

Short “essay” on the Memory Fund

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I started working in the newly established University of San Marino coming from the State Library with the arduous task of creating a university library practically from scratch. Fausta Morganti, the then Minister of Education, Culture and University, who had done so much to realise her “visionary” project for a university in San Marino, entrusted me with this challenging task. It was the late 1980s and I was a young academic full of ambition and expectation, so I enthusiastically accepted the burden (and the honour) of this task. The first steps taken by our University saw the involvement of the unforgettable Prof. Umberto Eco, who founded a Centre for Semiotic and Cognitive Studies, and of Prof. Aldo Schiavone, who was entrusted with the direction of the Advanced School of Historical Studies, a very high-level postgraduate PhD course. For this reason, the first materials of the newly established library were mainly focused on these subjects. The only way I could fill the modern empty shelves of the University Library was to agree with some publishers on the “advantageous” purchase of entire thematic catalogues and to try to acquire some private collections of scholars of the above-mentioned subjects, who wished to bring together and organise the thousands of volumes they had collected during their lives as researchers and lecturers, with the help of Prof. Roberto Finzi, Scientific Secretary of the Advanced School of Historical Studies.

When I met Prof. Eco, I was told that I would have to check the quality and the possibility of acquiring an interesting collection that he had found in the United States of America. Such collection belonged to Dr. Morris Young, an ophthalmologist, who for forty years had collected, out of pure passion for collecting, a fund that, according to a summary catalogue that he had made and printed, contained over 400 pages of bibliographical references concerning works on memory and mnemonics, certainly the richest collection in the world at that time.

Convinced that he had completed his work as a collector, Dr. Young decided to sell his invaluable collection, which included not only a large number of modern and contemporary books, but also ancient volumes and incunabula (books printed using movable type before 1501). Therefore, he entrusted the task of finding a buyer to a well-known American antiquarian bookseller with offices in St James's, London, Mr. Robin Halwas.

Prof. Eco convinced our University's Scientific Committee and Management Board that this could be a unique and immensely valuable acquisition, so I was sent to London to meet Mr. Halwas. I arrived in London, took a modest room in a hotel in Knightsbridge and the next morning met the very nice Robin Halwas for breakfast in the elegant Fortnum and Mason cafeteria in Piccadilly. He showed me the Young catalogue and described the most valuable materials; I asked him about the external condition of the ancient volumes and incunabula and he showed me recently reproduced images. I did not go into the economic aspects, which fortunately were not my concern, but asked if there was any room for negotiation on the price. It seemed so. We decided that a meeting at Dr. Young's home in New York was necessary in order to see the entire collection in person, which had already been visited by Prof. Eco prior to the negotiations.

A few months later I went to New York with the then Chairman of the Management Board, Marco Beccari, and Halwas himself. Luckily, my English was excellent. We all met at the home of Messrs Chesley and Morris Young on Fifth Avenue, just a stone's throw from the famous Washington Square. I had studied for a year at university in New York and I was confident. There we saw the most valuable (and interesting) part of the collection, some incunabula (12 if I remember correctly), medieval manuscripts and other ancient volumes, but the bulk of the collection was, for obvious reasons of space, in another couple's apartment, which served practically as a storeroom. Then we went to the other site, I think it was further north, close to 70th Street. It was impressive to see this amount of material and to consult some of it to check its external condition. There was some need for restoration here and there, but in general the volumes had been carefully preserved over the 40 years of collection, without mould or paper disease. The problem was that the collection consisted not only of printed material, but also of a large number of objects, memorabilia, various relics related in some way to the theme of memory and mnemonics, interesting to a collector but meaningless for a library.

It was here that the financial negotiations began, based on a valuation by a famous Austrian and naturalised American antiquarian, Hans Peter Kraus. We had to wait until 1991 for the materials to finally arrive in our young and small library, where a room entirely dedicated to the Young Fund awaited them. Here we had installed “Compactus” units, i.e. large mobile folding bookshelves, thus guaranteeing better and safer preservation.