

THE FEDERICO ZERI FOUNDATION

An International Research Centre for Art History

Unlike previous seminars where fellows of the Italian Academy presented research they were engaged on, I am privileged today to report on a reality that has kept the University of Bologna and a small band of scholars hard at work these last few years.

Guided by a series of images, I would like to document Federico Zeri's 1998 bequest to Bologna University, relate some cultural and biographical episodes featuring this great art historian (1921-1998), and illustrate the library, the photo archive, and some of the Federico Zeri Foundation's achievements and projects.



Winning Younger generations over Art History

The primary goal of the Federico Zeri Foundation has been to offer to the scientific community the cultural legacy (the Library and photograph Archive) that Zeri donated to the University of Bologna. The priority has been to make the collection of books and photographs available to scholars and students by cataloguing and digitizing the originals and setting up an online database. This objective has been achieved by a trained team of young art historians (PhD, MA, etc.) specialized in different fields: cataloguing, book and photograph conservation, IT competency, management of archives. A strong sense of devotion to the project characterizes the workgroup, amid the excitement of daily dialogue with similar international experiences. The flexibility of the project and the vocation to keep up with technological acceleration have made the Foundation an acknowledged reference point for scholars and international art history institutions. The Federico Zeri Foundation is also committed to the enhancement of research and winning younger generations over Art History: the interdisciplinary and specialized training courses in Mentana, Bologna and Venice are designed to achieve this result. This will be the aim of the Foundation in coming years.

Federico Zeri, eccentric Art Historian

"I was born in Rome in Via XXIV Maggio on 12 th August 1921, a step away from the Quirinal and the statues of the Dioscuri". In his autobiography, Federico Zeri brings in both Papal Rome and Imperial Rome to reconstruct his cultural boundaries on the basis of an early vocation for art and classical antiquity which was to shape his career as a scholar.



Federico Zeri in a portrait by Gianni Berengo Gardin



Didime, 1987

When at the University of Rome in the early 1940s, Zeri followed the courses of Pietro Toesca, under whom he graduated in 1945. It was an encounter which would change his life. Zeri's unconventional approach to the discipline made an early appearance in his degree thesis, where the subject was Jacopino del Conte, a painter of Roman Mannerism to whom little importance was given at the time. Zeri would often choose obscure viewpoints from which to ask innovative questions on the great themes in art history. Evidence of this is given in his book *Pittura e Controforma* (1957) which, though the subtitle bore a reference to Scipione Pulzone, another figure in late Mannerism, was to create a milestone in contemporary historical interpretation

It was Toesca who introduced him to Bernard Berenson, a figure who held a deep fascination for the young Zeri, who was later to dedicate to him his book on the Master of the Barberini Panels (1961). At the end of the war Zeri made the acquaintance of Giuliano Briganti, Mario Praz and particularly Roberto Longhi, a *maestro* with a strong and charismatic personality with whom he was to have a quarrelsome and sometimes competitive relationship. He took up employment on the fine arts committee of the Ministry for the Cultural Heritage and in 1948 was appointed director of the Galleria Spada in Rome. He left this position at the beginning of the 1950s after publishing a fundamental catalogue of the collection (1952).

From then on, Zeri's career was that of an independent art historian, but he was never to lose his critical conscience as regards the protection of art and the close ties between the works and their contexts. His interest in rediscovering minor areas of art production led to a philological and historical recuperation of forgotten artists, lost pictorial series, an entire figurative geography overlooked by studies.

From 1948 the scholar published extensively on the subject in a clear, terse style, in the tradition of art literature in the English-speaking world, even borrowing from the language of science. This certainly went against the more allusive and literary style in fashion in Italy at that time.

His first trips to Paris and London between 1947 and 1948 brought him in contact with leading figures in international *connoisseurship* like Philip Pouncey, Denis Mahon, John Pope-Hennessy and Frederick Antal. Zeri was later to claim that he owed a great deal to this last for his interest in the relations between art and society.

His philological approach to the work of art and the moment where the "attribution" is revealed were never in fact an end in themselves but were evidence of attention to the works' material data, their history and even historical short circuits. In this way, from Renaissance painting Zeri came to concern himself with forgeries as revealing a certain taste in collecting and a different way of interpreting art works of the past.

The method of the connoisseur, which he learnt from Toesca, Berenson and Longhi, was to be of fundamental importance for him. His first instrument of work was the photograph library which he began to collect in the 1940s and which over time was to become "the world's largest private archive of Italian painting", an essential reference work for the historical sequencing of any work out of context. It had been Berenson who claimed that the "winner" in art history is the one with the most photographs, in other words a historian who can provide the best documentation of individual stylistic variants recorded over time.

He combined his talent as a connoisseur with a close network of relations which brought him into contact with the leading collectors and antiquarians of the time, including Vittorio Cini, J. Paul Getty, Alessandro Contini Bonacossi and Daniel Wildenstein.

Of great significance were his relations with the United States. Visiting professor at Harvard University in Cambridge (Mass.) and New York's Columbia University, he was instrumental in setting up the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. He was commissioned to catalogue the Italian paintings in US state-owned collections (1972), publishing the catalogues of the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore (1976) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (1971, 1973, 1980, 1986).

Zeri's time was spent between Europe, the States and the Middle East. When not travelling he would retreat to his villa in Mentana, designed especially for him by the architect Andrea Busiri Vici in 1963 to suit his requirements for living and studying. From his isolated location in the Roman countryside he had no hesitation in expressing outspoken views through the Press and television, eventually becoming the critical conscience of Italian culture, which was only later to bring him recognition.

In 1993 he was appointed deputy chairman of the national council for the cultural heritage. In February 1998 he was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Bologna, a year after becoming a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, where he took the place of Richard Nixon.

Zeri continued working right up to the end, because "each day brings its share of photographs and paintings". He died in Mentana on 5 th October 1998.

Villa Zeri and the epigraph collection

Zeri's house was designed by the architect Andrea Busiri Vici in 1963 in order to host the scholar's art and antiquity collection and his rich library.

During his tireless research, Federico Zeri looked many times towards the ancient world, collecting a range of different items including Antiochia mosaics, Fayum portraits and sculptures from Palmyra.

The bulk of his collection of antiquities is made up of nearly 400 inscriptions, framed within the garden of the villa. The majority of them are in Latin, often purchased on the antiques market.

The collection is distinctive not only for its wealth of contents but also for its variety, making it almost a "manual" of Epigraphy.



Villa Zeri in Mentana



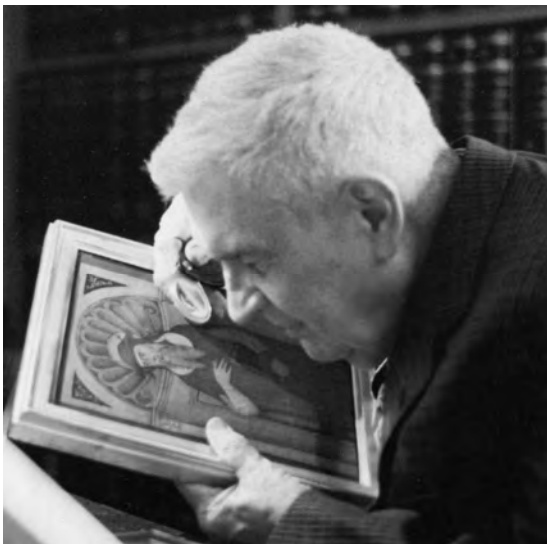
Torlonia sphinxes, once in the garden of Villa Zeri

The University of Bologna and Federico Zeri

In a will dated 29th September 1998, Federico Zeri bequeathed to the University of Bologna his Villa in Mentana, the estate of 10 hectares, 3 farmhouses, the collection of epigraphs, the art library (46,000 art books, 37,000 auction catalogues, 60 periodicals) and the photograph archive (290,000 photographs of monuments and works of art).

Behind that choice lay a two-way relationship of growing trust and esteem between Federico Zeri and Bologna University, despite the scholar's well-known aversion for the academic world. Throughout the Eighties and Nineties he gave many unforgettable lectures at Bologna University, which in turn recognised his career and contribution by the highest Italian accolade, the Honorary Degree, conferred in February 1998.

To honour a bequest of such magnitude, in 1999 the University of Bologna established the "Federico Zeri Foundation" on the basis of the statute presented by then Chancellor Fabio Roversi Monaco, in order to preserve and open to scholars the Zeri library and photograph archive.



Zeri studying a panel by Maestro di Marradi, 1989



Zeri receives the honorary degree from the University of Bologna, 1998
(Anna Ottani Cavina, Federico Zeri, Umberto Eco, Pierre Rosenberg)

An Art History Foundation and an International Research Centre

Since 2001 the joint energies of the Chancellor and Foundation President, Pier Ugo Calzolari, and the Director Anna Ottani Cavina have shaped the Foundation project as a centre for advanced research into humanistic studies, specialising in the History of Art, and at the same time a centre for the promotion of culture in the context of a dynamic modern university. The Foundation programmes are supported by a scientific board of international experts.

Links have been forged to this end with institutions such as The Getty Research Institute of Los Angeles, The Kress Foundation-ARTstor Digital Library of New York, the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA) of Paris, the Kunsthistorisches Institut of Florence, the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti of Venice.

The Foundation's first task however is to ensure that the collections it has been left are made accessible to the public. Work has been in progress since 2002 on cataloguing the Zeri photograph archive, digitizing it and putting it on line.

Since September 2007 this taxing programme has also involved inventorying, cataloguing and updating the Library which is now open to the public.

The Bologna centre of the Federico Zeri Foundation is hosted in the restored convent of Santa Cristina, a Renaissance complex in the centre of the city which the University has equipped to house the photograph archive, the art library and a study centre with a large reading room and computer stations for online consultation.

The same roof houses the Department of Visual Arts with its library, enriched by the precious Supino and Volpe photograph archives. As a whole this ranks as a specialist centre, attaining to international

standards. This is the first large centre for art history studies to have been funded and promoted by an Italian institution. The other temples of art history research on Italian soil are German (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and Biblioteca Hertziana in Rome) and American (The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies at Bernard Berenson's Villa I Tatti at Settignano).

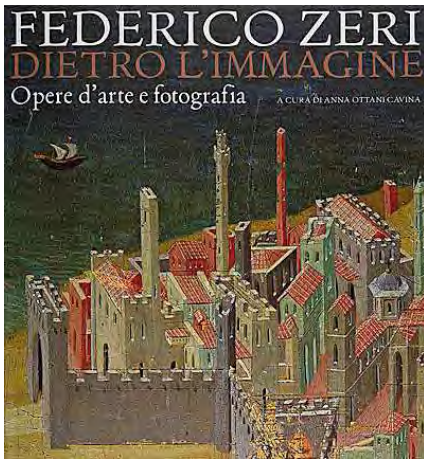
With its geographic location, Bologna is highly accessible to researchers and will perform the same reference service as the aforesaid centres further south in Florence and Rome.

The Federico Zeri Foundation also took an active part in Europeana (Europe's cultural heritage portal) being one of the first Italian content providers.

Scientific activities

One of the Foundation's objectives is to set up research laboratories (entailing seminars, conferences, study grants) which tap the potential resources of the library and photograph archive and boost interdisciplinary dialogue among researchers.

The Federico Zeri Foundation promotes annual meetings and lectures, edits volumes to stimulate comparisons and debates with other cultural institutions.



Catalogue and first room of the exhibition "Federico Zeri dietro l'immagine" (Bologna, Oct. 10th 2009-Jan. 10th 2010)

Training activities

Since 2004 the Federico Zeri Foundation has promoted specialist training courses in Art History and Epigraphy in collaboration with Italian and foreign universities. These courses study in-depth topics linked to Zeri's research: Art History in Rome from the 13th to the 19th century.

Since 2008 the Foundation has collaborated with the Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, to promote training courses about landscape. Topics related to history, culture and landscape protection in Italy are studied in depth through new perspectives that allow an interdisciplinary approach and introduce new methods of research.

Finally the Foundation organizes seminars concerning more technical areas such as preserving, cataloguing and digitizing historical photograph archives, or on museology, art libraries, the cultural heritage.



Training course on photograph archives



Students in the Library

The Library

The library that Federico Zeri bequeathed to the University of Bologna consists of more than **46,000 books** as well as about **37,000 auction catalogues** and **60 periodicals**.

Of the books, a particularly large section concerns Italian painting from the Middle Ages to the 19th century and consists of monographs, catalogues of museums, exhibition catalogues and extracts. There are also important sections covering sculpture, miniatures, drawing, engraving, foreign art, applied arts, archaeology and architecture.



Federico Zeri's library in Mentana



The Library of the Federico Zeri Foundation in Bologna

A set of **auction catalogues**, some of the most important in existence, includes a number of rare Italian and foreign catalogues from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The library is intrinsically linked to the photograph archive to which, in Zeri's intention and practice, it forms the natural scientific extension, an approach which the Foundation intends to maintain.

The volumes has been catalogued in SBN (National Library Service) to grant visibility and web access. An ad hoc bibliographic classification has been devised, so that it is now possible to update Zeri's book collection with new acquisitions without breaking up the original arrangement, which is thus preserved.



Auction catalogues of the beginning of the 19th century

The Photograph Archive

The photograph archive numbers **290,000 photographs** of art works and monuments. The majority of them are black and white prints (gelatin and albumin on paper, carbon prints), coming from State photography archives (Fototeca Nazionale, Soprintendenze), Italian and foreign museums, private archives and collections.



Photographs of Still Life painting in the Fototeca Zeri



Lorenzo Lotto, *Madonna with Child, angel and Saints* in a carbon print dated 1896 from the Fototeca Zeri

On 24th March 1947, Federico Zeri wrote to Bernard Berenson to confess that his photograph archive was still "small and ill-organized". It was around the same time that clarity and order were given to the ambitious project that would result in one of the world's most complete private archives for the Art History sector.

Over the years whole photograph collections previously owned by scholars, auction houses and antique dealers were saved by Zeri from dispersion or destruction. He collected photographic campaigns on historic building complexes and fresco cycles. Many important works that have now been irretrievably lost or have sunk without trace are only documented by photos from his archive.

The photograph collection copiously documents the scholar's favourite research field: **Italian painting** from the 13th to the 18th century, with **140.000 photographs**, but also includes sets devoted to Italian sculpture, archaeology, architecture, as well as to applied arts, drawing, miniature and European painting. A special mention deserves the **Still Life painting** set of **14.000 photographs**. It represents the most important archive on this subject.

In some sectors, the quantity of pictures is well-nigh exhaustive of the subject. Most of the reproductions bear notes in Zeri's hand on the back, and these offer a wealth of information extremely important for research (bibliographical references, provenances, cross-references to other works, alternative attributions).



The online database

To make the photograph archive materials available to scholars and students, since 2003 a group of young art historians has been working with the following objectives: to inventory and order the photograph collection, to monitor its state of preservation, to design a catalogue tailored to the collection characteristics and ordering principle, to produce specific cataloguing software enabling the photograph archive to be consulted on line.

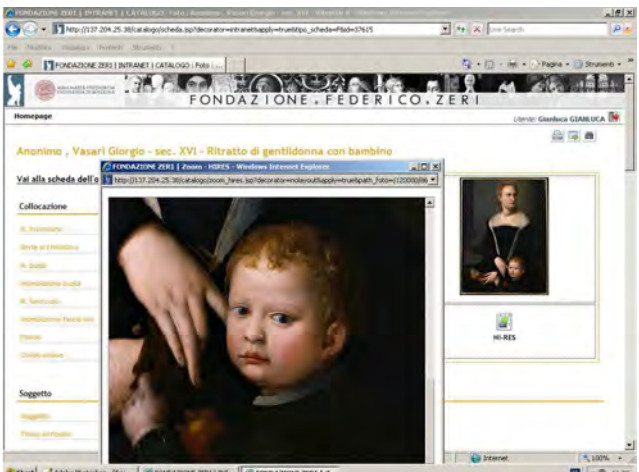
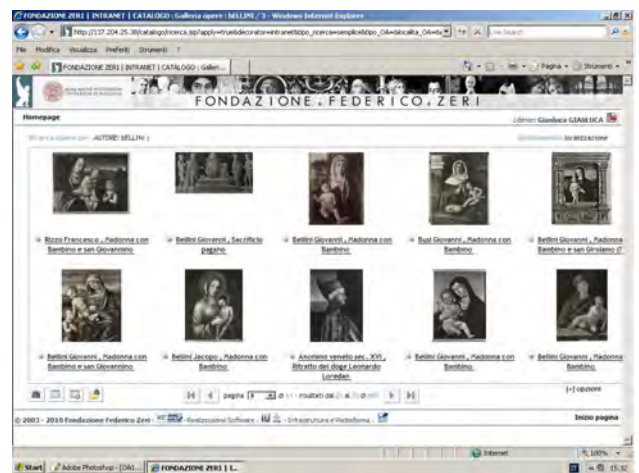
A relevant aspect was the involvement, from the very start, of specific and diverse professionalisms: conservators, experts on cataloguing standards and methodology, historians of photography, archivists and computer experts. The contribution made by these figures was crucial to guaranteeing a correct methodological approach.

For the cataloguing of the photographs we created a file comprising two primary catalogue units, an *Artwork* entry and a *Photograph* entry, which give rise to a symmetrical database that allows two-sided research and transversal navigation. This system permits to save and standardise all the levels of information on the back of the photographs and convey to users the hierarchical structure of the Zeri Library.

The database, available from the Foundation web site www.fondazionezeri.unibo.it, allows instant access to 140.000 entries and images in the catalogue.

Users can consult the catalogue and order data, not only according to author, subject, typology, date and location of the art work but also by author, subject, date and technique of the photographs. This type of structure offers multiple research options applying not only to art history but also to related disciplines such as the history of photography, the history of criticism, the history of collecting and taste.

Images can be viewed in low definition jpg format and can be used for study and research purposes only. The same database can be consulted at the Federico Zeri Foundation: here all images and their verso can be viewed in high resolution jpg format.



Samples of research from Fototeca Zeri online database