Collections in Context

Fresco, Karen, Hedeman, Anne D.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Fresco, Karen and Anne D. Hedeman.
Collections in Context: The Organization of Knowledge and Community in Europe.
The Ohio State University Press, 2012.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/24275.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/24275
The Prato fiorito, the Selva di cose diverse, and Other Compilations by Suor Fiammetta Frescobaldi

Fiammetta Frescobaldi (1523–86) was born in Florence on January 17, 1523, one of the six children of Lamberto Frescobaldi and Francesca Morelli. She was christened Brigida but took the name Fiammetta when, in November 1535, she entered the Dominican convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli in Florence, where she lived for 50 years, until her death in 1586. As the convent’s chronicle tells us, she was self-taught and had a keen mind and memory. In her early twenties she became crippled, and, in order to make herself useful, she began to write for the edification and recreation of her convent sisters. In this chapter I will discuss Frescobaldi’s work, the genres she knew and imitated, especially those that were compilations of materials she found in other writers, translated, and/or synthesized, and I will examine her style of ordering the materials she col-

---


lected. I will devote my attention especially to three works that belong to a genre that had become very popular in mid-sixteenth century Italy when Frescobaldi was writing, a genre generally known as the selva (or silva, in Latin) in which diverse materials are collected without any clear notion of order.  

Frescobaldi’s convent, San Jacopo di Ripoli, had been the site of one of the earliest printing presses operating in Florence; there the nuns, working together with two Dominican friars, printed approximately one hundred books (nearly half were secular works) during the years 1476–84. It is not known how many of those books, if any, remained in the convent archive, but we do know that there was a place in the convent for books, since Fiammetta Frescobaldi, in a note of ownership attached to one of her volumes, writes: “This [book] belongs to the nuns of S. Jacopo called Ripoli, [it was] made for the convent and assigned to the bookcase in the cemetery, which is the archive of our convent, where it must be conserved with the others so that the nuns may enjoy it when they like. Take good care of it and put it back in its assigned place. I wrote it and gave it to the convent. Remember me sometimes with a sigh to our Lord Jesus. 1584.” Frescobaldi herself had purchased a bookcase (armadio) for the convent in 1582. This was unusual; women’s religious communities in Italy at the time did not normally have libraries. In most convents, nuns had only their personal books. The need for a bookcase, or a new bookcase in 1582 was clearly owing to the many books Frescobaldi wrote and those she obtained through relatives and friends, and which she acknowledges as sources of the materials in her compilations. She translated many of them, or at least selected passages, from Latin into the vernacular, and from those texts and others she took accounts of the most memorable events, sermons, exempla, saints’ lives, geographical descriptions, descriptions of monuments—whatever she thought could be of interest and benefit to her convent sisters, who were less learned than she, who knew little Latin, if any, and who were occupied with convent chores or administration and had very little leisure time. Each of Frescobaldi’s works begins with an


5. “Delle monache di San Jacopo, detto Ripoli, dato in convento e assegnato allo armario di cimiterio che è lo archivo di questo nostro monasterio ove con gli altri si de’ conservare acciò le suore ne possino havere contento a·lloro posta, ma sien contente haverne buona cura et rimetterlo dove è assegnato. È di me che l’ò fatto e dato in convento, talvolta si degnino ricordarsi con dare un sospiro a Giesú nostro Signore per me. Dato l’anno 1584.” Le Sieci, Archivio Frescobaldi, Cose prodigiose e calamitose del mondo, cominciando dal diluvio infino ai tempi nostri, part III, unnumbered initial page. The date on the colophon is 1578. This translation and all that follow are mine.

6. “A dua venne lo armadio fatto per tenervi drento libri latini e vulgari e scritti a mano per consolazione delle suore. Costa scudi cinque, fatto da mia fatiche et di amorevoleze havute da parenti, posto in cimiterio come si vede.” Cronica del sacro ordine di santo Domenico. In particolare de’ conventi e monasterii di esso ordine nella alma città di Firenze, massimo di quel di Santa Maria Novella e di San Jacopo vocato Ripoli (Florence, Archivio di Santa Maria Novella [ASMN], I.B.66, fol. 113v).
address to the reader—some with a dedication as well, and her paratexts always include metaliterary statements in which she introduces herself, her subject matter and method, the purpose and audience of her work, and usually names her sources (if not there, she scrupulously names them later). Most of her works are collections and most of their titles (though not all) make this clear.

Frescobaldi produced several volumes of saints’ lives, five volumes (in nine parts) of descriptions of the entire known world, a digest (in eight volumes) of Guicciardini’s *History of Italy* (a work that unfortunately is lost), and she wrote two chronicles of the Dominican order from its founding to the sixteenth century. The first treats especially the Florentine Dominican friary of Santa Maria Novella; in the other, which, in my opinion, is a revision and continuation of the first, she devotes most of her attention to the history of her convent of San Jacopo. The materials she collected for these works have a central organizing theme or chronology, however full they may be of digressions, one of the specialties of her inquiring mind. Frescobaldi also wrote works in a genre, the subject of this essay, which was a sort of florilegium, or anthology, but without a logical structural principle or theme governing the choice and organization of materials in the collection.

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy a collection of this sort was often called, a *selva* (in Latin, *silva*, meaning a forest); some were called a *giardino* (garden), a *prato* (field), or similar vernacular or Latin variations on the theme; others were more literally entitled *miscellanies*, or *varie historie* (varied histories or various stories). This genre has ancient origins. In its better-known, popular form, a miscellaneous collection of prose and poetry, its most authoritative model is Aulus Gellius’s *Noctes Atticae*, a collection of many short chapters on a great variety of topics: philosophy, history, law, grammar, literary criticism, textual questions, and many others. There was also a related, but more erudite, form called a *sylva* or *selva*, whose classical antecedent is Statius’ *Silvae*. This genre is really quite different from the other. First of all, it is entirely in somewhat loosely structured verse that gives the impression of improvisation, but is, instead, a highly studied form. We find examples of this in the writing of early humanists, the best known being Poliziano’s *Silvae*, written in Latin, and Lorenzo de’ Medici’s *Selve*, written in the vernacular.7

Fiammetta Frescobaldi’s work belongs to the popular form of the genre, whose more immediate model was a Spanish collection, the work of Pedro Mexía, the *Silva de varia lección*, a compilation of excerpts, short works, pas-

---

sages taken from a variety of authors, which was first published in Seville in 1540, again in 1543, and in an enlarged edition in 1550. It was immediately successful and had thirty-two editions in Spain by the end of the century, twenty or so in Italy in translation, even more in French (around thirty), five in English, and four in German.\(^8\) Mexía wrote that he called his work a *silva*, because in forests (*selvas*) the plants and trees are distributed “without order or rule” (“en las selvas o bosques están las plantas y árboles sin orden ni regla”).\(^9\) When Fiammetta Frescobaldi began to write, in the late 1560s, Mexía’s work was already very well known in Italy and had spawned a lively tradition of *selve* or *silvae*, most often collections of works whose original authors were not acknowledged, what we would today call plagiaries.

Frescobaldi wrote three works that belong to this genre. However, unlike her contemporaries, she always acknowledged her sources, and she rewrote them for her purposes in a style that is unmistakably her own. She wrote a *Selva di cose diverse* (A Forest of various things, dated 1585), a *Prato fiorito, ovvero giardino d’esempi* (Field of flowers or garden of examples, 1575), and the *Cose prodigiose e calamitose del mondo cominciando dal diluvio infino ai tempi nostri* (Things extraordinary and disastrous in the world, from the Universal Flood till today, finished in 1578 or 79).

### I. *Selva* (1562–85)

Frescobaldi compiled her *Selva di cose diverse* over a period of approximately twenty years, from 1562, when she began, until 1585, the year before her death. This long span of over twenty years provides an insight into her understanding of the genre as an open-ended collection to which she could add material she liked without concern for its appropriateness to a central topic or place in an order. She seems to have stopped only when the material was so large that it needed to be bound.\(^10\) The *Selva* opens with this statement: “This book is entitled a *selva* of various and diverse readings, of many things that should, in truth, not be disparaged by anyone who would like to know about an infinite number of things, ancient and modern, collected at various times from many different authors.”\(^11\) And her *Selva*, as she claims, contains numerous and quite

---

10. This is the explanation she gives for terminating her first chronicle. See F. Frescobaldi, *Cronica del sacro ordine de’ frati predicatori*, Florence, ASMN, I.B.65, fol. 216r.
11. “Questo libro si intitola una selva di variate e diverse leszioni, di tante cose invero da non essere disprezzate da chi è desideroso di havere notizia di una infinità di cose antiche et moderne, racolte in vari tempi da diversi e vari autori.”
varied texts, for example, an account of the construction of the Florentine cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore, taken, as she acknowledges, from the first edition of the *Lives of the Artists* by Giorgio Vasari.\(^\text{12}\) Alongside this account we find the story of an attempt on the life of Pope Pius IV in 1565, and descriptions of distant parts of the world and customs of ancient peoples, gleaned from books of geography and ancient history. There is also a brief introduction to the Spanish language (“*Trattatello di regole sulla lingua spagnola*”), a discussion of the decoration of the *guardaroba*, or wardrobe room, in the ducal palace; and her collection concludes with a number of stories about the Kingdom of Naples.

II. *Cose calamitose* . . . (dated 1578)

Another of Frescobaldi’s works that I would ascribe to this genre is her *Cose prodigiose e calamitose del mondo cominciando dal diluvio infino ai tempi nostri* (Things extraordinary and disastrous beginning with the Flood and down to our times). In this collection Frescobaldi follows the chronology of universal historians, from whom she took and translated selected stories; she used many sources and cites among others Giovanni Tarcagnota’s universal history, *Le historie del mondo* (1562) and Matteo di Giovanni Villani’s fourteenth-century *Cronica universale*.\(^\text{13}\) In her prologue to the *Cose prodigiose* she says that this work narrates “horrible and frightful things and miserable events” (“cose di orrore, di spavento e miserabili casi”), stories from the past, which, she claims, delight her audience of convent sisters. Her purpose in this work, she writes, is to occupy her mind with serious matters and to be of use to her dear mothers and sisters in Christ, to teach them not to be frightened by the evil they will find in these accounts, but to be inspired by the examples of the actions of good men, which are also depicted. She adds that reading stories of disasters and other horrible events will teach her readers not to praise the past and lament the present, as they commonly do, because they will learn that terrible things occur in all ages; they have never lacked, nor ever will. We condemn the present, she writes, which we experience and feel, and if we praise the past it is because we do not know it, a situation that her work seeks to correct by provid-

---

12. Frescobaldi writes: “Le sopra dette chose sono cavate de’ libri delle Vite de’ pittori, schultori e architettori, scritte da Giorgio Vasari. Si stamporno nel 1550, scritte da me nel 1562 il verno che morì la ill. ma Duchessa e i 2 sua figliuoli, il card. don Giovanni e s. don. Gratia [Garzia] e in tal tempo fu la fame (fra tutte le altre adversità orribilissime) e, se non si fussi provisto con far venire del grano, aperto in Firenze quattro canove dove si dà un moggio di pan fatto per ciascuna, ogni dì sarebbe morto di molte persone. Apersonsi il 1° di febbraio 1563.”

ing examples of how bad things were so that her readers can, she says, “touch it with their hands, so to speak” (“Io tocherete con mano, a dir cosí”). In this Frescobaldi clearly reflects the teaching of the Counter-Reformation Church, which stressed the importance of using a clear language of powerful examples to elicit strong emotions and move the faithful to imitate the saints and their good works.\(^1^4\) Her purpose is certainly didactic, and she knows that the entertainment of her readers with stories of catastrophes, wars, murders, and other frightful events is a beginning (she states that her readers “delight” [“dilettate”] in her stories and in their variety) on which to build in order to enlighten and transform them. She gives clear directions for how she intends the process to work in her prologue.

This collection was another of the fascinating works that are now in the Frescobaldi family’s private archive (and have been, probably, since the suppression of the convent of San Jacopo; in the Leopoldine suppression of 1785 the convent became a conservatorio, a girls’ school).\(^1^5\) Unfortunately, only two volumes of what was at least a four-volume work are preserved in the Frescobaldi archives.

### III. Prato fiorito

Frescobaldi’s third contribution to this genre is the *Prato fiorito*, a title I translate as “Field of flowers.”\(^1^6\) It was probably the first of the three examples of this genre that she completed, but I have left it for the last, since I have been able to consult an autograph copy in the National Library in Florence. Unlike the other very fragile texts, this one is in excellent condition, having been restored in 1988. It is also useful to this discussion since in its prologue and dedication Frescobaldi goes to great lengths to describe the genre, and she does so in a very literary way, by playfully extending the metaphor she has chosen in a manner of writing quite uncharacteristic of her style.

The contents of the *Prato fiorito* include the usual variety: exempla taken from sermons, short humorous anecdotes, an account of St. Peter Martyr’s vision of the founding of the Servite order, the foundation of the hermitage of Camaldoli in the Tuscan hills, the miracle of the Sacrament in the convent

\(^{14}\) Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent, trans. H. J. Schroeder, St. Louis, MO, 1941, p. 216: “because through the saints the miracles of God and salutary examples are set before the eyes of the faithful, so that they may... fashion their own life and conduct in imitation of the saints and be moved to adore and love God. . . .”


\(^{16}\) Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, *Conventi Soppressi*, C II 504, an autograph manuscript and the only known exemplar of this work.
church of Sant’Ambrogio in Florence, the tale of a vision of a black cross in a relic that was said to have caused the death of the archbishop and a lot of subsequent bad luck for the city, including the death of the Grand Duke Cosimo, an epidemic of smallpox at home, and a plague that at the time of Frescobaldi’s writing still raged in Provence and had Italians fearful. She also includes other stories of miracles, saints, and local legends like the delightful story of the apparition of the Madonna del Carcere (Madonna of the prison) in Prato, a painting that comes to life for a small child and engages him as he passes by. The source of the story of this miracle was a contemporary, whom Frescobaldi had not yet mentioned among her sources, so she adds the following acknowledgment: “I got what I have written from the original by Giovanni dalla Porta, the bookkeeper for that church of the Madonna, who has at many times and places shown us his incredible generosity . . . This author tells of about 136 miracles [concerning this painting], which, not being necessary to mention here, I will forgo.”

In the dedication of this volume, dated 1572, to the prioress of her convent, Suor Angela Malegonelle, Frescobaldi discusses the form of the collection and, as usual, her purpose in compiling it. She calls it “a collection of rare and beautiful things, exempla that are useful and pleasing in the manner of a field in bloom, adorned with different kinds of flowers of many colors” (“una racolta di cose rare belle esemplari utili et dilettevoli a maniera di un fiorito prato di variati fiori e diversi colori fatti adorno”). In an opening “avviso al lettore” (a note to her reader), she continues the title metaphor in a discussion of what the book contains and the way she has put it together. She writes that “it is not completely without order since it begins with many different exempla, like the little herbs of various kinds one sees in the fields, and, as in the fields there are places one might rest, next (in the collection) is the foundation and growth of the Servite order and the hermitage at Camaldoli” (places, like those in a beautiful field where one might rest). She continues: “the trellises draped with vines [are] the other exempla and the holy miracles of so many saints.” She writes, still describing the field: “Very often there are rose bushes; these are the many martyrs that surround them (that is, the other saints), adding to their beauty. Very often too in the fields there are clear springs captured with mastery and art; these it seems to me can be compared to San Giovanni Crisostomo, whom we cannot praise enough, whose life is found just about in the middle of this book, taken systematically from various authors, so that he who has thirst and desires

---

17. “Quanto ò scritto l’ò cavato dallo orriginale di mano di Giovanni dalla Porta, riveditore di libri di tal chiesa della Madonna, la quale in varii tempi e luoghi gli piace mostrarci la sua sviscerata carità, come a tempi nostri à fatto alla vergine Maria della Pace et teste nel 1574 a quella delle Murate. Lo autore sopradetto scrive da 136 miracoli, i quali per non essere necessario porgli in queso luogo, gli lascio” (fol. 126v).
to quench it on this exemplary life, let him read it with attention and derive the greatest satisfaction, since it has been very well structured. This is the order of this book without order; yet one will find as much order here as one sees in a field of flowers that is well kept and was well ordered. Let this be enough about order.”

That is, if I understand what Frescobaldi is saying, this field has not been left to nature alone, though it exhibits the beauty of the natural setting in its grass, herbs, rose bushes, and fresh streams. It has been adapted to the use and pleasure of man (there are benches, and presumably paths), an art then, though not one that has a well-defined structure, yet the beauty of the place makes it seem right that it appears as it does. This is the order without order that Frescobaldi claims for her collection of enlightening and entertaining stories. This Prato fiorito (Field of flowers) contributes to the reader’s pleasure, perhaps by offering her surprise encounters as she proceeds from one subject matter to the unpredictable one that follows, and, upon opening up the book, the satisfaction of finding anywhere a delightful passage to read.

The emphasis the author gives to her metaphor of a flowered field, the stress she places on its beauty and the comfort one finds resting there, is, I would argue, a reflection of Frescobaldi’s concern that her stories delight and offer recreation to her readers. Learning is here represented by the fountain or stream at which the reader, anxious to sate her thirst, may drink; yet in this figurative presentation, the author’s didactic purpose seems to be subordinated to her interest in giving pleasure through her stories. Yet in the dedication of the Prato fiorito, Frescobaldi also makes her didactic intentions clear. She writes that her purpose has been “to console all of my mothers and sisters who are now present in our convent and who will be in the future, especially those who are in the workroom, so that they may find recreation reading it sometimes all together, hearing so many varied and noble exempla, by which we are very often moved more than by words meant to convince someone to imitate them.”

---

18. “Nondimeno, però, non è al tutto senza hordine, imperoché nel suo principio sono molti variati esempi, a somiglianza di herbette pichole di variate sorte come ne’ prati si vegono, di poi v’è dove, alquanto posarsi. Questo sarà la origine e ’l progresso dello ordine de’ Servi, lo heremo di Camaldoli. Le spalliere atorno colle pergole gli altri esempi e divini miracoli di tanti santi. Bene spesso vi sono siepe di rosarii, questi sono e martiri di molti che atorno lo circundano dandogli vaghezza. Bene spesso ne’ prati è qualche limpida fonte con maestria e arte benissimo aconcia; questa mi pare che benissimo si possa asomigliare al non mai abastanza lodato San Giovan Grisostomo la vita del quale quasi che nel mezo si truova di questo libro racolta da vari autori hordinatamente tal che chi ha sete e della sua vita ordinate all’ordine . . . ,” unnumbered fol. [12] recto and verso.

19. “per consolatione di tutte le mie madri e sorelle che sono al presente in questo vostro e mio monasterio, per dir meglio nostro, et pello advenire ci saranno, massimo di quelle che stanno nella sala del lavoro, a fine che le si possino recreare leggendolo tal volta in comune, udendo tanti vari e notabili esempi, da’ quali bene spesso sian mossi più che dalle parole che le inciti alla imitatione di essi” (fols. 1v–2r).
concludes apologizing for her poor hand and her lack of schooling and adding that even if her art is wanting, “the things this book contains are they themselves very beautiful, they are rather so many beautiful flowers” (“le cose che in questo libro si contengono considerate per loro medesime son bellissime, anzi son tanti vaghissimi fiori,” fol. 2v).

Frescobaldi’s forest, her field of flowers, and her collection of wonderful, terrible things, speak volumes about the author’s reading, about the books available to her—and it seems she was reading in the convent much of what was popular in the secular world. They tell us too of her relationship with her convent sisters, of her generosity toward them, and her desire to play an active role in the life of San Jacopo, despite her physical handicap. While much of the material she collected in her selve is religious, there is much too on art and architecture, geography, and the history of the world. Since both her imagined and real audience were convent women, then and in the future, her collections also speak to what she perceived as their desire, not only to learn more about their religion, its history, and their faith, but also to know and enjoy the outside world from the safe haven of their convents. Another of Frescobaldi’s compilations, the Sfera del mondo (Sphere of the world), is a description in several volumes of the entire known world, taken from Alessandro Piccolomini’s work of similar title (Della sfera del mondo, 1540, which she cites in an edition of 1561), along with many other sources, more specific geographies, accounts of voyages of discovery, and letters of missionaries. In all of her work it seems that her aim was to bring as much of the world and history as she could to her convent sisters. Through collections, she sought to do so most effectively.

20. In the table of contents of the Prato fiorito (unnumbered fols. 3–5) she lists thirty topics, following each group of ten or so with the name of her source. The sources mentioned are: Luigi Lip pomano, Bishop di Verona, Vite de’ Santi, tomo 2; Saint Gregory of Tours; Simeone Metrafaste, Vite de santi, tomo 5; Saint John Chrysostom, the Tripartite History; and the Venerable Bede, the Storia ecclesiastica anglicana (taken from Lippomano). At the end of the table she mentions three friars from recent times, it seems: the Dominican, fra Gabriello da Barletta; the Servite friar, fra Michele da Firenze; and the Camaldolite brother, don Andrea Spagnuolo.