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Yale University Buys Renaissance Archive

By DOUGLAS C. MCGILL, Special to the New York Times

NEW HAVEN— An enormous trove of Italian Renaissance and later manuscripts and documents, forming the archive of the prominent Spinelli banking family of Florence over a period of 500 years, has been bought for an undisclosed sum by Yale University, its officials have announced.

Among the approximately 150,000 documents in the archive are business records and extensive correspondence between the Spinellis and many of the major figures of Renaissance Italy, including Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, a succession of Popes, the painter and biographer Giorgio Vasari and many leading merchant families of Europe.

"In scholarly terms, this is a mother lode of treasure that just goes on and on," said Benno C. Schmidt Jr., the president of Yale, in an interview. "It's not a Michelangelo, but it's the historical equivalent of it. For centuries to come this will be a foundation for thinking about the Renaissance and early modern thinking."

Yale officials said the archive was kept in the Florentine palace of the Spinellis until the 1920's, when it was sold. The archive was bought by Yale from a Swiss book dealer whom the university would not identify. **Commonplace but Telling**

Despite the extensive personal papers of powerful Renaissance figures in the archive, it is the more mundane artifacts of the Spinelli banking business - their accountants' books as treasurers to the Vatican - that some historians expect to yield new information on the Renaissance and the Roman Catholic Church.

"It was papal finances that triggered the Reformation, when the Pope had to borrow money to pay for the remodeling of St. Peter's," said Jaroslav Pelikan, a professor of religious history at Yale. "To begin to see the kinds of deal-making that went on, you need to get hold of account books."

Among the Spinellis' records are hundreds of accountants' ledgers detailing the amount of loans made by the Spinelli bank to cardinals and bishops in dioceses throughout the world, along with the amount repaid in interest. While the Vatican archives contain a great deal of this material, scholars say relatively little of it exists elsewhere; they believe the Spinelli papers offer an independent perspective that will shed new light on the Vatican's financial maneuverings.

"Accountancy isn't a jazzy subject, but remember, Al Capone was sent to prison by an accountant," said Professor Pelikan. "Once they got his account books he was sunk. What you're up against here is a similar possibility of beginning to track down the whole intricate web of deal-making, of the borrowing and lending of the church." Other Things to Be Learned

From the accountants' books in the Spinelli archives, Professor Pelikan said, scholars may also be able to trace with unusual clarity the gradual replacement of a barter economy by a money economy, the development of such practices as charging interest on loans and the use of risk capital to finance the building of churches and commercial business ventures.

The Spinellis, though they were among the leading merchant and banking families of Renaissance Florence, did not have the international political ambitions of other prominent Florentine families like the Medicis. Thus the family is not well known to history, although the Spinelli palace, built by Tomasso Spinelli in the mid-1400's, still stands in the Santa Croce section of Florence. It is now used by the Italian Government to house an agency for art restoration.

No Renaissance scholars outside of Yale have examined the archive, but several experts said scholarly research in the archives could have a profound effect on modern understanding of the Renaissance period.

"It's going to be exciting," said Howard Saalman, a professor of architectural history who specializes in the Renaissance, at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh. "What makes a cache like this interesting is the overall picture, the unity of an important banking family over centuries." An Archive's Enemies

According to Professor Saalman and other scholars, it is extremely rare for the archives of a banking family to be preserved in such a complete state. Most such archives, scholars say, including those of the Medicis, have either been damaged or destroyed in floods or largely dispersed through time by enforced exiles, political upheavals and other calamities.

Besides the Spinellis' account books, other important documents in the collection are hundreds of letters written in code by a Spinelli family member who was a spy for King Henry VII of England, and exhaustive daily journals and financial records for many of the Spinelli family businesses, including silk manufacturing and trading companies, branch banks throughout Europe, and Tuscan farms.

Robert Babcock, the curator of early books and manuscripts at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, said close examination of the handwriting, inks and papers of the archive revealed that it was genuine. The sheer bulk of the collection, he added, also helped convince the university that there was virtually no chance a forger had made the documents.

The Spinelli papers will be kept at the Beinecke Library, where they now become the largest single historical archive owned by the university and the largest Renaissance archive in the country. Paper and More Paper

The Spinelli papers, as observed on a recent visit to the Beinecke, are stored on row upon row of shelves in the library's cool, quiet stacks. Hundreds of thousands of brownish, rough-edged papers, most covered with an ornate black-ink scrawl in Latin or Italian, lie in loose stacks on the shelves. Others are collected in eight-inch-thick, cream-colored 18th-century parchment folders, each one bearing a calligraphic number on its spine and bound with a green string.

Several boxes contain bundles of legal contracts written out on paper scrolls, some up to 30 feet long, many of them detailing the terms of doweries and other prenuptial arrangements of Spinelli marriages. Many other documents, such as dozens of letters between members of the Spinelli and Medici families, are still affixed with a glob of red sealing wax and a short length of binding thread.

One striking document, a papal injunction from 1478, is kept between sheets of glass because of its fragility. In brightly colored inks and a handwriting as fine as embroidery, Pope Sixtus IV orders a Spinelli bank customer to pay an outstanding debt.

In the lower left corner of the document, like a modern notary's mark, is a further note added later by the Pope, excommunicating the customer because his debt was not paid. The Ultimate Foreclosure

"When you're a papal banker, there are a lot of advantages," Mr. Babcock, holding the document, noted wryly. "One is that you can condemn your debtors to hell."

Only a fraction of the collection has been carefully studied by scholars at Yale; it will be catalogued in phases, with the first portions available to scholars in January. The entire collection is to be catalogued by 1992.

The Spinellis, whose palace in Florence was next to the home of Vasari, the painter and biographer, were the executors of the Vasari estate and so owned thousands of Vasari's personal records. Scholars say these papers appear to be among the most important in the Spinelli archive.

Vasari, one of the celebrated Florentine painters of his time, is today best known for his biographical portraits of Renaissance painters and sculptors in his book "Lives of the Artists."

Among the documents thus far discovered in the archive is Vasari's last will, which lists all of the paintings in his personal art collection at the time of his death, including works by Botticelli, Leonardo, Raphael and Durer.

Among Vasari's other papers in the archive are correspondence with Cosimo de' Medici, who was his patron, many notes and records of various artistic projects and a long account of negotiations Vasari conducted with a Florentine priest to insure that a prospective wife would have a generous dowry.

Photos of two bound manuscripts from the approximately 150,000 documents of the Florentine archive that was acquired by Yale University; Robert Babcock, curator of early books at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale (NYT/Bill Burkhart)