

The long story of the “Atlantic Code”

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This year, 2009, sees the publication in instalments of the Atlantic Code, 1119 pages collected into 12 volumes, making up **the largest collection of Leonardo Da Vinci’s drawings and writings**. Yesterday, at the Rotary Club “La Malpensa”, Don Alberto Rocca, son of member, Francesco, and academic at the venerable Ambrosian Library, where the precious work is kept, spoke about it. “We are proceeding with the work of taking the support apart, and putting it back together, in a way that does not affect the original papers,” he declared. The work entails removing the spine and dissolving the mercuric chloride-based glues that were applied in the period 1962 – 1972, when the Code was reassembled from the single volume, into the current 12 volumes by a process of cutting and pasting. “The choice made at the time was by no means a brilliant one,” commented Don Rocca, “even though there has never been the technology to ensure perfect preservation over decades or centuries.

The thick manuscript, which was pillaged by Napoleon in 1796, and returned in 1815, is called the Atlantic Code because of its size (64.5 x 43.5 cm), that of atlases. “So, **it has nothing to do with the stories invented by Dan Brown in his book**,” the speaker stressed. But sketches and notes that Leonardo Da Vinci used to make about anything in the notebook that he always had with him, had been in danger of being lost a long time ago, when the artist’s property and possessions, were left, after his death in 1519, to Francesco Melzi, and, in 1570, to his son, Orazio, who, without realising, saw them taken away by the family teacher, and who, after getting them back, gave them away as presents.

It is only thanks to the efforts and the perseverance of Pompeo Leoni that they were later recovered, collected and organized into two binders: the first contained 640 drawings of human anatomy, the second contained more than a thousand sketches of the secret arts and machines. “Just as Leonardo was an attentive scholar, of human physiognomy, one of the first, ” the priest explained, “he was also a genius and an extraordinary inventor, who would have had difficulty producing his projects given the existing technology.” Furthermore, he added, “he was more a military engineer than a painter”, given that he moved to Milan and offered to make attack weapons, such as mortars, and defences, such as ramparts.

This latest collection (the other one is in the UK, “paid for, not stolen, as in the case of the French”) is the one bought by Galeazzo Arconati for about 3000 Spanish ducats (today, these would be worth several million euros”) and then it was donated to the Ambrosian Library in 1637. “This means,” he ended, “that even then, the Library enjoyed such status of respectability among the Milanese” as to justify such a present.

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