



STEPHEN • BUTLER  
RARE BOOKS & MANUSCRIPTS

A beautiful historiated initial [northern  
Italy, late 15th century]



With outstanding Provenance

**An exquisite miniature cutting by an accomplished Lombard artist working within the bounds of the Visconti court.**

**Anonymous Lombard artist.** A prophet in prayer, historiated initial cut from an illuminated choirbook on vellum [northern Italy, late 15th century]

110 x 117mm. Text on reverse covered with paper and illegible with the exception of '[afferu]nt in patie[n]tia': this is likely from second Vespers for Sexagesima Sunday ('Vobis datum [...] et fructum afferunt in patientia') (some tiny loss of blue pigment, but in excellent condition).

**Provenance:**

(1) The verso bears the pencil inscription 'from the Cathedral of Como'. Many of the cuttings that bear this inscription are stylistically attributable to Cremona, and can be traced back to the 1838 catalogue of the sale of **William Young Ottley (1771-1836)**, English collector and Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum. The present cutting was possibly part of lot 74, a group of thirteen cuttings that included a 'David kneeling', along with 'twelve Letters, without figures, from the Cathedral of Como'. The present cutting forms a pair with an initial now at Chazen Museum of Art, an initial 'D' with Noah's Ark (also for Sexagesima Sunday; on this see P. Kidd, <https://mssprovenance.blogspot.com/2018/01/a-curious-cutting-at-chazen.html>). The two cuttings were sold in the collection of:

(2) **Samuel Rogers (1763-1855)**, poet, banker, art collector, friend of Byron and Shelley: his sale at Christie's, 28 April 1856, lot 989, the pair of cuttings described as: 'St. Joseph praying ; and a temple, in a landscape—two beautiful illuminated minatures [sic], in capital letters'. The pair were bought by:

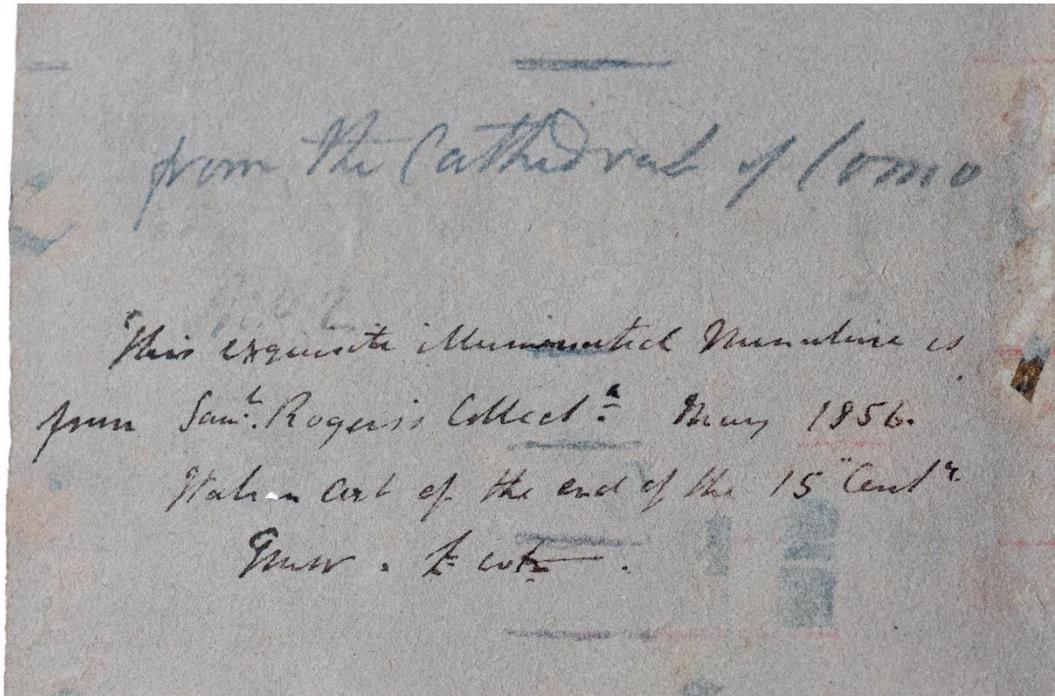
(3) **Walter Benjamin Tiffin** for 16s.

(4) **Thomas Miller Whitehead (1821-1897)**: his ink inscription and initials on the reverse.

(5) Sotheby's, 10 July 2012, lot 8.

*detail***Illumination:**

The straight-bearded figure, his head turned up towards God, echoes the earlier compositions of Lombard illuminators such as the Master of the Lodi Choirbooks (Cambridge, Mass., Houghton Library, Ms. Typ. 983 f.3) and the Master of the Vitae Imperatorum. Our anonymous artist, with his exquisitely detailed modelling of the faces and the robes, is of a later generation, and seems to have been working in the ambit of the Visconti court, with the presence of the Visconti-sun motif below the figure of God reminiscent of the copy of Antonio Minuti, Vita di Muzio Attendolo Sforza, dated 1491 (now Château de Blois, see Dix Siècles d'Enluminure Italienne, 1984, no139), which has similar portraits of Sforza dukes before richly coloured backgrounds heightened with clusters of white dots.



*Reverse of cutting with 'Como' reference and Provenance*

*Below we reproduce the blogpost written by Peter Kidd with his permission. The post was published on 14, January 2018 and discusses the sister cuttings which all have the 'Como cathedral' reference on the reverse of which ours is one.*

### **From Peter Kidd's blog :**

Last summer Maria Saffiotti Dale, Curator at the Chazen Museum of Art, sent me just the sort of provenance puzzle I enjoy. It concerned a 15th-century Italian cutting, shown above, described on the Chazen website as an "Initial 'D' from an Antiphonary from Como Cathedral with a Temple". [1]

On the back is an inscription which she could not entirely read: "I can make out all the inscriptions EXCEPT the initials(?) immediately preceding the date 1856 and what follows it. Any ideas?"

Here is a the photo of the reverse she sent me:



It is easy enough to read, in pencil:

"from the Cathedral of Como" and "No 2."

and in ink:

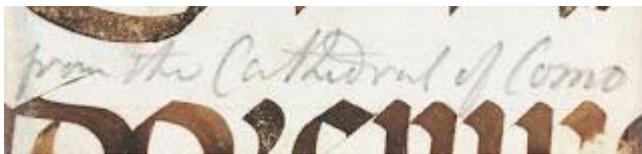
"Rogers Collect[io]n" and "Highest Italian Art of the end of the 15th Cent[ur]y"

followed by the problematic line:

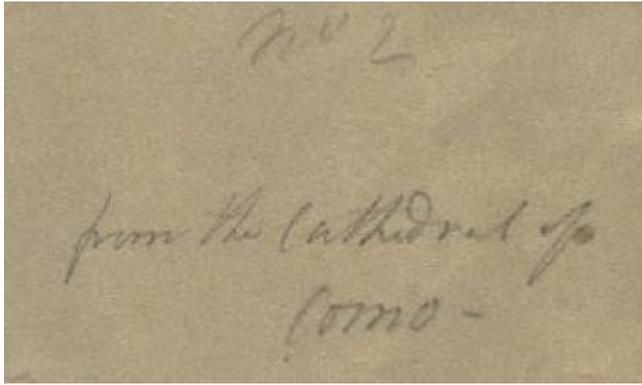
"[?] 1856 [?]"

The phrase "from the Cathedral of Como" is well known to anyone who works with Italian cuttings, including Maria, who wrote that the Chazen example is "one of the Rogers cuttings purportedly from Como Cathedral (but most likely Cremona)".

Here is an example from the Free Library, Philadelphia:



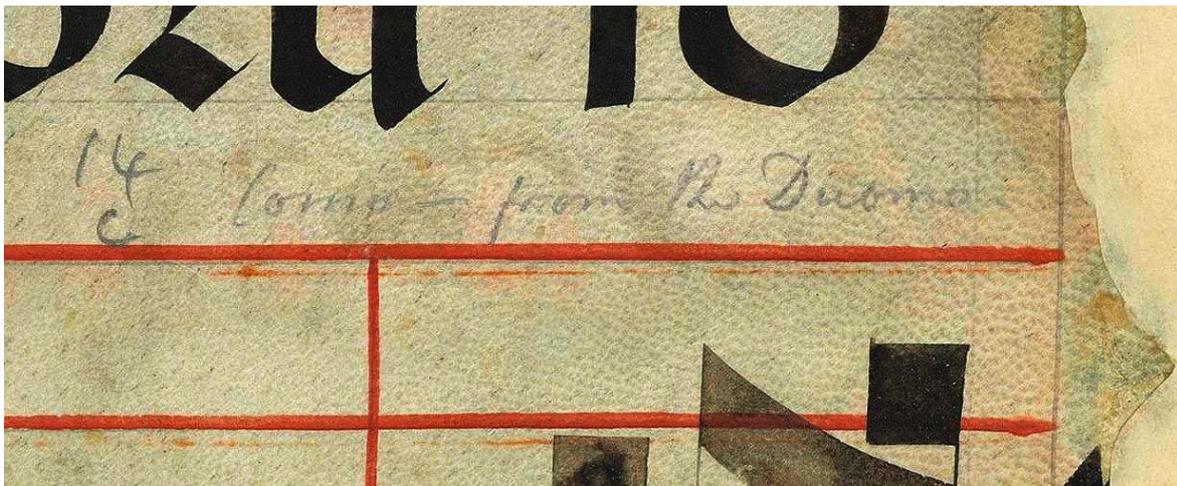
Here is one at the Getty Museum:



And several more are recorded (but the inscriptions not reproduced), in one of the Lehman collection catalogues available online from The Met (as mentioned in the previous post):

A Google search on "cutting" and "from the Cathedral of Como" produces a number of further hits at the British Library, Fitzwilliam Museum, and elsewhere, including the online catalogue of the Beyond Words exhibition. [2]

Occasionally a slight variant occurs, as in this detail from a cutting sold by Christie's in 2015:



Many of the cuttings with the "Como" inscription can be traced back to the Ottley sale in 1838, which has been mentioned in various previous posts (e.g. here and here), and the catalogue specifically mentions this provenance for a considerable number of individual cuttings:

74 Thirteen—David kneeling; and twelve Letters, without figures, from the Cathedral of Como

140 Eleven small initial Letters, Prophets, &c. —————

141 Five ditto—Apostles; St. Cecilia, &c. from Como —————

142 Three—The Annunciation; Magdalen; and St. Peter in Prison, from the same place

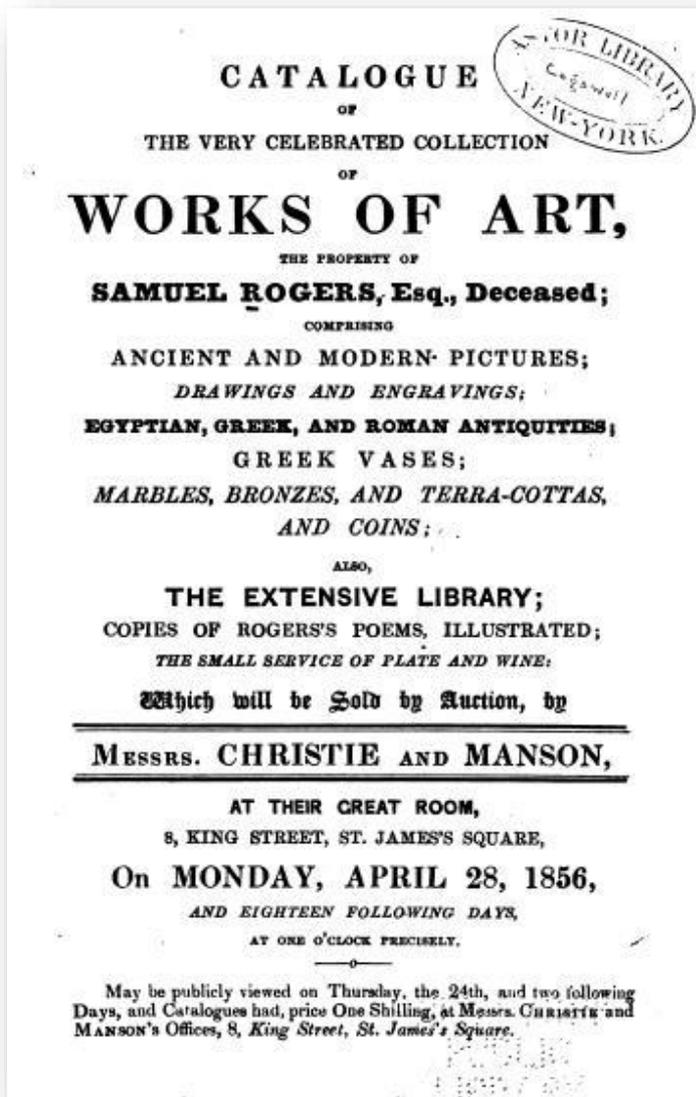
160 Two—St. Andreas with the Cross, delicately heightened with gold; and the Meeting of the Madonna and Elizabeth, *query*, by Princivalle Negri, from the Church at Como

161 Seven from the Cathedral at Como—The Transfiguration; the Descent of the Holy Spirit; Martyrdom of a Saint, &c.

162 Four, from the same place—The Angel and the Maries at the Sepulchre; the Madonna in glory; St. Paul, &c.

It seems most likely that the Chazen initial was part of lot 74 or 149, one of the "Letters without figures".

With the inscription mentioning the "Rogers Collection" and the year "1856", it was a simple matter to identify the Chazen cutting in the 1856 sale catalogue of the poet, banker, and art collector Samuel Rogers (1763-1855):



It must surely be the second item in lot 989:

"989 St. Joseph praying; and a temple, in a landscape—two beautiful illuminated miniatures, in capital letters"

The Chazen's description of the initial's subject as "a temple" may have originally been derived from this source, but I think it is probably incorrect.

The surviving text on the back of the cutting is enough to allow identification; it must come from the first

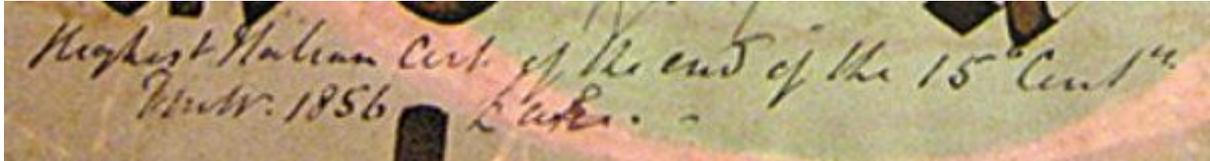
versicle for Sexagesima Sunday:

*"Fac tibi archam de lignis levigatis mansiunculas in ea facies ..."*

This strongly suggests that this text is on the verso, and the illuminated initial is the recto, the "D" being the first letter of the first response of the same day: "Dixit dominus ad Noe ...".

The subject-matter of both texts suggest that the "temple" depicted in the initial is in fact Noah's Ark. I haven't found a precise 15th-century Italian equivalent, but the form of the structure is very like this 16th-century drawing, with a single small, high, window at one gable-end:

This is all good and well, but does not answer Maria's original question, concerning the final line of the inscription on the reverse of the cutting. Here is a close-up:



I was fairly confident that the first character after "1856" looks like a "£" symbol, which would mean that the rest could be a price, in code (perhaps "£ak" or "£ah"?).

At first I thought that the bit before the year 1856 might be an abbreviation for a month, such as "Nov[em]b[er]", but a couple of months later I found closely comparable inscriptions on the back of a series of Bible historiale cuttings at the Free Library, Philadelphia (here and here), including these:

These not only confirm that the author of these notes writes "£" and a price-code (in this case "£a.o.o"), but the bit before the year "1856" now looks much less like a month, and more like a personal name, perhaps beginning with a "T" and ending with "er", such as "Turner", or perhaps three initials, such as "TMW".

This last reading proved to be correct: a search of Lugt's Marques online led me to Thomas Miller Whitehead (1821-1897):

So in addition to providing a bit more provenance for the Chazen cutting, we have also found some for the Free Library's Bible historiale cuttings.

[1] The cutting was included in a 2011 exhibition, for which there is an accompanying PDF guide, available here.

[2] A number of cuttings in the USA with the inscription are recorded and discussed by Anna Melograni, 'Miniature inedite del Quattrocento lombardo nelle collezioni

*americane [prima parte]*, *Storia dell'Arte*, 82 (1994), 283–302, at p. 299 n. 35, p. 301 nn. 65, 71; *'Miniature inedite [...] [seconda parte]'*, *Storia dell'Arte*, 83 (1995), 5–27, at p. 22 n. 80. Her lists of cuttings with the inscription are slightly expanded by Anne-Marie Eze in her catalogue descriptions of the British Library cuttings, [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). She dates the handwriting to the early 20th century, but I think that it is more likely to be of the first half of the 19th century.

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With thanks to Peter Kidd for permission to reproduce this blogpost which can be found at [mssprovenance.blogspot.com](https://mssprovenance.blogspot.com)

Since this post Peter has identified further cuttings with Ottley connections which he published on 9, January 2021. <https://mssprovenance.blogspot.com/2021/01/the-hoe-album-iv-more-ottley.html>





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