The recent University of Melbourne Library exhibition, Significant Others: the Representation of Women in Early Printed Books, was opened by Jaynie Anderson during one of the rainiest Octobers in recent memory. This seemed appropriate for an exhibition that featured water and fountains in the majority of items in the display. This exhibition showed some of the oldest books in the Library’s collection — a rare treat for art and architecture history students and lovers of old books. Jaynie Anderson’s opening address is reproduced here.

**This charming and elegant exhibition of illustrated Renaissance books was curated jointly by Luke Morgan, a doctoral candidate in the School of Fine Arts, and Merete Smith, the Curator of Rare Books at the University of Melbourne Library.** Merete Smith is well known through the innovative exhibitions that she has consistently prepared for the University Library, whereas my doctoral student perhaps needs some introduction. Luke Morgan began his undergraduate studies in art history at Auckland University. He came to Melbourne in 2000 to embark upon a doctoral dissertation on the Renaissance architect and fountain designer Salomon de Caus.

Two of De Caus’ works are represented in the exhibition, namely the Hortus Palatinus (1620) and the Raisons des Forces Mouvantes (1615). De Caus is a fascinating subject for a doctoral dissertation. To date there is no monograph on him. He wrote a great deal and designed gardens in Heidelberg, London, and in major French cities. Today, garden architecture and history is a topical subject. During the first eight months of Morgan’s candidature he has written a major article on contemporary New Zealand art for the Australian New Zealand Art journal. In addition to co-curating this exhibition he has conceptualised his thesis.

Initially I had the idea to stage an exhibition on the representation of women in Renaissance books to coincide with a fourth year honours subject that I teach on the same theme. Morgan’s passionate interest in fountains developed the subject to include a large section on architecture and fountains and the women who adorn them. “Women and water” might be said to be the subtitle to the show. The exhibition’s catalogue is an informative read. It is theoretically sophisticated and full of interesting novel observations about the books on exhibition. Smith has written an excellent catalogue that will make the treasures of the University Library better known to a wider audience.

Morgan’s catalogue essay “Significant Others” takes its title from the French theorists Hélène Cixious and Lucie Irigaray that women as “other” (man’s opposite) are inscribed negatively in culture through language. It begins with an account of mythical women whose life stories are about loss, who are emblematic of Cixious’ thesis, Echo and Andromeda. Narcissus is
Narcissus’s vehement “Hands off! Embrace me not! May I die before I give you power over me!” Echo can only respond: “I give you power over me!” Her heartfelt reiteration draws attention to an implicit theme of many of the images exhibited here. In these plates, nymphs, nereids, mermaids, Andromeda, and even nature are nearly all powerless; sometimes literally bound; always, in one form or another, objects of desire.

Although the selection of books exhibited was chosen to demonstrate a particular thesis, the exhibition is open to a number of different interpretations, one of which would be that it represents the art historian’s laboratory. These books can all be used by art historians as sources for ideas. Their images, with their accompanying explanations, shed light on larger works of art, buildings, gardens etc. The books chosen for exhibition are the classical sources, such as Virgil and Ovid, from which artists took constant inspiration. One of the best introductions to Renaissance art is Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* was a contemporary Renaissance text of the same order. There is also an excellent selection of emblem books, for example: the famous *Iconologia* by Cesare Ripa, Francis Tolson’s moral emblems, Andrea Alciati’s *Emblemata*, and Fortunio Liceti’s *Hieroglyphica*. These books all contain images, with accompanying mottos, that have often provided art historians with help for interpreting images. Boccaccio’s book *Concerning Famous Women* established the canon of famous women for the Renaissance, and indeed for many centuries to come.

The final section of the exhibition is about architectural treatises. The famous Venetian incunable the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, is seen here in various facsimile editions. Another notable treatise exhibited is by Du Cerceau, the greatest architect of the French Renaissance. Visitors will also see Dezallier D’Argenville’s work on how to lay out a garden, Piranesi’s engravings of the Amorous Tritons for Fountains, and of course some of the published writings by De Caus.

All in all this is an exhibition that presents erudite and beautiful books in a way that makes them accessible to undergraduates and scholars alike.

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