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Subject: **Ficino Listserv Turns 21 This Week**
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Reply-To: "FICINO: FICINO Discussion - Renaissance and Reformation Studies"
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On 28 September 2011, the Ficino listserv turns 21.

Back in the summer of 1990 when the list was conceived, the idea of creating an on-going virtual seminar populated by scholars from across the globe was still very new. Instructors in the humanities still used blackboards, their lectures written on yellowing papers, annotated and glossed with details and insights garnered through years of repetition. Course packs were still photocopied by the bookstore, and syllabi peppered with references to curious corners of the library such as "in the reference section" or "on reserve." Most students still typed essays, and, in the name of social equity, some were still allowed to submit handwritten versions! Conference announcements were sent out by mail, and editors corresponded with contributors through a succession of letters. Not only were internet connections far from ubiquitous, and e-mail only beginning to become a staple of academic life but the idea of a virtual colleague-someone with whom one may collaborate through electronic media but whom one has never met-was cutting-edge stuff.

The idea of an e-mail list for Renaissance and early modern studies originated with Germaine Warkentin of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (CRRS) at the University of Toronto. But with Warkentin away on research in Europe, the mantle passed to the CRRS's William Bowen to determine what such a system might look like, and how it might operate. To this end, Bowen approached Willard McCarty who had pioneered the Humanist listserv for what was then known as computing in the humanities-the precursor of digital humanities. Begun some three years earlier, Humanist was groundbreaking in itself, for it was only the second such list in the humanities, only a few months younger than the pioneering AnsaxNet. The original idea for the early modern list was to call it "Erasmus," reflecting the CRRS's strong collection of Erasmiana, but this proved impractical as it would have resulted in the list perhaps being confused with the "Erasmus Programme" (an EU initiative that had recently been launched to promote student exchanges). Another early contender was "Borgia," but it was Bowen who suggested "Ficino" on the basis of Marsilio's comments in a letter to Bembo: "The convivium alone ... rebuilds limbs, revives humours, restores spirit, delights senses, fosters and awakens reason. The convivium is rest from labours, release from cares and nourishment of genius; it is the demonstration of love and splendour, the food of good will, the seasoning of friendship, the leavening of grace and the solace of life." Certainly, it was a choice of name that better evoked the spirit of academic fellowship and cooperation that was-and is-the hallmark of the list.

Bowen, McCarty and Warkentin appreciated that the strength of the list lay in its ability to foster ideas through the aether, openly, widely and as quickly as possible. Underlying their vision was the notion that knowledge is realised through dialogue. The list, they said, was to be "a free-wheeling 'seminar' convened for the purpose of argumentation, in the etymological sense of 'making bright and clear.'" In order to break new ground, in order to nurture debate and to facilitate cross-disciplinary discussion, the list was to be "radically inclusive" with membership open to anyone looking to bring his or her knowledge and skills to bear on the early modern period. The list, then, was to be unmoderated, but even in these early days Bowen, McCarty and Warkentin appreciated the fact that it was important to keep the list tightly focussed, and to put off triflers and potential advertisers. This was the beginning of the short academic biography that all would-be members must supply, an idea that they borrowed from the Humanist list.

By the end of the list's first week, Ficino had 20 members: 14 Americans, 3 Canadians and 3 from the UK. Aside from early issues of technical housekeeping, the first discussion thread was begun by Roy Flannagan from Ohio University who asked where he might find an American source for high-quality slides of the restored Sistine Chapel-to which the reply was that he should phone the Vatican (number provided) and see if they could arrange for him to purchase some through the mail. Reading over these early postings, it is hard to re-imagine an academic world where an art historian could not just pull down high-quality digital images for his class from the Vatican's website, and was advised instead to phone the cardinal overseeing the restorations-but, of course, in 1990 that's what happened.

The list has had several editors over the course of its life:

1990-1992: McCarty (editor) with Bowen (assistant editor)

1992-1995: Warkentin and Bowen (co-editors)

1995-2000: Bowen (editor)

 Laura Hunt (assistant editor, 1997-1999)

 Richard Raiswell (assistant editor, 2000-2001)

2001- current: Raiswell (associate editor)

As the list's longest serving editor, my recollections are entirely positive. I have only had to remove people on a handful of occasions, for one of the great strengths of the list is that members are collegial and cordial. And when etiquette is breached, usually a polite private e-mail from me has ensured that appropriate decorum is quickly restored. I don't think I have ever refused admission to the list-although I have had to suggest to many high school students upon applying for membership each year that they might be better served elsewhere for their project on Machiavelli or the Renaissance. Indeed, in November 2003, a high school teacher in Texas told his/her class that they should all just write to me as editor for help with their essays on various Renaissance topics. These requests, of course, never made it on to the list! My most difficult period, though, was in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States. Naturally, members wanted to find out about colleagues in New York, to share experiences and to try to make sense of the appalling atrocities that had taken place. But after a few days, the discussion quite remarkably reoriented itself and used the events as a lens through which to consider early modern instances of terrorism.

Over the years, the list has grown to become the most important community of early modern scholars on the web. Today, Ficino has some 794 members who hail from some 29 different countries. Of course, the lion's share of members are based in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, but we have members from Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland.

And the future of Ficino? The list is still going strong, but the format needs some tweaking to take advantage of some of the recent trends in social networking, perhaps through Twitter or the nascent Iter Community that is now the focus of some Bowen's efforts. We are looking at new possibilities, but the current listserv model still remains an exceptionally valuable resource, and the only place on the web that can bring together all the right minds on any subject in early modern studies.

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