

One of the last works of the chivalric romance period and the first of the modern, the *Orlando Furioso* sprung from the imagination of Ludovico Ariosto in Ferrara in 1516. Clear, yet at the same time mysterious, world-weary, and dreamy, the *Furioso* emerged as the first Italian classic poem. It quickly attracted many readers, from Machiavelli to Cervantes, Galileo to Voltaire, and on up to Pirandello and Calvino.

To mark 500 years since it was first published, the Palazzo dei Diamanti is celebrating this literary masterpiece with an exhibition that brings together paintings, sculptures, tapestries, books, illuminated manuscripts, musical instruments, weapons and precious objects.

Orchestrating this visual enchantment is a very simple idea: to recreate the universe of images that populated Ariosto's mind while he was composing the *Orlando furioso*.

What, therefore, did the poet see, when he closed his eyes, when he was recounting a battle, a duel between knights, or describing the fulfilment of a miraculous enchantment? What works of art were the muses to his imagination?

The long process of preparing for this exhibition was undertaken by the curators, Guido Beltramini and Adolfo Tura, with the assistance of Maria Luisa Pacelli and Barbara Guidi, respectively the director and the curator of the Palazzo dei Diamanti, with an advisory board composed of literary scholars and art historians. Starting from the main themes of the poem, their research was directed towards identifying iconographic sources that Ariosto would have known or that were consistent with the figurative traditions with which he would have been familiar, and which could have inspired his narrative.

The centrepiece of the exhibition, the *Orlando Furioso*, is the keystone to an itinerary organized into thematic sections that present potential muses to Ariosto's imagination in the context of where they occur in the poem: from the universe of battles to an evocation of the elegant life of the court, from the fascination for travel to images of real and legendary leaders. Over 80 works, including some of the best masterpieces from Ferrara's Renaissance period, have been reunited at the Palazzo dei Diamanti in order to bring to alive the wonderful world of Orlando and the knights and paladins.

1. The Joust and the Battle

Welcoming the visitor and conducting him into the heart of Ariosto's imagination is the theme of the battle, both real and literary, which is presented here through drawings, sculptures, tapestries, miniatures, weapons, and remarkable objects.

The Battle of Roncesvalles, one of the most famous cantos of the epic *Chanson de Roland*, is evoked by an ivory elephant horn from the 11th century. According to legend, this is the Horn that Roland blew which resonated throughout the Pyrenees. The large tapestry captures, with great visual impact, the height of the battle between the paladins and a handful of Saracens.

Ariosto borrowed abundantly from the French chivalric traditions (*Lancelot*), as well as from the Classical world as seen through the eyes of late 15th century artists such as Bertoldo di Giovanni (*Bronze relief*) or Antonio del Pollaiuolo, whose *Battle of the nudes* is one of the most famous battle pictures from the Renaissance.

Roughly contemporary with the publication of the *Furioso*, Leonardo da Vinci's *Battle scene* is a masterpiece depicting modern warfare. Here, the view as seen from above and the sophisticated painting technique allow a realistic and participatory representation of the tense tangle of bodies caught in the thick of battle.

Finally, to document the battle in its more playful and ritualized form of the tournament, a recurring theme in Ariosto's poem, will be a series of objects amongst which is rare suit of jousting armour dating from the early 16th century, and the priceless parade saddle that belonged to Ercole I, inlaid with scenes of courtly love and knights as well as representations of the guardian figures of the Este court, such as Hercules and St George.

2. Court Life between Ferrara and Mantua

Continuing the story from Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, the *Orlando furioso* is the heir to the longstanding tradition of epic chivalric romances and an expression of the world of life at the court to which it is addressed, and in which Ariosto himself grew up. A section of the exhibition introduces the *Furioso's* audience: the men and women who shared the ideals and cultural values of the poem, the erudite taste inspired by the Classics (Ercole de' Roberti and Giovan Francesco Maineri, *Lucretius, Brutus and Collatinus*), the love of literature (*Guiron le Courtois*), the elegant manners and refined leisure pastimes (the mirror belonging to Alfonso I or an ancient musical instrument, the *Lira da braccio*).

The "studiolo," or cabinet, was a significant part of the sophisticated world of the Este court. This was a private space where the Lord kept his carefully selected collections of art and precious objects. Isabella was one of the more sophisticated commissioners of works in her time, as was Alfonso after her. Representing the types of treasures that would have been kept in the studiolo is the masterpiece *Minerva Expelling the Vices from the Garden of Virtue* by Andrea Mantegna. This extraordinary work, one of the highlights of early 16th century Italian painting, represents one of the figurative sources that fed Ariosto's imagination. Admired on a visit to Mantua in 1507, this large canvas with its complex iconography, rich with allusions and mythological references, offered Ariosto the starting point for his description of the procession of monstrous beings which Ruggiero comes across on the island of the sorceress Alcina (canto VI).

3. The Image of the Knight

What would a 16th century writer imagine an 8th century warrior to be like? What most likely inspired Ariosto in creating the intrepid Orlando; the valiant Rinaldo; or Bradamante, the beautiful female knight; or even, Ruggiero, the converted Saracen who has the role of forefather to the house of Este? Apart from traditional chivalric romances, available sources included a repertoire of ancient and modern, pagan and religious images, which without doubt he drew upon for the description of his characters.

Various works and objects are called upon to speak of the richness and the variety of this imagery: the figure of Saint George above all, who in Ferrara epitomizes the very idea of the knight (Cosmè Tura, *Saint George and the dragon*); *Mars the warrior*, the key figure in one of the marbles that Antonio Lombardo made for Alfonso d'Este; the legendary figure of Scipio Africanus, well known at the time thanks to Della Robbia's glazed terracotta works; or even, the female knight, represented in our exhibition by a small but beautiful drawing by Marco Zoppo.

The "modern" knight, shown in his shining armour, is the protagonist of one of the most evocative portraits of an early 16th century warrior: the *Portrait of a warrior with his squire*, also known as *Gattamelata*, by Giorgione. An expression of the new genre portraying men-at-arms that flourished in the culture of the court in Northern Italy, this painting presents a model of idealized and romantic chivalry, treated with grace, languor, and stylized beauty.

4. The Marvellous and the Exotic

The fantastic has a dominant role in the *Orlando Furioso*: the manifestation of a parallel reality made up of wonders, extraordinary encounters, and magical powers which is fed by ancient, modern, classical, and Christian sources. There is no doubt, for example, that in the description of the rescue of Angelica by Ruggiero or that of Olympia by Orlando, Ariosto had in mind episodes of Jacopo da Varagine's *Golden Legend* and Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. To conjure up these stories, the exhibition presents rare manuscripts about saints or legendary people such as the *Life of Merlin* by Luca del Domenico and the *Morgante*

Maggiore by Luigi Pulci, as well as two of the most enchanting Italian paintings of the 15th and early 16th centuries: *Saint George and the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello, and *The Liberation of Andromeda* by Piero di Cosimo. In an enchanted atmosphere, the *Saint George* by Paolo Uccello stands out against the background of a delicate night sky. The painting, stylized and fantastic, retains the spirit of the *cantari leggendari* (Tuscan octave poems), which were one of the sources of the *Orlando Furioso*.

An eccentric genius, Piero di Cosimo was one of the most visionary painters of the Renaissance whose works were certainly known by Ariosto who travelled often to the Florence of the Vespucci and the Medici. Both families had collections of Di Cosimo's work. *The Liberation of Andromeda* is considered one of the artist's masterpieces and among the best representations of Ovid's myth. The meticulous painting, describing multiple details, now curious, now exotic, now realistic, combines harmoniously with a soft "sfumato" that bathes the entire composition.

Set in the 8th century, in the frame of the clash between the Carolingian empire and the Saracens in Spain, the *Orlando furioso* reveals Ariosto's fascination with the Arab world. Evoking this world in our exhibition are some objects that are contemporary to the poem, such as the sword of Boabdil, the last sultan of Granada which was conquered by Isabella of Castile.

Finally, to represent the entirely mental geography of the poem ("The *Orlando furioso* is an immense chess game played on the map of the world," wrote Calvino) will be one of the masterpieces of Renaissance cartography, the enormous Cantino World Map. Part of the Este collections in Ferrara since 1502, the map illustrates some of the key places recounted in the poem, such as the mountains of the Moon, from which Astolfo departed on his journey to find a cure for Orlando madness.

5. The Orlando comes on the scene: between desire and madness

The beating heart of the exhibition, the first edition of the *Orlando furioso*, is also the keystone of a section that explores in depth the two themes on which the whole poem turns – desire and madness—allowing the visitor to really dive into the story.

Although Ariosto draws on the courtly knight traditions, his narrative speaks of the feelings and passions of modern man, which are examined with a clear and disenchanting eye by the poet. The *Orlando furioso* is, in all senses, a poem about desire. In it, each character is tirelessly in pursuit of the object of their dreams, something they can't have, be it a weapon, a horse, or a person. Only two pieces in the exhibition represent this concept. An ancient helmet symbolizes the legendary arms of Hector of Troy found and lost by the protagonists of the poem. In front of it, a *Venus* by Botticelli sets an example of the ideal of female beauty similar to that of Alcina or Angelica as described by Ariosto in the 1516 edition.

A work that by definition represents feminine grace at the end of the 15th century, the Botticelli *Venus* enjoyed a wide diffusion, as can be seen by the requests for copies that the painter received from private clients. Among the few versions that have survived until today, that displayed here in Ferrara depicts the shining goddess dressed only in a thin veil which leaves visible the grace of her body, the naked splendour of her beauty: "With long and knotted tresses; to the eye / Not yellow gold with brighter lustre glows." (VII, 11, v. 3-4).

Unfulfilled desire for Angelica is the cause of Orlando's madness, of his departure from the sphere of rationality. The madness of the paladin, like the foolishness of the other characters (Rinaldo's desperation, Bradamante's jealousy, Rodomonte's fury) are examples on which to reflect upon the passions and feelings which may cause one to lose all sense of perspective.

This theme places the *Orlando furioso* within European culture in the first decades of the 16th century: the idea of madness affirmed in Ariosto's poem, which has similarities with the contemporary work by Erasmus of Rotterdam, is a deeply human madness. It has roots in classical antiquity and is a common condition to all mankind. A selection of works and manuscripts illustrates the sources, both literary and figurative, that inspired Ariosto, from Seneca's *Hercules Furens* to Lucretius, sent mad by a love potion, represented in a striking drawing by Giuliano da Sangallo.

6. *The Poem's Immediate Success*

On April 22nd, 1516, Mazzocchi's printing shop in Ferrara finished printing the *Orlando furioso*. Composed of 40 cantos, the poem which aspired to sing "of loves and ladies, knights and arms, of courtesies, and many a daring feat"; of a distant world immediately knew great success, reaping the admiration of many contemporaries.

The earliest comments on the poem are found in a letter from Niccolò Machiavelli written to Lodovico Alamanni in 1517, in which he complains that Ariosto, in a poem, "which is very good and in some parts, amazing" had voluntarily forgotten to name him. The letter is present here in the exhibition.

Painted two years after the first edition of the *Orlando Furioso*, Dosso Dossi's *Melissa* is the first painting based on this poem, which continued to inspire many other artists. Painter to the court of Alfonso I d'Este, Dossi showed one of the protagonists of the poem, the sorceress Melissa, surprised in the act of using the magic circle, book and the fire to undo the spell of the evil Alcina and free the knights who had been transformed into flowers, trees, and animals. Dossi's sorceress is more than an illustration of a specific episode, but rather a tribute to the poem by celebrating the character to whom Ariosto entrusted the role of fairy godmother and prophetess to the descendants of the house of Este. This painting, unrivalled for its ability to translate the content and form of the first edition of the *Orlando* into the medium of painting, is a masterpiece of extraordinary tension, illuminated by lavish colours in the lush landscape as much as in the clothes of the sorceress.

7. *The Masterpiece in Transformation*

Ariosto never stopped revising his poem, which was reprinted in Ferrara with some changes in 1521 and a third time, significantly revised and enlarged, in 1532, a few months before he died. In the years between the first and third editions, the world around the author radically changed, starting with the upheaval that culminated in the Battle of Pavia in 1525, represented in the exhibition with the priceless sword of Francesco I. The battle marked the defeat of the King of France and the beginning of the political and cultural hegemony of Charles V over northern Italian courts. These events are recalled also in Sebastiano del Piombo's portrait of the condottiere Andrea Doria, honoured in the *Furioso* as the one who helped to establish the French king in Italy. At the same time, new expressions in the visual arts triumphed over what Vasari called "the Modern Manner," developing into an artistic language that was no longer regional but Italian, having Raphael and Michelangelo as its champions. This same synthesis of earlier traditions and assimilations from the lessons of the ancient world in literature has a singular parallel in the linguistic transformation of the *Orlando Furioso*, which Ariosto brought to completion in the 1532 edition. Thanks to this, the poem, now purified of local inflections, becomes a "classic of the new classics," an "Italian" masterpiece, a symbol of Renaissance literature.

Ariosto participates in this revolution in painting, seeing in person works by artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael, whose works Alfonso I d'Este yearned to own. Outstanding among these is the now lost *Leda and the Swan* commissioned from Michelangelo but which never reached Ferrara because of an unforgivable gaffe committed in the presence of the artist by the Duke, and which will be documented in the exhibition by the beautiful 16th century copy attributed by some scholars to Rosso Fiorentino.

Ariosto was also actively involved in the creation of masterpieces that artists like Dossi or Titian painted for the Lord of Ferrara, works which illuminated one of the most beautiful pages in the history of Renaissance art, that of the Camerini in the Este castle. Representing this decisive chapter in the exhibition is Titian's *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*, one of the gems of Alfonso's collections, which thanks to an exceptional loan permitted by the Museo del Prado is returning to Italy for the first time in over 400 years. Made almost certainly with Ariosto's support, the painting is in turn a source of fascination for the poet. It is not by chance that Botticelli's idealized Venus and the icy figure of Angelica as described in the 1516 *Orlando Furioso* correspond to the sensual figure of Olympia in the 1532 edition and the soft nude of Ariana, lying in the foreground of Vecellio's *Bacchanal*. To this stunning masterpiece lies the task of saying goodbye to the visitor at the end of this fascinating journey through the art and literature that marked one of the high points of our historical culture.