

September 24, 2007  
News Release

## Celebrating Italian Festivals

### An exhibition at the Beinecke Library

Seventeenth-century Venice was no stranger to lavish celebrations. Yet in 1686, the visiting Duke of Braunschweig-Lüneburg arranged a musical performance that astounded even the Venetians. The musicians performed on the water, atop a forty-foot glass boat in the figure of the Greek god Proteus, which was illuminated with torches placed in its hull. Not content simply to impress his audience, the Duke also published and circulated a book that included an illustration of the famous boat. His book is just one of the many attractions of the Beinecke Library exhibition, *Celebrating Italian Festivals*, on view through January 9, 2008.



From the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, the royal and aristocratic courts behind Europe's most illustrious festivals printed elaborate, illustrated volumes to record the celebrations that they organized to mark births, deaths, betrothals, weddings, coronations, and visits. Often circulated for the benefit of rival noble families and in the interests of self promotion, festival books are fascinating witnesses to aristocratic culture and art during the Early Modern period.

With over sixty volumes from across Italy, *Celebrating Italian Festivals* will provide a rare and up-close look at the Italian festival book tradition. The books to be exhibited document a wide array of festivities, among them athletic competitions, tournaments, parades, fireworks, and theatrical and operatic performances. The cities, noble families, and wealthy individuals who organized these celebrations competed with each other to hold the most illustrious events possible. They hired Italy's most famous artists, composers, librettists, choreographers, actors, singers, and architects to develop their elaborate spectacles.

Among the attractions of the exhibit is a book describing the wedding celebration of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Published in 1579, it is one of the first books ever printed with color plates.



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The Beinecke will exhibit three variant copies of this rare volume. Also on display will be several volumes with illustrations by the printmaker Jacques Callot, who spent almost a decade in Florence and produced plates for a number of festival books. One book, published to describe a tournament held in Florence in 1616, includes an illustration by Callot that depicts a mock battle

held in the Piazza Santa Croce. Another Callot illustration accompanies a description of the obsequies held to honor the death of the Holy Roman Emperor Matthias in 1619.

Italian festival books grew more elaborate with the passage of time. One volume in the exhibit commemorates a parade held in Palermo on the feast day of Santa Rosalia in 1704. The book not only describes the event, but also includes a fold-out illustration of the entire parade. Over six feet in length, it depicts every float and participant, in order. Another book documents the procession for the feast of Corpus Christi organized by Pope Gregory XVI in 1838. The book consists of a single color illustration that, unfolded, is more than 38 feet long. It includes every one of the thousands of participants in the procession, including the pope himself, at about the midpoint of the procession.

Other books to be exhibited record the celebrations surrounding the law school graduation of a relative of Pope Clement XI, the miraculous discovery of the relics of San Placido, the coronation of the Emperor Charles VI as King of Sicily, and the annual Bolognese festival involving the roasting of a pig.

Celebrating Italian Festivals opens on Wednesday, October 3, 2007, and will continue through January 9, 2008. Opening night will include a lecture by Dr. Sarah Knight of the University of Leicester, at 5:15 p.m. with a reception afterward.

This exhibition was organized by Yale graduate students Eric Knibbs, Ayesha Ramachandran, and Torrence Thomas and Beinecke Acquisitions Assistant Amelia Prozano under the leadership of Robert G. Babcock, Curator of Early Books and Manuscripts.



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