IDENTIFICATION AND SYMBOLOGY OF PLANT SPECIES IN GILT AND PAINTED LEATHER

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The Alps are an impressive range of mountains separating central and Mediterranean Europe. Since Roman times and especially in the Middle Ages, many mountain passes (e.g. via Francigena) provided important commercial trade routes between the French, Swiss, Austrian, and Istrian sides of the division and Italy (today from West to East: Liguria, Valle d’Aosta, Piemonte, Lombardia, Trentino Alto Adige, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia). Originally, the route network was developed for political and military reasons to enable the transit from the Italian peninsula to Middle Europe. Road maps and books of itineraries were available at quite an early date (e.g. the Tabula Peutingeriana dated 1200).

Pilgrimage to Rome had by the third century A.D. became a traditional practice. This became especially popular after Pope Bonifacius VIII announced the first Holy Year in 1300 A.D., thus starting a new way of traveling.

Local fashion, ritual practice and beneficial climate conditions have allowed a certain number of gilt, painted and hand-stamped artistic works on leather to survive. The original geographic areas mentioned above were selected and will be described in two pending publications.

Over ten years ago, a systematic research started in Italy to achieve the following objectives:

- identify the leather artefacts, mostly altar frontals
- understand techniques and materials used
- to recognize centres of manufacture
- to identify better preservation and conservation systems for the future care of these artistic works.

In this contribution, the author, coordinator of the project, outlines the results of an investigation into the identification of 40 plants found either painted, punched or (rarely) embossed in leather artworks dating mostly back to the seventeenth century. The painted representation of the plants on the many pieces examined during the survey was very often precise enough to enable their identification. However sometimes, as the depicted flowers were purely decorative, an accurate identification was very difficult or even impossible. All of the plants found within the artworks have been identified within their natural local environment.

Among the many plant species studied in the artefacts it was possible to recognize: the white lily flower Linum candidum L., often depicted as the symbol of purity and majesty; the rose with or without thorns, white or red, which is connected to martyrdom but can also be a symbol of charity; the fern is considered useful against plague and symbol of modesty and humbleness; the tulip Tulipa australis Link meaning the need for the grace of God; Adonis sp with yellow or red flowers was common in the fields as well as false camomile Matricaria discoidea DC; the cornflower Centaurea cyanus L. symbolizes the blue heaven; together with roses, iris and peach flowers, daises and carnations are very often associated with the Virgin Mary.

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