con il supporto di una rete di intellettuali tra cui spiccano Corrado Ricci, Vilfredo Pareto e Maffeo Pantaleoni. L'attività filantropica delle sorelle Ponti, che combinava le loro radici cattoliche e conservatrici con la volontà di cambiare la condizione femminile, ha lasciato una traccia e un'eredità che prendono forma nella collezione di merletti e libri.

## Keywords:

Women / public libraries / Italy / history  
donne / biblioteche pubbliche / Italia / storia

The first public library established in Italy was the Biblioteca Angelica, opened in Rome in 1604 as bequest of Cardinal Angelo Rocca to the Saint Augustin Monastery, on the provision that the library shall be untouchable and made available to everybody, secular or religious, noble or common, well-known or unknown scholar, who wanted to use the library.<sup>1</sup> It was a generous disposition that cannot be taken literally, because a very small number of people could be considered literate in 17th-century Italy and only a minor part of them could be considered a scholar. The library was therefore attended by a group circumscribed by social rank, education level, acquaintances, richness, and gender. Women were almost never mentioned in the library's internal regulation, as they were not even regarded as potential patrons; when they were, it was only to express their ban. Therefore, whether women could enter and benefit from libraries was a question related to the social and juridical position they occupied in society.

The concept of public library evolved in time, undergoing influences by the Enlightenment, by the spread of libertine thought, and by the social, economic, and cultural transformations of the Industrial Revolution. The 19th century witnessed a growth in the number of libraries, cabinets, and circulating libraries in almost all European countries. Italy was facing a different situation because until 1861, it was still divided into several states. After the Italian unification, the positivistic ideas of the French thinker Auguste Comte spread widely, especially among the bourgeoisie, whose members totally

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed information is given in Alfredo Serrai, *Angelo Rocca: Fondatore della prima biblioteca pubblica europea* (Milan: Sylvestre Bonard, 2005), 9.

absorbed the ideal connection between the economic development of a nation and the progress in literacy rates. Despite the unification, there were great problems to face, such as the planning of an effective educational program to defeat illiteracy, which was affecting almost 80% of the population;<sup>2</sup> another challenge was the creation of a new mentality of the population, still divided by regional diversity in conventions, traditions, and lifestyles.<sup>3</sup> How could it be possible to improve the economic and cultural conditions of Italians, to give them the comfort of a shared, patriotic background, when not even the state had been successful in such an endeavor? Some saw the answer in the founding of associations for the improvement of the economic and social condition of the working classes. Almost all the associations operated in the cultural field by organizing conferences cycles, education classes, and libraries. In the second half of the 19th century, several small libraries, called “biblioteche popolari,” were devised to encounter the needs—and capacities—of the working class by guaranteeing them new opportunities through education.<sup>4</sup>

The individuals—or the organizations—who were promoting those libraries were inspired liberals, democrats, socialists, or Catholics who took to heart the propagation of their own ideas and the defense of their cause by suggesting chosen readings. Libraries never arose from the needs of the people; instead, they were often proposed to the people with a paternalistic attitude connected to the never completely hidden idea that it was necessary to filter out the elements that threatened to disrupt the social order. On the other hand, at least, it was believed that readers needed to be protected by alleviating bad influences coming from the wrong books. Two points are critical for those libraries: the first is the distance between the patrons and the founders, and the second is the absence of domain expertise.<sup>5</sup> The lack of expertise in library management was mitigated, for a limited amount of time, by the founders’ enthusiastic faith in their mission, although this proved to be insufficient to solve concrete problems, such as funding.

The first popular Italian library was set up in Prato (Tuscany) by Antonio Bruni, teacher and pedagogue, who understood the importance of ongoing education, which school could not satisfy. On November 1, 1861, he founded the Società per la lettura popolare in Prato aimed at establishing a library in every city and rural town.<sup>6</sup> His proposal was attentive, especially focused on the criteria for acquisitions: books had to be “good and useful” to form the minds and the souls of the future Italians, following the ideal expressed in the motto “God, Country and Family.” Bruni’s library soon became a model, and in 1886, about 1,000 similar ones had opened throughout Italy, especially in the northern and central part.<sup>7</sup> The libraries in Bruni’s network had a life span that was very dependent on the skills and popularity of their local promoter and were quick to vanish if he faced social decline.

At the beginning of the 20th century, popular libraries had another moment of glory in Milan, where two national federations of libraries, one religiously inspired and the other secular but endorsed by

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<sup>2</sup> Data on the state of Italian education in the 19th century are synthetically presented in Luigi Faccini, Rosalba Graglia, and Giuseppe Ricuperati, “Analfabetismo e scolarizzazione,” in *Storia d’Italia Atlante* (Milan: Il Sole 24 ore, 2005), 756–781.

<sup>3</sup> The biggest obstacles to the birth of the new Italian man were the lack of common moral principles to counterbalance local interests and the lack of personal involvement in the modernization process regardless of whether people were urban or rural. In this environment, the notion that education and reading were ideal instruments to “fare gli italiani” (make the Italians) and to spread the new ethic to the general public was widespread. Simonetta Soldani and Gabriele Turi, eds., *Fare gli italiani: Scuola e cultura nell’Italia contemporanea* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Popular libraries had increased in number, but their growth had been haphazard, depending on individual will or associations’ stability: today, as researchers, we suffer the consequences of this in the scarcity of archives and documents.

<sup>5</sup> The first survey on the editorial market and preferences of readers was launched in 1902 by the Società bibliografica italiana some decades after the opening of the first popular library. An important role was played by Maria Pasolini Ponti, who was one of its members. The results were published in *I libri più letti dal popolo italiano, primi risultati della inchiesta promossa dalla Società bibliografica italiana* (Milan: Società bibliografica italiana, 1906).

<sup>6</sup> A circulating and subscription library for which Bruni decided that every associate must pay a monthly contribution of 30 cents to be entitled to borrow for home reading; this tax helped to self-finance the purchase of books and created awareness among patrons.

<sup>7</sup> In 1869, Bruni founded in Florence a popular libraries promotion committee. See Ettore Fabietti, *La biblioteca popolare moderna* (Milan: Vallardi, 1933), 150.

the socialist party, opposed each other. The clerical Federazione delle biblioteche circolanti cattoliche was founded in 1904, six years after the opening of its first library; the socialist Federazione italiana delle biblioteche popolari followed in 1907. Acting on opposite sides, both focused very strongly on educating their users by carefully evaluating the books to be loaned and, in the case of the Catholic Federation, by preparing manuals in which almost all books were reviewed and attributed to specific groups of readers—students, young women, adults, elderly, or pious people. The solidity and extent of the libraries opened in this second wave is greater thanks to the cultural transformations that had taken place in the Italian society and also to the greater awareness of the skills needed to manage a library; their eventual closure was often caused by fascist laws.

Next to those with a more generalist perspective, initiatives focused on certain categories, such as soldiers,<sup>8</sup> schoolchildren,<sup>9</sup> and women, thrived as well. Even if women were accepted in popular libraries, a project for a specific model of library conceived for the needs of women was developed by two sisters, Maria and Antonia Ponti. Their libraries would be named after their father, Andrea Ponti, a key figure to understanding the sisters' background and inspiration.<sup>10</sup>

### **Maria Pasolini Ponti and Antonia Suardi Ponti**

Maria Ponti (b. 1856, Gallarate; d. 1938, Rome) was educated at the Istituto femminile fiorentino in Poggio Imperiale and married the earl Pietro Desiderio Pasolini dall'Onda (1844–1920) on November 11, 1874, giving him two sons, Pasolino and Guido. They spent the first years of their marriage in the estate of Pasolini's family in Ravenna, where poverty and hardships were striking the countryside. Despite the modern management of Pasolini's properties, sharecroppers lived under bad economic conditions, which Maria described in a survey published in 1890 in an important Italian journal.<sup>11</sup> Her attempt to improve the circumstances of peasants—an enterprising spirit she inherited from her father—failed because of the indifference of the clergy and the aristocracy she was trying to involve in her philanthropic initiatives. These were years of loneliness, as she admits in some letters to her stepsister Angelica Rasponi. Despite it, she tried to devise measures to solve social and economic disparities, focusing on women because they were the weakest group and were exposed to the worst consequences of poverty. Interest in the condition of women and an effort to bring them educational and professional help will be her main purpose: the first activity she founded in 1883 was a female

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<sup>8</sup> See Loretta De Franceschi, "Scientific, Educational and Pleasure Readings for Young Italian Soldiers: 1900–1920," *History of Education and Children Literature* 6, no. 2 (2011): 261–280.

<sup>9</sup> The best-known examples of schoolchildren's library were set up by Clara Cavalleri Archivolti and Paola Lombroso Carrara. In 1903, Clara Cavalleri Archivolti founded in Ferrara the Associazione nazionale per le biblioteche delle scuole italiane, whose goal was to prevent young working-class people from relapsing into illiteracy. Her initiative was successful and gave birth to several promotion committees, but in 1927, it lost its autonomy and became part of the corporation of fascist libraries. Paola Lombroso Carrara, daughter of criminologist Cesare Lombroso, created *Bibliotechine rurali* (small rural libraries) to bring the poorest people closer to culture from a very early age and achieve positive effects on literacy. See Maria Luisa Betri, *Leggere, obbedire, combattere: Le biblioteche popolari durante il fascismo* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 1991), and Maria Luisa Betri and Elena Brambilla, eds., *Salotti e ruolo femminile in Italia: tra fine Seicento e primo Novecento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Ponti (1821–1853) was the heir of an important cotton industry with branches distributed from Milan to New Orleans. He shared the responsibility of the company with his older brother Antonio, working toward growth and modernization. His success owes much to his great relational skills both in private and in business. He was gifted with an extraordinary capacity for recognizing valid projects and became a leader in the textile industry in a period of severe recession. Always on the liberal side although not actively participating in politics, he preferred to commit to civil engagement, traces of which remain in the social and philanthropic work realized over the years, ranging from building working-class houses to creating hospitals and from kindergartens to friendly societies and professional schools. Those initiatives were perceived as a moral duty that the ruling class must obey to be legitimated in the exercise of power over other social classes. His example was an important legacy for his children, together with his network of relationships and his reputation. Especially for Maria and Antonia, it would become a path to marrying into noble families involved in Italian politics and very close to the royal court.

<sup>11</sup> The first article was Maria Pasolini Ponti, "Una famiglia di mezzadri romagnoli nel comune di Ravenna," *Giornale degli economisti* 1, no. 1 (September 1890): 245–277. She then further analyzed this topic in "Monografie di alcuni operai braccianti nel comune di Ravenna," *Giornale degli economisti* 3, no. 5 (October 1892): 311–343.

practice school set in Coccolia—a family estate—where young girls learned to make lace, a feminine employment that made use of the downtimes of agricultural work to produce additional income for families.

In 1883, Pietro Pasolini was elected to the Senate, and they moved to Rome, where Maria found new stimuli for her philanthropic initiatives: in 1896, she opened the *Ufficio informazioni di beneficenza*, along with a library for its members. In 1899, she was among the founders of the *Federazione romana delle opere di attività femminili*; she became interested in photography, which she combined with her curiosity for architectural and natural preservation in a reportage for the *Associazione artistica fra i cultori di architettura di Roma*.<sup>12</sup> Maria Pasolini had several interests, but her most energetic fight was for improving the condition of women, which expressed itself in various initiatives—in which she was usually the first in line—as in establishing the *Consiglio nazionale delle donne italiane*, which congregated liberal feminists, then the *Industrie Femminili Italiane* (IFI). In 1906, she signed the petition presented by Anna Maria Mozzoni (b. 1837, Milan; d. 1920, Rome) for women's suffrage, and in 1908, she chaired the education section at the first *Congresso delle donne italiane*. Her younger sister Antonia (b. 1860, Gallarate; d. 1938, Rome) had a similar destiny: in 1885, she married in Rome the earl Gianforte Suardi (b. 1854, Bergamo; d. 1931, Rome) from Bergamo, who descended from an old aristocrat family that sided with moderate-wing liberals. He was active in local politics as mayor of Bergamo from 1883 to 1890 before undertaking a parliamentary career and became first senator and finally undersecretary of the Ministry of Agriculture in 1896. As a perpetual honorary member of the *Società di Mutuo soccorso fra le operaie di Bergamo* and founder of *Ars Orobie* (the Bergamo subcommittee of IFI, whose national Patronage branch she was president of) Antonia Suardi took part in local philanthropic initiatives to help impoverished women.

Despite their recognition that new rights were needed for women to economically and culturally contribute to society, both sisters were committed to the improvement of the condition of women in the philanthropic and paternalistic spirit of their families in law, never truly working toward a radical change of woman's role in society. This is particularly evident in Antonia's predilection for the local Bergamo associations that tried to improve the status of women by refining their skills and increasing their earnings, not by claiming more political or juridical rights, as other associations did. Maria was probably the most radical, as she stood for women's suffrage and wrote more than one passionate pamphlet on feminist battles, insisting on the need to adjust the law to take the condition of women into account and on ending gender-based discrimination of their intelligence and cognitive abilities. During the first congress of the *Comitato nazionale donne italiane*, organized in Rome in 1908, in which Antonia was a member of the organizing committee and Maria president of the education section, the discussion about the condition and problems of women was permeated by mostly moderate opinions. It was a triumph for the reassuring positions of the aristocracy, which insisted only on a philanthropic approach to problems, at most asking for the juridical independence of the wife from the husband as a necessary measure to allow her freedom of initiative in associations. The presence of working-class women was inexistent and the perpetuation of a culture of dependency guaranteed.<sup>13</sup> In this context, we can define Maria Pasolini as a moderate feminist, convinced that women were fit to occupy an important place in society but not yet ready to sustain a revolutionary approach to issues regarding their condition.

Founded in 1903 by Maria Pasolini, Amelia Pincherle Rosselli (1870–1954), and other Italian noble and upper-middle-class women, the IFI aimed at promoting and improving female work with artistic influences;<sup>14</sup> Antonia defines the purpose of the IFI with these words: “To elevate feminine working

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<sup>12</sup> Lindsay Harris, “Photography of the ‘Primitive’ in Italy: Perceptions of the Peasantry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Italian Modern Studies* 17, no. 3 (2012): 310–330.

<sup>13</sup> Teresa Labriola, president of the Women's Juridical Condition section of the Congress, wrote “we [members of the CNDI, not feminist] consider it more important to convince men of women's fitness both to work and to intellectual activity; in this way we hope to obtain a spontaneous concession of rights.” Teresa Labriola, “Il Congresso femminile a Roma,” *L'illustrazione popolare* 38, no. 18 (May 3, 1908): 277.

<sup>14</sup> “The inner moral and intellectual power of Italians.” Maria Pasolini Ponti, *Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti*, fondata in Ravenna 1897 (Rome: Forzani & C., 1897), 2.

standard with an appropriate salary . . . and soften the struggle for life thanks to the relief given by art.”<sup>15</sup> It was a very important initiative, also supported by the Italian royal family, that tried to move the production of traditional Italian lace and tissue in two directions: creating a retailing network without intermediaries and connecting the ladies of the association with the workers, to which they gave advice on style and patterns in order to improve their lacework or loom work. The IFI grew because of the solid agreement between their members to establish a network of personal relationships that extended throughout the Italian peninsula and also to the United States thanks to the chairwoman Cora Savorgnan di Brazzà (1860–1944), née Slocomb. The Ponti sisters’ commitment to this enterprise is demonstrated especially by Antonia’s promotional activity: by her key role in the organization of IFI’s stand in the World Fair of Milan in 1906 and in her personal collection. Antonia Suardi was in fact familiar with antique dealers in Rome because of her interest in lace, embroidery, and ancient fabric, which she bought and collected.<sup>16</sup> The Museo del Tessuto di Prato conserves the Antonia Ponti Suardi Collection, which consists of 1,500 textile items and 200 objects and documents, such as account books, receipts, and photographs of ancient items documenting the educational activity of the Ars Orobic school from 1904 to 1930.<sup>17</sup>

### **How the Ponti Sisters Conceived Their Libraries for Women**

The proximity of ideas between the two sisters is confirmed by their collaboration in a further project: the opening of libraries named after their father, Andrea Ponti.

The leader of this enterprise was Maria, who stated the aim of the project in the catalog she wrote for the opening the Ravenna library, located—by concession of the mayor—inside the premises of the primary school: “to provide young women who love to studying a useful, delightful and well-structured reading.”<sup>18</sup> Opened in 1897, a period of great revival in the foundation of popular libraries, Maria Ponti Pasolini’s was a library unlike all others. Although it had its roots in the same positivist belief in the usefulness of learning and in the importance of reading as a tool of personal and collective improvement, the Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti distinguished itself from other libraries in two ways: first, it was meant for a public of already literate women with an open mind and moderate feminist influences and, second, the pedagogical conception supported by the founder was based on the benefit of learning facts and notions following a chronological or historical sequence to which the choice of books to be purchased and loaned had to adhere faithfully. This approach had practical consequences over the selection of books, which would not be made randomly but rather be a result of specific studies entrusted to experts in the field. Books were therefore chosen with cultural and moral growth in mind and presented in the form of catalogs. The catalogs of the Biblioteca storica Ponti had a threefold significance: communicative, as they explained to patrons why some specific books had been reserved for them; heuristic, as they became guides for the learning process; and, finally, informative, as they listed the documents that could be borrowed. As was customary in other popular libraries, all purchased works were listed in printed catalogs distributed to members. In fact, in the catalogs edited by the Federation of Popular Libraries and the Federation of Catholic Circulating Libraries—or in the book reviews of their magazines—we witness the use of short descriptions aimed at guiding the reader’s choice and often at recommending (or limit) the book only to certain types of readers.

These institutions perceived books as powerful vehicles for transmitting knowledge and influencing minds, and Maria Pasolini herself believed that the choice of books should be approached with

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<sup>15</sup> “To elevate women’s working standards with an appropriate salary . . . and soften the struggle for life thanks to the relief given by art,” quoted in *Le industrie femminili italiane: Cooperativa nazionale, sede centrale via Marco Minghetti, Roma [relazioni e catalogo dei lavori inviati all’esposizione internazionale di Milano del 1906 e distrutti dall’incendio nella notte del 3 agosto]* (Milan: P. Rocco e C., 1906), 13.

<sup>16</sup> Umberto Ronchi, “Antonia Suardi Ponti,” *La rivista di Bergamo* 18, no. 3 (March 1939): 156–157.

<sup>17</sup> A complete showcase of the collection took place in 2015 at the Museo del Tessuto in Prato. The exhibition “Arte vera e Gentile. Ricami e merletti dalla collezione Antonia Suardi—True and gentle art. Lace works from Antonia Suardi’s collection” was curated by Daniela Degl’Innocenti.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, *La biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti, fondata in Ravenna* (Rome: Forzani & C., 1897), 1.

caution so that young women could be offered a “pleasant, useful reading” that provided sensible knowledge and helped to “reflect, to regulate ideas and feelings . . . to form an inner moral and intellectual life.”<sup>19</sup> Books were purchased because they were clearly “suitable for encouraging further reading” and “easy in the form and pleasing in the exposition.” The possibility that they were not the most up to date or complete choice was taken into account and accepted as a necessary compromise. Moreover, technical or scholarly books were excluded a priori since they were unable to arouse the desire for further readings. In part, Maria’s library was composed of “series” of essays specifically chosen for their intrinsic value; the other part was a set of selected but unrelated works collected, defined “fuori serie” (“out of series” collection). Once placed side by side, these books created a useful intellectual path, with their subjects organized in chronological order, thus fully embodying the adjective “historic” in the library’s name. It is possible to collect information regarding the choice of subjects and their bibliographic organization in Ponti’s libraries thanks to Maria Pasolini’s four catalogs, published between 1897 and 1907, each of them structured in two parts. Each catalog provides two fascicules, reflecting the division described above: the first one, called “fixed series catalog,” refers to a specific subject and presents the essential books to be read, while the second fascicule, “out of series,” lists newly published books that were considered useful enough to be purchased, even if they were not related to the topic.

### **The First Catalogue: Universal History as a Starting Point**

The educational path conceived by Maria Pasolini cannot be reduced as a simple bibliographic list; rather, it needs to be accurately described to become intelligible to the public, as Maria Pasolini did in introducing every catalog with a propaedeutic essay that she (or a closer friend of hers, nevertheless a recognized connoisseur of the matter) wrote. The first issue of the fixed series catalog is named *Universal History* and is edited by Maria Pasolini with the collaboration of Pasquale Villari,<sup>20</sup> a well-known Italian historian and a friend of the Ponti family. The choice of history as the first topic expresses Maria Pasolini’s high esteem for this discipline in the education of girls, as she considered history “more than any other effective in forming a knowledge and a conscience of life.”<sup>21</sup> Obviously, “history” did not mean learning names, battles, and dates by heart; rather, it was conceived as an exposition of the facts that encourage the understanding of human dynamics by bringing questions and reflections to life and by counterbalancing the unfortunate absence of morality, which she believed to be at the root of many contemporary evils. The selection of works listed in this catalog is rather meager: the course of readings begins with Ruggiero Bonghi’s *Storia antica in oriente e in Grecia* and goes on to review all of the 33 titles presented in *Universal History*. Maria concludes with a passionate eulogy of Thomas Carlyle’s *Gli eroi*, in whose admirable examples of greatness the reader could find inspiration for his own improvement; librarians would not have to be afraid of an author who writes that “this world, after all science and sciences, is still a miracle. . . . We are the miracle of miracles, the great inscrutable mystery of God.”<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that Maria Pasolini’s wide culture was enriched by her familiarity with several foreign authors, including Gustav Friedrich Hertzberg (1826–1907) and Hippolite Taine (1828–1893), even though it was especially England that awakened her curiosity; she resorted to Italian translations of German and English historians but picked in many cases the original French version or preferred the French translation in case it was the only one available. Out of a total of 33 titles, 17 are in French. The presence of books

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<sup>19</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, *Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti. I. Catalogo a serie fissa* (Rome: Forzani & C., 1897).

<sup>20</sup> Pasquale Villari (b. 1826, Naples; d. 1917, Florence) was a historian and a politician. Exiled in Florence after his involvement in the uprising in Naples in 1848, he taught history at the University of Pisa (1859) and at Istituto di studi superiori of Florence (1865–1913). A member of cultural associations, such as Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei and Società Dante Alighieri (1896–1903), he was elected to the Italian Parliament in 1870, became senator in 1884, and was Minister of education from 1891 to 1892; he is remembered for his studies on the conditions of southern Italy and for his philosophical works introducing positivist thought to Italy.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, “Osservazioni pratiche sullo studio della storia,” *Rivista per le signorine*, April 9, 1896, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Carlyle, “On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History,” in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Henry Duff Traill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8–10.

in multiple languages indicates that the young women to whom this institution was addressed were not only literate but also rather educated. Given that the 1901 census detects a female illiteracy rate of 60.82%, the Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti was meant to serve quite a small number of patrons.<sup>23</sup> A very interesting aspect of this introduction is the reference to the development plan of the series designed for the library (14 series) and their related catalogs that were forecast to be published. In fact, after sketching the “Universal History” section, Pasolini announces her personal interest in the history of art, which she depicts as a tool to understand the nation and its past, a legacy she felt the government was requested to protect. The library’s patrons should not only be offered books but also given the opportunity to appreciate, through artistic reproductions, those museums and cities they could visit in person.

Out of 14 announced series, only two have come down to us as they were planned in 1897 catalog: *Universal History* and *History of the Risorgimento*. In order to tackle urgent contemporary problems that came to light in 1898, two more catalogs were published: *Social and Economic Sciences* (the title of which was listed as *History of Political Economy*) and a new catalog on the condition of women, not listed or supposed.<sup>24</sup> Excluded from publication were *History of Art, Detailed History of Italy’s Regions, History of the Various Nations of Europe and Their Literatures, History of the Ancient East, History of the Colonies, American History and the Civilizations of the New World, History of Intellectual and Moral Philosophy, History of Inductive Sciences and Mathematics, History of Charity, Series of Novels That Represent the Development of the Genre in Europe and Reflect the Times in Which They Were Written, History of Pedagogy, and Pedagogical Systems*.

The first issue of the “out of series” catalogs, published in 1898, is structured in the same way, beginning with a discursive opening that analyzes the virtues of the selected works and then, in the last pages, presents the actual list. Drafted by the countess, this essay focuses on the English publication *Social Evolution*, by sociologist Benjamin Kidd (1858–1916), which had been freshly published, on Italian authors Guglielmo Ferrero (1871–1942) and Filippo Ottonieri (unsolved pseudonym), then on Edmond Demolins (1852–1907), Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), and Max Leclerc (1864–1932), who all share a positivistic conception of education. The other titles, 94 books and the journal *Ora presente*, are concisely examined and tackle a great variety of topics. They are organized in the final list to reflect a thematic grouping and constitute an interesting offer for readers on subjects like hygiene, religion, travel, European literature, and, “by wish of some subscriber,” contemporary Italian literature, such as books by Antonio Fogazzaro (1842–1911), Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938), Giovanni Verga (1840–1922), and a few others.<sup>25</sup> Noteworthy, in comparison to the collection of other popular libraries, is the absence of well-loved authors such as Emile Zola (1840–1902), Georges Ohnet (1848–1918), Neera (1846–1918), Carolina Invernizio (1851–1916), Gerolamo Rovetta (1851–1910), and Pierre Alexis Ponson du Terrail (1829–1871). Pasolini is keen to point out that, apart from the authors she presents, Italian novels and the French ones on the list had been donated, thus signaling her original unwillingness to include them.

### **Economic and Social Sciences Presented in the Second Catalog**

The second catalog, devoted to social and economic sciences, was thus printed the following year (1899), rather than the one about art history, because Maria Pasolini was deeply touched by the recent insurrections and was reflecting on the reasons that took the Italian commons to such a level of “dissatisfaction and even despair,”<sup>26</sup> at the same time keeping her confidence that knowledge would emerge as an instrument of mutual comprehension and an opportunity to amend the errors of the past

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<sup>23</sup> Faccini, Graglia and Ricuperati, *Analfabetismo e scolarizzazione*, 756–781.

<sup>24</sup> From January to July 1898, several popular insurrections took place in various Italian cities, such as Milan, where the uprising was brutally suppressed by the army.

<sup>25</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, *Catalogo illustrativo dei libri fuori di serie. Fascicolo 1* (Rome: Forzani & C., 1898), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, *Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti. 1. Catalogo a serie fissa. 2. Scienze sociali ed economiche* (Rome: Forzani & C., 1899), 5.

for women as well; Herbert Spencer (1820–1903), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Charles Gide (1847–1932), and Frederick Pollock (1845–1937) were present in this guide, together with important Italian scholars, such as Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923), Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), Pasquale Villari (1827–1917), Sidney Sonnino (1847–1922), and Leopoldo Franchetti (1847–1917). A second edition was published in 1908 with the addition of an important essays by the economist Maffeo Pantaleoni (1857–1924).<sup>27</sup>

### **The Third and Fourth Catalogs and their Contemporary Themes**

The third catalog opens to a theme at once both very dear to the Ponti sisters and widely debated in the year in which it is published (1903): the condition of women. The topic is articulated in six points of view: the condition of women in the different races and civilizations, the condition of women in accordance with the law, the contribution of women to history, the concept of woman until today, Italian woman, feminine culture in France, and the modern woman. The Italian Risorgimento is the subject of the fourth and last catalog, written under the supervision of Ernesto Masi (1836–1908) in 1907 and then published in Bologna by the publisher Zanichelli in 1911.

The care with which the catalogs were prepared is highlighted by the comprehensiveness of bibliographic descriptions (we must remember that Maria Pasolini was a member of the Italian Bibliographic Society and promoted the first survey on popular reading in Italy). In comparison to other catalogs, the theoretical organization of the collection and its selection criteria are given more importance than the practical directives the reader needs to find “her” book in the library. We can therefore advance the hypothesis that Maria had already planned to open two libraries, one in Ravenna and another in Bergamo, and therefore the catalogs were conceived as manuals to lay out an educational method. The first catalog gives us some information about the life of the library thanks to a short regulation that provides indications regarding the opening of the library, limited to four hours per week, distributed between Thursdays and Sunday mornings; the admission fee of 10 lire per year, reinvested in new acquisitions; the rule in case of illness, stating that the patron is required to immediately return the books she had borrowed in order to avoid contagion through these objects since the library was unable to pay for disinfection because of its shaky financial conditions; and, finally, the rule that books need to be returned in the same condition in which they were borrowed.

### **The Historic Library “Andrea Ponti” in Ravenna**

The Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti in Ravenna opened on October 21, 1897, without being announced by the local press. Furthermore, no article on this innovative challenge appeared in the following years, which must be interpreted as a severe disapproval by the cultural elite of the city.<sup>28</sup> Such censorship could be explained by the prevalent conservative mentality in Ravenna, which sanctioned either the idea of a library for the cultural enrichment of women or the positivistic conception of the collection. Moreover, it was first the physical distance of Maria Pasolini, who was living in Rome in those years, and then her spiritual distance, a lack of interest that emerged after publishing the last catalog in 1911 before completing the library plan, that weakened the original strategy. Maybe Countess Pasolini thought that the librarian and the associates she had gathered would have continued her project. In fact, the Ravenna library was still alive in 1935, when it was put under municipal control and became a collection inside the historical town library called Classense, losing every bit of its peculiarity by being mixed up with the private collection of Luigi Rava and the U.S. Information Service Library donations.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Maria Pasolini Ponti, *Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti. 1. Catalogo a serie fissa. 2. Scienze sociali ed economiche*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Forzani & C., 1908), i–xxii.

<sup>28</sup> Giovanna Bosi Maramotti, “Il liberalismo illuminato di una donna dell’Ottocento: Maria Pasolini Ponti (1857–1938),” in *La cultura a Ravenna: Storia, luoghi, figure negli scritti di Giovanna Bosi Maramotti dal 1972 al 1997*, ed. Andrea Maramotti (Ravenna: Società di studi ravennati, 2006), 105.

<sup>29</sup> Giovanna Bosi Maramotti, “La Biblioteca Ponti: Storia di una sezione all’interno della Classense,” in *Cultura e vita civile a Ravenna: Secoli XVI–XX* (Bologna: University Press, 1981), 239.

## Bergamo and Imola Libraries

In 1897, Ravenna's twin library opened in Bergamo. Its history is more indistinct, beginning with the uncertainty surrounding its exact opening date,<sup>30</sup> continuing with the scarcity of legal documents relating to the establishment of the company appointed to guide the library, and concluding with Antonia Suardi's own biography.<sup>31</sup> The symbiotic connection that binds the Ponti sisters' initiatives is still in place and encourages the younger sister to follow the footsteps of the elder although with some peculiarities of her own. Countess Antonia Suardi never denied the dependence of the Bergamo library from the Ravenna example; in fact, she declared to have used, during the 36 years in which the library was alive, the Ravenna "directives" and to have followed "the program of readings" closely; an examination of the library's collection, though, shows a slightly different picture, which we will analyze later.<sup>32</sup> The library was at first located in the Royal Prefecture, then was moved to the palace of the countess, who always played an active role in managing and supporting the library, though it was officially entrusted to a steering committee since its foundation. The organization chart and the functioning of the association are described in a six-page statute: its steering committee consisted of a president, a vice president, a secretary, a treasurer's office librarian, and seven counselors, elected among all the members. Once a year in July, the steering committee convened a general assembly and, whenever it was deemed useful, mandated the counselors to suggest book acquisitions in consideration of the annual budget and of the Ravenna catalogs' recommendations. Confirming this trend are a number of printed sheets found as attachments to the copy of the *Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti. 1. Catalogo a serie fissa* held at the Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai in Bergamo, containing the lists of "out of series" books purchased by the Biblioteca Ponti in Bergamo in the years 1916, 1917–1919, and 1920–1922. Even if these lists are short (unsurprisingly, considering that two of them fall into the World War I period), they give us some clues to evaluate the Bergamo site's peculiarities. Compared to Ravenna, the intellectual refinement of the library was more modest, and the collection certainly contained more books about everyday practical concerns, such as etiquette, gardening, and housekeeping. A different choice of books was justified by a different audience: despite the lack of data about the age, education level, and social class of patrons, we can assume that this library was meant for readers who were young, educated, but less interested in an intellectual approach to reading, yet the presence of books from the Ravenna selection—the most important titles presented in the three catalogs were all present—would still enable more speculative investigations. A predominant position in these lists is occupied by literature (novels, poems, and plays), which covers 34% of the 2,355 works that have persisted to this day. There clearly was a strong focus on French editorial production, often in the original language or in both versions, including newly published books, such as the winner of the Goncourt Prize of 1915, *Gaspard*, by René Benjamin.<sup>33</sup> Countess Antonia wrote in 1933 to Monsignor Giuseppe Locatelli, director of the Biblioteca Civica Angelo Mai, expressing her desire to transfer the Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti to the town library. The agreement between her and the city mayor was quickly settled with the support of the director of the library, who valued this acquisition as strategic for the improvement of his collection. As Countess Antonia Suardi wished, the original shelves and books can still be admired today.

Documental sources attesting to the daily functioning of the Bergamo or Ravenna libraries, along with the correspondence between the Ponti sisters, still have not been found. They would have been

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<sup>30</sup> The Biblioteca storica Andrea Ponti in Bergamo was inaugurated in 1897, as stated by Antonia Suardi in an article she wrote for the local paper *L'Eco di Bergamo*, published on March 24, 1933.

<sup>31</sup> See Rachele Farina, ed., *Dizionario biografico delle donne lombarde: 568–1968* (Milan: Baldini & Castoldi, 1995), 895–897.

<sup>32</sup> Antonia Suardi, *Lettera al Podestà di Bergamo, 4 dicembre 1932*, Biblioteca Civica e Archivi storici di Bergamo, Archivio della corrispondenza. Countess Suardi wrote this letter to thank the mayor of the city for accepting the donation of her library.

<sup>33</sup> René Benjamin, *Gaspard* (Paris: Arthème Fayard & Cie, 1915).

very useful for understanding the origins of their collaboration and for defining their respective roles in this endeavor. Even if the role of Antonia Suardi seems less crucial, her permanent attention is demonstrated by her donation of books, which we find in the additional lists; surely, she was a bibliophile and a collector because we know that in 1893, she won a very important antiquarian fund at auction: the Libreria Piatti, formerly owned by some of Bergamo's monasteries.<sup>34</sup>

The Biblioteca popolare circolante Andrea Ponti was inaugurated in Imola—a small city near Bologna—on October 4, 1900, in a room of the convent of San Francesco, which hosted the city library.<sup>35</sup> Its origin is rather unusual: a group of enthusiastic town notables in contact with Countess Pasolini, whose summer family residence was in Imola, asked her to help them establish a library similar to the one in Ravenna. They weaved relationships with the municipality and with the countess herself through the establishment of a promoting committee composed only of women whose task was to maintain contacts. The municipality's benefit consisted of an option to acquire the books in case the association would be dissolved. Since its foundation, the Imola library had been detached from the original project of historical libraries for various reasons. In addition, the presence of Maria Pasolini was secondary: she almost played the role of the inspiring figure who approves the committee's initiatives from afar, something that better fitted her position of benefactor. Men were granted access to the collection but not membership in the committee. This reflected the situation in Ravenna, where, since 1900, male patrons were accepted in order to encourage their cultural improvement. The annual tax of ten lire was reduced to six, deferred payment was allowed, and entertainment literature was purchased, thus widening the audience and opening its doors to young people. This section had all the characteristic of a "classic" circulating—and subscription—library, open to a large and heterogeneous public, with a broad reading spectrum dominated by novels and by some of the most-read books of the time, namely, the entertainment literature that was at the core of the Italian publishing production. The success of this formula was definitely positive: the proximity to the civic library benefited both institutions, which grew in a fruitful symbiosis for several years, survived the fascist period, and reached the republican era with unaltered vigor.

## Conclusions

The libraries established by the Ponti sisters were part of a wider enterprise of aristocratic commitment to social development. The core of all the initiatives they embraced was based on a new perception of women as worthy of becoming equal to men as a result of their cultural improvement through education. While bourgeois women could use culture to advance their position in society, women from the lower classes could enhance their position only through work—mediated by the artistic and economic skills of upper-class women. The articulated project of the Ponti's could be successful in only a specific cultural and social context since without the necessary charismatic influence of its founders, the theoretical incentive would have lost its strength. In fact, the Bergamo and Imola libraries survived only because they opened their doors to entertainment literature. This enterprise strikes us as a unique experience considering its goals, its complexity, and the intricacy of

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<sup>34</sup> Known as Libreria Piatti, from the family name of the two brothers Francesco and Faustino, both monks, who saved the books of the monasteries in which they resided from the confiscation of ecclesiastical assets by the Cisalpine Republic in 1797. This collection, which according to a 19th-century source consisted of 90 manuscripts, 300 incunabula, and about 10,000 ancient books (but at the time of the purchase by the City of Bergamo in 1958, the count amounted to 30,000 books, 24 codices, and 197 incunabula), has merged into the heritage of the civic library after several intermediate steps because Suardi had not bequeathed it to the citizens. It is still difficult to reconstruct the collection's true conformation, although an aid to the identification of the volumes is the presence of the ex libris of the countess: a rectangle decorated with liberty-style flowers with a motto, "Read good works and observe them," taken from the Prophecy of Leonardo da Vinci and below it a scroll with the name of the owner.

<sup>35</sup> Amadeo Tabanelli, *La Biblioteca popolare circolante Andrea Ponti d'Imola nel quarantesimo dalla fondazione (1900–1940)* (Imola: Paola Galeati, 1940), 9–10.

relationships it involved. Today, traces of such projects for the benefit of women still persist in the collections of museums and libraries.