The best six antique book dealers

by Jennie Gamwell

Our selection of six best antique book dealers, spanning all the world, specialising in incunabula, manuscripts and history.

Despite its strengths and weaknesses, and despite its dating spots and small strictnesses, once bought and registered, an antique book will always remain mint, even if it loses it will it." Umberto Pregliasco is quoting Ezra Pound's Cantos and discussing the rarity of antique books, the likes to reveal the authentic, and not the most antique book dealers. Separating from a book by selling it does not cut the bond between the dealer and the object of passion and research.

As we mentioned in a **previous article**, the world of the antiquarian books is still shaped by the hard practice. Research is rarely marked, many potential collectors are intimidated, many a talk about the rarity of the book, and the dealer's knowledge is not always fully understood. Some recent news did not help to dissipate this preconception.

We have to try unfold some mysteries by drawing up a list of six top antique book dealers that have shown rigor and passion in their research and work. Some of the dealers are well known, some more commercial purposes. Some are based in Paris, from New York to Chicago, London, Turin and Milan, here is our selection.

Les Enluminures (Paris, Chicago, New York)

Les Enluminures was founded in Paris by Jacques Rosenthal and Sandra Hindman along with a branch in Chicago. Then New York gallery and shop were opened in May 2010. Les Enluminures is a regular presence at the most important art and antique fairs, such as the TEFAF in Maastricht, the Winter Antiquities Show in New York, the Chicago Antiquarian Book Fair, the Paris Book Fair. Among its many clients are the Getty and the Louvre, the Metropolitan Museum, the National Gallery in Washington and the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. Les Enluminures specializes in illuminated, and in manuscripts from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it also deals with jewellery from the same periods – rare kits for a dealer specializing in books, but which underscores the extreme interest in a line of the leading experts in miniatures and medieval manuscripts, Sandra Hindman, who has, for example, curated the exhibition "Blue is precious" the a professor of art history at Northwestern University and author, co-author and editor of numerous books and articles on the history of illuminated manuscripts and medieval rings.

"The Blessed Virgin", in an illuminated manuscript on vellum, by Jacques Rosenthal, c. 1470s. With kindness of Les Enluminures

Les Enluminures organizes four or five exhibitions every year, some in collaboration with other dealers and artists travelling to other locations. To give an idea of the quality of the books from this antique book dealer in recent years, it is worth to point out a page from Christian Dioxata's Latin language illuminated manuscript on parchment of the Gospel of Luke, dated 1470, with illuminated initials and miniatures, from the Chester Beatty and the Bibliotheca Wittockiana collections, and with eleven decorated initials by the Master of the Cloud Bouths of Lust, from the Fourteen Vision Master, and a leaf from a Dominican Missal, with a page of the Mass for the Dead, from the Master of the Cloud Bouths of Lust, with eleven decorated initials by the Master of the Cloud Bouths of Lust

Undoubtedly one of the most famous antique book dealers in Italy, Pregliasco was founded in 1911 when the very young Lorenzo Pregliasco asked the family to sell a farmhouse in the Cuneo area in order to be able to take over, by pure instinct, a dusty bookshop. Ever since that first intuition, the gallery has seen many illustrious visitors such as Benedetto Croce, Piero Gobetti, Franco Antonicelli, Luigi Einaudi, Giovanni Spadolini, Leonardo Sciascia, Gianni Agnelli and, in more recent years, the assiduous Umberto Eco.

The Pregliasco family has been tightly linked to the Italian Association of Antiquarian Booksellers (ALAI). Lorenzo was one of the founders of the association in 1947. His son Arturo was president from 1970 to 1976 and from 2004 to 2010 the role passed to Umberto, who is now at the helm of the business and who, with Umberto Eco, was the protagonist of a lectio magistralis at Yale University focusing on the dangerous relationships between book collectors and their own "pushers."

Despite their clear focus on the early 16th century, the Pregliasco family have always dealt with all forms of bibliophilia. Over the various decades, these antique book dealers have proposed rare masterpieces but also indispensable reference books, for example *Convivio*, newsletters that complemented illustrated and autographed publications.

"Biblia Pauperum" – Venice, Giovanni Andrea Vavassori, 1511, h-B - 154 x 101 mm) cc 64 unnumbered – Picture from pregliasco.com.

Among the most important thematic catalogs by Pregliasco, each with hundreds of titles, we should mention *Dante and his Time* from 1965, those on the mountains (1963 and 2006), on Manzoni (1973, followed by Pascoli, Carducci, Monti), on Gabriele D'Annunzio (1972 and 1996), those on the Italian Risorgimento (1978), on the 20th century, on the Italian Private Presses, and *L'idea del Teatro* (on The Idea of Theatre, 2005). Catalogs on the Greek classics and Aldus Manutius, on Picasso and one on Dante have been published in collaboration with PrPh Books in New York. Unusual themes such as earthquakes, books printed on blue paper were curated by this Italian antique book dealer.

"Jorge Luis Borges once declared that when writers die, they become the books they have written. Paraphrasing this happy maxim, we could say that antique dealers live on in the catalogs they have published." Umberto Pregliasco tells us. "Few traces of the books passed over the decades may remain, while the whole of their catalogs constitutes the dealer's spiritual testament, the story of their life, of how they were able to transmit to the bibliophile, at every sale, their own knowledge and passion."

After decades with a storefront on Via Accademia Albertina in Turin, Umberto Pregliasco moved the activity to the first floor hall, an open-space that combines old bookcases with some modern design. "The world has changed" explains the antique book dealer. "The social function of bookstores has changed. Even older customers prefer to surf on search engines and shop almost in the dark, without first stroking and smelling the volumes. Sales are mostly made by appointment and via e-mail: the established reputation of the bookstore means that there are requests from otherwise unknown customers from all over the world." Concludes the antique book dealer: "Luckily the fundamental role of preserving memory and protecting antique books will remain with the dealer, dispersing and restoring libraries."

Antique books will still have a long life according to Pregliasco, who explains his vision with this metaphor: "Just like when gases change their state, a reversible process that is but a variation of the internal energy, so is for books. Nothing is lost: book collections change their skin, yes they change in their internal structure, maybe they divide, but just to aggregate in different forms and places. They come back to life, as it has always happened."

[For more about books and art, here is our selection of best European artist book publishers. Ed.]

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