

2970 North Lake Shore Drive 11B  
Chicago, Illinois 60657

tel. 1-773-929-5986  
fax. 1-773-528-3976  
chicago@lesenluminures.com

Le Louvre des Antiquaires  
2 place du Palais-Royal  
75001 Paris

tél : 33 1 42 60 15 58  
fax : 33 1 40 15 00 25  
info@lesenluminures.com

AESOP, *Vita Aesopi* [Life of Aesop in the Latin translation of Rinuccio Aretino from the Greek]  
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment  
[Italy, likely Ferrara, c. 1465-75]

*39 folios plus 2 paper flyleaves, complete (i-iv8, v8-1 [last leaf canceled]), horizontal catchwords, written in a neat humanist script on 22 long lines, lightly ruled in pale brown ink (justification 117 x 75 mm.), in brown ink, many contemporary notes in the margin, some signaling passages, others picking out words in the text (esp. ff. 14v-15), some corrections (e.g., f. 18v), some words in Greek, on f. 1 an illuminated initial Q in goldleaf with intertwining white vine decoration on red, blue, and green grounds filled with white dots, extending into the upper and side margins, in the lower margin a shield enclosed in a laurel wreath and illuminated with gold besants, blue, and purple flowers finely inscribed in brown penwork, in excellent clean condition with wide margins. Bound in early nineteenth-century vellum over pasteboard, ornamental gilt border on covers, marbled pastedowns and endleaves, spine gilt in compartments "AESOP/ VITA" "XIII.S" [sic]. Dimensions 178 x 122 mm.*

Rare unrecorded copy of the Latin prose translation of Aesop's *Vita* by Rinuccio Aretino, an Italian humanist scholar. Rinuccio's translation exists in only seven manuscripts, including the present copy, which is both one of the earliest and most deluxe, certainly predating the first printed edition of 1474. Finely written and carefully illuminated, it was made by artists working at the Ferrarese court for a humanist patron. Its scattered contemporary marginalia warrant further study.

## PROVENANCE

1. Likely made in the region of Ferrara because of the ornamental decoration on the frontispiece, which closely compares with that of illuminators working in the entourage of Guglielmo Giralardi, responsible for the Bible of the Certosa of san Cristoforo and active c. 1475. The manuscript was surely made on commission for the still-unidentified family whose coat-of-arms appears in the lower border.

## TEXT

ff. 1-39r, rubric, *Incipit Vita Esopi*; incipit, "Qui per omnem vitam vite studiosissimus fuit;" explicit, "... qui moris esopi auctores fuerunt. FINIS."

This finely written life of Aesop is the Latin prose version by the Italian humanist Rinuccio Aretino (c. 1395-1450), translated from the Greek version of the Byzantine scholar Maximus Planudes (c. 1260-1330). In printed versions Rinuccio's translation of the *Vita* is usually found with the *Fabulae*. It was first published by Antonius Zarotus in Milan in 1474 six years before the publication by Bonus Accursius, c. 1480, which included the Greek along with the Latin text. Concluding with a scribal flourish "Finis" on a recto, followed by a blank verso, the present copy is unusual in that it appears to be an integral, independent transcription of the *Vita* without the *Fabulae*.

The *Vita* of Aesop, the legendary slave born about 620 B.C., is preserved in manuscript versions from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries. Professor Perry discovered that the earliest complete extant manuscript, a tenth-century Greek codex (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 397), correlates with a papyrus fragment of the second century A.D. now in Berlin. Although the *Vita* was believed to be a creation of Maximus Planudes, it is now thought by scholars such as Perry that the *Vita* existed essentially in its current form as early as the second century A.D. and that it was probably compiled using anecdotes dating as far back as the fifth century B.C., possibly by a Greek-speaking Egyptian. This early dating gives the work an immense significance in the history of literature as the author has not only compiled fictional anecdotes, which include a number of fables, but has brought to the *Vita* a distinct literary style through his descriptive touches and dialogue. The translator of the Morgan Library *Vita*, L. W. Daly, concludes that the extant versions of the text are "of unique importance in the history of prose fiction. Greek literature, which is so rich in myth and other forms of the storyteller's art, knows nothing comparable to them."

Rinuccio's account narrates Aesop's life, literary activity, and death as follows. Born a slave in ancient Greece, Aesop served successively two masters in Samos, Xanthus and Jadmon. As a reward for his learning, Jadmon made him a freeman. Subsequently Aesop traveled widely, and he eventually settled in Sardis, the capital of Lydia, at the court of King Croesus. He undertook at the command of Croesus various ambassadorial missions, during which he often narrated his fables to reconcile the citizens of different Greek cities. Sent to Delphi by Croesus to distribute a large sum of money to its inhabitants, Aesop became so incensed by their covetousness that he refused to hand out the money and instead returned it to his master. Enraged by this act, the Delphians had him executed as a public criminal. Until they made public retribution for the unjust execution, the Delphians met with a series of mysterious disasters. A statue by Lysippus, one of the famous Greek sculptors, was erected in Aesop's memory in Athens.

Manuscripts of Rinuccio's translation of the *Vita* are exceedingly rare. De Ricci records two in North American collections: University of Illinois, manuscript on paper (see *Census*, p. 699, no. 5) and one in the Robert Garrett Collection, now Princeton University Library, also on paper (see *Census*, p. 884, no. 101). To these should be added a manuscript in Yale University Beinecke Library, MS 611, also on paper, acquired from Laurence Witten, his Catalogue no. 8, 1978, item 1. *In Principio* records only three additional copies in European libraries: Escorial, Real Bibl. De S. Lorenzo, MS O III 26; Cambridge, Trinity College Library, MS R.I.39; and Vatican, MS Ottob. Lat. 1490. Transcribed on paper, most of these are modest exemplars; the present manuscript, finely written and illuminated, is one of the few deluxe copies to survive.

## ILLUSTRATION

The initial Q is close in style to the production described as dating from the time of Ercole I, in particular to no. 42, a "Historia Imperiale, c. 1471-75, attributed to an anonymous Ferrarese miniaturist (see Mariani Canova, in Toniolo, 1998, pp. 229-31) and the slightly later no. 43, Vespasiano Strozzi's *Eroticon*, c. 1487-1505 (ibid., pp. 231-32). At the bottom of the page the laurel enclosing the still-unidentified coat-of-arms compares with the work of Guglielmo Giraldi, as in nos. 37 and 30, both from c. 1475 (pp. 214-16 and 218-20). Guglielmo Giraldi is considered one of the protagonists of Ferrarese illumination, responsible for illuminating manuscripts for the Certosa di san Cristoforo of Ferrara, in particular a Bible dated c. 1469-71 (see ibid., no. 31).

## LITERATURE

Daly, L. W. *Aesop without Morals*, New York, 1961.

Mariani Canova, G. "La miniatura a Ferrara," in *La miniatura a Ferrara dal tempo di Cosmè Tura all'eredità di Ercole de' Roberti*, ed. F. Toniolo, Modena, Franco Cosimo Panini, 1998.

Perry, Ben Edwin. *Aesopica*, vol. I, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1952.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Description of the Pierpont Morgan Library *Vita* (MS M.397)  
<http://corsair.morganlibrary.org/msdescr/BBM0397z.pdf>

Online collection of Aesop's Fables with many links  
[www.AesopFables.com](http://www.AesopFables.com)

Life and Fables of Aesop  
<http://tomsdomain.com/aesop/aesopmain.htm>