

Ulisse Aldrovandi
Libri e immagini di Storia naturale
nella prima Età moderna

a cura di

Giuseppe Olmi e Fulvio Simoni



Il volume è stato pubblicato grazie al contributo di



SISTEMA MUSEALE DI ATENEIO

Si ringrazia la Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, in particolare il prof. Mirko Degli Esposti, il dott. Giacomo Nerozzi e il dott. Michele Catarinella, per la cortese disponibilità, per la fattiva collaborazione e per la concessione dei diritti di riproduzione delle *Tavole acquerellate* facenti parte del Fondo Aldrovandi.



Bononia University Press
Via Ugo Foscolo 7 – 40123 Bologna
tel. (+39) 051 232 882
fax (+39) 051 221 019

www.buonline.com
email: info@buonline.com

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ISBN: 978-88-6923-269-5

In copertina: Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, Fondo Aldrovandi, Tavole, vol. 4 unico, c. 72.

Impaginazione: DoppioClickArt - San Lazzaro di Savena (BO)

Prima edizione: gennaio 2018

Sommario

Prefazione	V
Nota introduttiva	VII
<i>Da Argo alla lince. Il ruolo della vista nella cultura scientifica del Seicento</i> Andrea Battistini	1
<i>Dopo Ulisse Aldrovandi: migrazioni di immagini</i> Giuseppe Olmi, Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi	9
<i>Echoes of Aldrovandi: notes on an illustrated album from the Natural History Museum in London</i> José Ramón Marcaida	23
<i>Le donne barbute di Ulisse Aldrovandi</i> Peter Mason	29
<i>Materiali aldrovandiani in Spagna: l'enigmatico caso del Códice Pomar</i> Emma Sallent Del Colombo, José Pardo-Tomás	37
<i>Acconciare, seccare, dipingere: pratiche di rappresentazione della natura tra le "spigolature" aldrovandiane</i> Alessandro Tosi	49
<i>Dal disegno al libro a stampa. La rappresentazione del mondo naturale nelle matrici xilografiche di Ulisse Aldrovandi</i> Fulvio Simoni	59
<i>Antiche matrici silografiche europee. Una descrizione provvisoria delle sopravvivenze come contributo alla comprensione dei nuclei aldrovandiani di Bologna</i> Maria Goldoni	71
<i>Il progetto di recupero, catalogazione e valorizzazione delle raccolte di matrici Soliani-Barelli e Mucchi della Galleria Estense di Modena</i> Marco Mozzo, Maria Ludovica Piazzì, Chiara Trivisonni	101

<i>The rich collection of woodblocks of the Museum Plantin-Moretus and its use in the Officina Plantiniana</i> Iris Kockelbergh	109
<i>La diffusione e la fortuna dei libri di Ulisse Aldrovandi in area francofona</i> Lorenzo Baldacchini	119
<i>I libri di Aldrovandi e i fondi di interesse naturalistico in Archiginnasio</i> Elisa Rebellato	125
<i>Novità sul semplicista Evangelista Quattrami (1527-1608) e sul suo collaboratore Simon Bocchi</i> Federica Dallasta	137
Tavole	169
Abstracts	201
Indice dei nomi	205



Echoes of Aldrovandi: notes on an illustrated album from the Natural History Museum in London

José Ramón Marcaida

This story begins, as is often the case, with a footnote. A few years ago, while conducting research on Peter Paul Rubens and the early modern iconography of the bird of paradise, I examined a wide range of visual materials featuring depictions of this extraordinary creature, from drawings and paintings to prints and book illustrations.¹ Within this corpus, Ulisse Aldrovandi's *Ornithologiae* (1599) occupies a prominent place: the treatise includes five woodcuts of the bird of paradise, making it the most comprehensive set of printed images available at the time of its publication.² Among

the several sources devoted to these images, an important text by the University of Cambridge-based scholar Jean Michel Massing offered me venues for further exploration. It was there, in one of its footnotes, that I read that two coloured drawings after Aldrovandi's *Manucodiata prima* (Fig. 1) and *Manucodiata secunda* (Fig. 2) were now kept at the Natural History Museum in London.³ Interestingly, these images were part of an album of bird illustrations which had belonged to the natural history collection of Lionel Walter Rothschild (1868-1937). Thanks to Massing's work I also learnt that the two images of birds of paradise had been reproduced in a 1914 article by the German ornithologist Erwin Stresemann, who argued that many illustrations in this album were related to the work of Aldrovandi.⁴ Intrigued by this information, and the associations between different visual corpora, I went to the Natural History Museum to examine the album.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Giuseppe Olmi and Fulvio Simoni for their invitation to take part in the conference on which this volume is based, and for their hospitality and generosity, both personal and intellectual. I am also grateful to the conference participants for much valuable feedback on my paper. I would like to thank the staff at the library of the Natural History Museum in London for their support, and the museum for the permission to publish images of its collection. The research leading to this publication has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement no 617391. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the research project *Imágenes y fantasmas de la ciencia ibérica, ss. XVI-XVIII* (HAR2014-52157-P).

¹ J.R. Marcaida, "Rubens and the bird of paradise. Painting natural knowledge in the early seventeenth century", *Renaissance Studies* 2014 (XXVIII), 1, pp. 112-127.

² U. Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae, hoc est, De avibus historiae libri XII*, Bologna: Francesco de Franceschi 1599. The section on the bird of paradise, including the five illustrations, can be found in pp. 806-816. The literature on Aldrovandi's

interest in visual culture is large. See references below as well as other contributions to this volume.

³ J.M. Massing, "Paradisaea Apoda: The Symbolism of the Bird of Paradise in the Sixteenth Century", in J.A. Levenson (ed.), *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th & 17th Centuries, 3: Essays*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution 2007, pp. 28-37; 258-261 (note 53 in p. 260).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260, note 51. E. Stresemann, "Was wussten die Schriftsteller des XVI. Jahrhunderts von den Paradiesvögeln? Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ornithologie", *Novitates zoologicae* 1914 (XXI), pp. 20-21, plates 1-2.



Fig. 1. *Manucodiata prima*, in Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae* (1599).

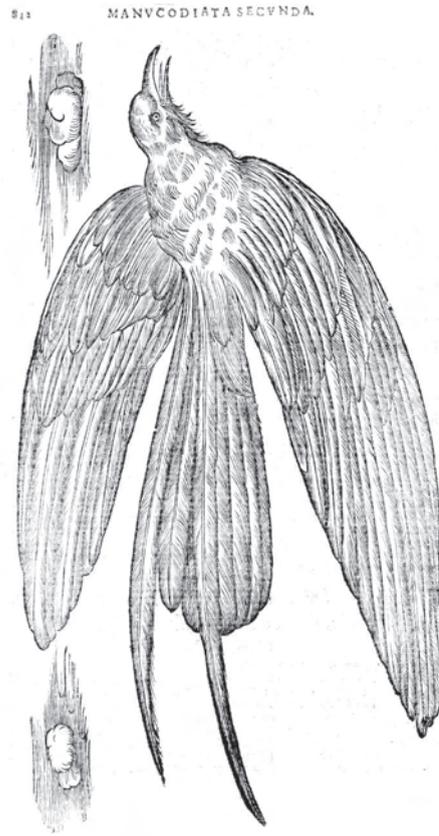


Fig. 2. *Manucodiata secunda*, in Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae* (1599).

Entitled *Raccolta di Uccelli fatta da Giovanni da Udine Scolare di Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino*, the album is made of 82 large sheets.⁵ There is no text on it, except for the handwritten title page, where the work is attributed to Giovanni da Udine (1487-1564) (Fig. 3).⁶ In terms of images, the album includes 136 depictions of birds, followed by two drawings of two marine crustaceans. What can be said, at first glance, about these illustrations? First of all, they do not seem to follow any particular order, and their arrangement varies. Some images of a single bird take up the whole page; in other cases several birds are depicted together. Secondly, none of these illustrations has been left unfinished, and this includes their background, which in most cases is rather minimal. In some instances the underlying drawing is visible, and the colours have been nicely preserved overall. Finally, as indi-

⁵ London: Natural History Museum, Zoology Special Collections, Signature 88 f B. Stresemann provides its measurements: 31.7 x 43.5 cm.

⁶ Glued to the verso of the album's cover there is a brief biographical account of Udine and an abstract of Stresemann's 1914 article.

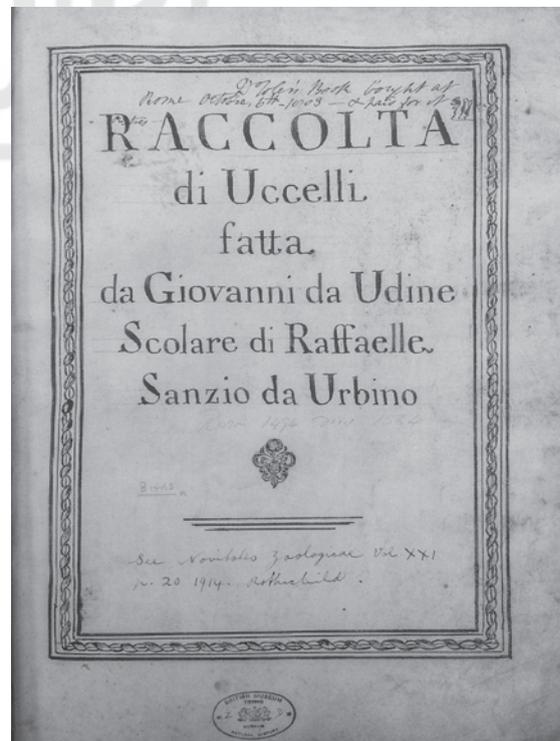


Fig. 3. Title page, in *Raccolta di Uccelli*, London, Natural History Museum (© The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London).

cated earlier, there is no text accompanying the images – except for page numbers and an occasional bibliographical reference, in pencil, in contemporary hand. A detailed comparing exercise confirms Stresemann's point: most of these images bear a close resemblance to the bird illustrations featured in either Aldrovandi's printed work or the corpus of coloured drawings associated with his natural historical endeavours, preserved at the Biblioteca Universitaria in Bologna. There is also a significant overlap with the kind of bird specimens depicted in other compilations said to be derived from the Aldrovandi corpus, such as, for example, the so-called *Pomar Codex*, a 234-sheet-long album kept at the Biblioteca Histórica of the University of Valencia.⁷

The two illustrations of the bird of paradise included in the *Raccolta di Uccelli* are a case in point. Though less graceful in its execution and more muted, chromatically, than the vibrant watercolour preserved in the Aldrovandi collection, the version of the *Manucodiata prima* in the London album follows its model closely (Tav. 10).⁸ It is one of the most familiar depictions of the bird of paradise in the early modern period – second only, perhaps, to the model popularised by Conrad Gesner a few decades earlier⁹ (Fig. 4) – and versions of it can be found in places such as the above-mentioned *Pomar Codex*, where is the first illustration in the compilation, or the ceiling decoration of the Uffizi Gallery (Tav. 11).¹⁰ The image of the *Manucodiata Secunda* is less familiar (Tav. 12).¹¹ Most

⁷ *Atlas de Historia Natural*, Valencia: Biblioteca Histórica, Universitat de València, BH Ms. 9. Several albums of this kind – most of which featured similar choices of bird specimens – were discussed at the 2015 conference. For an updated account of these image-making practices see Giuseppe Olmi and Lucia Tongiorgi Tomasi's contribution to this volume. For a recent discussion of the *Pomar Codex* in relation to the Aldrovandi visual materials see E. Sallent Del Colombo, "Natural History Illustration between Bologna and Valencia: The Aldrovandi-Pomar Case", *Early Science and Medicine* 2016 (XXI), pp. 182-213.

⁸ *Raccolta di Uccelli*, f. 68r. The Aldrovandi watercolour is reproduced in A. Alessandrini, A. Ceregato (eds), *Natura picta. Ulisse Aldrovandi*, Bologna: Compositori 2007, p. 401.

⁹ C. Gesner, *Historiae animalium liber III, qui est de avium natura*, Tiguri: apud Christoph. Froschouerum 1555, p. 612. Gesner's model of the bird of paradise is included in Aldrovandi's set of five images, with the title *Manucodiata Vulgaris*; Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae*, p. 815.

¹⁰ *Pomar Codex*, f. 2v; Corridoio Orientale, Galleria degli Uffizi, attributed to Alessandro Allori and collaborators.

¹¹ *Raccolta di Uccelli*, f. 9r.

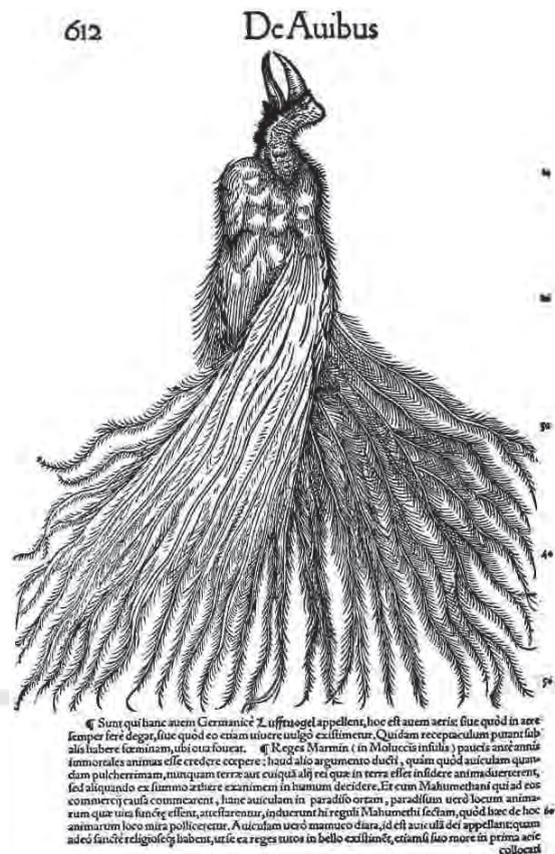


Fig. 4. Bird of paradise, in Conrad Gesner, *Historiae animalium liber III* (1555).

versions of it – there are not many – reproduce the published woodcut from the *Ornithologiae*, as in, for example, Edward Topsell's manuscript on birds, based on Aldrovandi's materials, kept at the Huntington Library.¹² In the case of the London album, the image seems to be based on the Aldrovandi watercolour kept at Bologna, as suggested by the choice of colours.¹³

We could continue exploring the similarities and variations between the images in the *Raccolta di Uccelli* and their potential sources as they apply to other bird specimens. Instead, I suggest that we take this album as a pretext to reflect on the status of this type of objects – beautifully-illustrated, often-anonymous, compilations of naturalist imagery – as source-materials for the scholar of early modern culture. Let us consider, first, some of the album's formal aspects. As we have seen, the *Raccol-*

¹² Aldrovandi, *Ornithologiae*, p. 812. E. Topsell, *The Fowles of Heauen*, Ellesmere MS 1142, f. 66v, San Marino (CA), Huntington Library.

¹³ Aldrovandi, *Tavole acquerellate*, Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna, vol. 1.2 *Animali*, n. 61.

ta di Uccelli – like many compilations of this kind – does not have a defined structure. Leaving aside its ornithological theme, this is a corpus of illustrations that lacks a sense of order or unity. This is particularly evident when we consider the set of specimens featured in it: there is no indication as to what criteria were used to choose which bird to depict. These criteria, like the objects in Borges' Chinese encyclopaedia, could have been many: geographical considerations, morphology, commercial value, rarity, etc. Instead, we are faced with a seemingly random assortment of illustrations. The case of the two images of the bird of paradise illustrates this point well: nothing in the album indicates that these two illustrations are related in any way. Not even in terms of arrangement; in fact the *Manuco-diata secunda* appears first. Not to mention the two images of crustaceans at the end, whose presence challenges the thematic unity of the album – as expressed by the title at least – even further. In contrast, a sense of formal uniformity derives from features such as facture – all of the illustrations seem to be the product of the same hand – and the choice of drawing, colouring materials and paper.

As an increasingly growing body of scholarship has shown, the features of the *Raccolta di Uccelli* are far from exceptional.¹⁴ In this regard, among other factors, we should not underestimate the capacity of this and similar compilations of images to reflect exactly that: in many cases they are the result of compiling exercises, that is, the products and display of sheer accumulation. Accumulation, of course, lies at the heart of the kind of collecting and knowledge-making practices that early modern naturalists like Aldrovandi promoted and exercised.¹⁵ But accumulation alone seems like a poor explanation when trying to understand the production and appreciation of visual corpora like the

one we are dealing with here. This may be largely due to the uncertain status granted to these albums as cultural products or, in other words, the capacity of these items to resist, even challenge, clear-cut classification. On the one hand, for example, there is the tendency to highlight and prioritize their status as epistemic objects.¹⁶ That is, one is expected to treat these works as part of a system of knowledge. Within this framework, it is inevitable to feel the urge to identify an epistemologically-driven motivation behind a given album's content and layout. In the case of the London album, for instance, one feels compelled to ask why the selection and arrangement of bird illustrations are what they are. The absence of text in this case complicates the matter even further: what are these images without notation – that is: without title, description, nomenclature, etc. – meant to be? Are they intended to speak or be legible on their own? If so, how does this lead to the generation or communication of knowledge? On the other hand, an equally problematic approach is to consider the interest of an album like this in terms of its artistic worth. Numerous Aldrovandi scholars have produced convincing evidence of the extent to which the illustrations commissioned by him were greatly appreciated by contemporary (and later) artists and art theorists. Just to mention one example, Giuseppe Olmi has shown how the physician and art critic Giulio Mancini, in his *Considerazioni sulla pittura*, puts the books of Aldrovandi “on the same level as Giovanni da Udine's frescoes in the Vatican loggias and Bassano's paintings”.¹⁷ From this perspective, an attribution like the one in the *Raccolta di Uccelli* – “*fatta da Giovanni da Udine Scolare di Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino*” – would be

¹⁴ In addition to the works mentioned above see, for instance, A. Fischel, *Natur im Bild. Zeichnung und Naturerkenntnis bei Conrad Gessner und Ulisse Aldrovandi*, Berlin: Verlag 2009 and F. Egmond, “A collection within a collection: rediscovered animal drawings from the collections of Conrad Gessner and Felix Platter”, *Journal of History of Collections* 2013 (XXV), 2, pp. 149-170.

¹⁵ G. Olmi, *L'inventario del mondo. Catalogazione della natura e luoghi del sapere nella prima età moderna*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992. For a recent discussion of accumulation in terms of early modern collecting and knowledge-making practices, see J.R. Marcaida, *Arte y ciencia en el Barroco español. Historia natural, coleccionismo y cultura visual*, Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia 2014, cap. 1.

¹⁶ G. Olmi, L. Tongiorgi Tomasi, A. Zanca (eds), *Natura-Cultura. L'interpretazione del Mondo Fisico nei Testi e nelle Immagini*, Firenze: Olschki 2000; P. Mason, *Before disenchantment. Images of exotic animals and plants in the early modern world*, London: Reaktion Books 2009; S. Kusakawa, *Picturing the book of nature: image, text, and argument in sixteenth-century human anatomy and medical botany*, London: University of Chicago Press 2012; J. Pimentel, *The Rhinoceros and the Megatherium. An Essay in Natural History*, Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2017. The literature on the question of what constitutes an ‘epistemic image’ is expanding. For a recent discussion, see A. Marr, “Knowing Images”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 2016 (LXIX), pp. 1000-1013.

¹⁷ G. Olmi, “Museums on paper in Emilia-Romagna from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries: from Aldrovandi to Count Sanvitale”, *Archives of Natural History* 2001 (XXVIII), 2, pp. 159-160.

sufficient to justify the existence of the album itself. Moreover, it would eliminate many of the difficulties that have been discussed earlier: the lack of structure, the lack of selection and arrangement criteria, the lack of descriptions and nomenclature, etc. These bird illustrations would become meaningful and valuable through the skill and prestige of their maker alone. Such a reading of these materials, however, is rather limiting. There is more to them than just a fancy attribution. Besides, as most experts concede, it is extremely difficult to judge these illustrations in artistic/aesthetic terms.

In sum, what seems certain about an object like the London album is the sense of awe and mystery that it inspires in the viewer. After all, it is a joy to flick through its sheets and imagine a whole world of interactions leading to these wonderful illustrations. At the same time, there is also something melancholic about this album; a sense of emptiness motivated by the same features that make it such an intriguing historical object – its elusive and hermetic character in particular. And yet, despite the difficulty of unravelling the many contingencies that shaped their fortunes, there is much to be gained by incorporating objects such as this to our repertoire of sources. These albums not only provide additional evidence of the stimulating interplay involving naturalists, image-makers and collectors that historians of early modern art and science have been exploring for the past decades. They are also testimonies of the remarkable proliferation of natural historical images both in association with and in contrast to the realm of print, another important and increasingly expanding area of interdisciplinary scholarship.¹⁸ Again, the case

of the images of the bird of paradise is illuminating in this regard, in that it captures all these tensions. On the one hand, these illustrations can be said to be mere versions of already-known depictions of the bird of paradise, here presented as part of an exquisitely crafted object but in a rather decontextualized manner. On the other hand, one cannot but celebrate the presence of these images in the album, as a testimony of the fascination around these wonders of nature, and a reminder of their status of natural objects worthy of visual representation and dissemination. Interestingly, this sense of visual abundance and heterogeneity poses new questions and is opening novel lines of enquiry. How can this awareness of the pervasiveness of *copies* complicate our views on early modern processes of knowledge production and dissemination?¹⁹ What does the proliferation of albums like the *Raccolta di Uccelli* reveal about early modern practices of accumulation and appreciation of natural historical visual materials?

In conclusion, the two bird of paradise illustrations featured in the *Raccolta di Uccelli* and, to a larger extent, the whole album itself may be regarded as ‘echoes’ of Aldrovandi’s natural historical project. But this is not to say that these are tenuous and empty reverberations. On the contrary, these visual materials reveal a complex world of image-production, circulation and collecting situated at the core of early modern European culture. The more we know about these materials – by means of scholarly dialogue and collaboration, and the support of museums and libraries and the tools of Digital Humanities – the richer our account of this culture will be.

¹⁸ On this type of visual materials and the practices underlying their production and use see F. Egmond, *Eye for detail. Images of plants and animals in art and science, 1500-1630*, London: Reaktion Books 2017.

¹⁹ For a brief but suggestive discussion of the inadequacy of using the notion of ‘original image’ in this context, as opposed to ‘copy’ or ‘copies’, see F. Egmond, S. Kusukawa, “Circulation of images and graphic practices in Renaissance natural history: the example of Conrad Gessner”, *Gesnerus* 2016 (LXXIII), 1, pp. 67-68. As indicated by these authors, for further discussion on this issue see J.J.G. Alexander, “Facsimiles, copies, and variations: The relationship to the model in medieval and Renaissance European manuscripts”, in K. Preciado (ed.), *Retaining the original: Multiple originals, copies, and reproductions*, Hanover: National Gallery of Art 1989, pp. 61-72. For the wider context of copy-making, see H. Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy. Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles*, New York: Zone Books 1996.