Paper History During the Golden Age in Fabriano,
Using Illustrations from the Zonghi Historical Archive
in Fabriano and the Rare Book and Special Collections
of the Library of Congress

ABSTRACT

A nine-month research grant funded in 2002 by the
Kläger Foundation at the Library of Congress helped sup-
port the research for this presentation. The grant period
was the culmination of a number of years of exploring the
subject during brief trips to Italy and to Fabriano in par-
ticular. Although most American book and paper conser-
vators are familiar with the role of the Italian paper-
making industry in the early dissemination of the craft
throughout Europe, the specific contributions of Fabriano
are perhaps less widely acknowledged. Literature pub-
lished in Italian over the last twenty years fills out the role
of Fabriano, which though not the first location for the
transfer of papermaking technology from the Arab world,
was the source of important technical innovations in the
craft, including the use of the multiple-head stamping
machine, the substitution of gelatin for starch in paper siz-
ing, and the introduction of the watermark. In addition,
the city’s key position along firmly established trade routes
contributed to making it the principal supplier of paper in
Europe by the first half of the fourteenth century. The
focus of the AIC presentation was on the period of 1300 to
1500 and explored the reasons why Fabriano both politi-
cally and geographically became the ideal location for the
advancement of this new technology.

Paper made in this region during this era is still remark-
able today for its pristine quality and permanence, such
that acid-free modern papers mimic the elemental com-
ponents in Fabriano paper made nearly one thousand years
ago. A collection of paper samples housed in the Fabriano
Museum of Paper and the Watermark and assembled in
the nineteenth century by the accomplished historian,
archivist, and prelate Aurelio Zonghi was described.

Zonghi collected watermarked blank sheets of handmade
paper from dated documents in the local archives with
known provenance from 1280 to 1600 and created a con-
secutive record of papers used in the Fabriano area during its “golden age” of papermaking. His watermark tracings
were published in 1953 in a volume issued by the
Hilversum Paper Publications Society of Holland. Zonghi
 corresponded extensively with the noted Swiss filigran-
ologist Charles Briquet about his collection in the 1880s and
the exchange of letters still kept in the Fabriano city
archives was discussed. Briquet did fiber analysis for
Zonghi on sixty samples of paper and concluded that all
the early Fabriano papers were made from hemp (or cana-
pe as it is known in Italian).

The presentation briefly went over the identifying
paper characteristics of these early Fabriano sample papers
including fiber content, color, sizing, alkaline earth con-
tent, laid and chain patterns, and watermarks which
document the technical development of hand papermak-
ing in Italy at this time. These features can help conser-
vators recognize early Fabriano papers in artworks,
manuscripts, and books which they come across in the
course of their work. Examples of rare books, fine prints,
manuscripts, and printed maps from the Special
Collections of the Library of Congress made with Fabriano
papers were shown.

An AIC publications grant from the Kress Foundation
beginning in August of 2003 is supporting the eventual
publication of the research conducted for this AIC paper.
A digital album of watermark samples made from the
Zonghi collection is also in progress. The planned com-
pletion date for the publication is January 2005.

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