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DISCOVERIES

Early Printed Book Contains Rare Evidence of Medieval Spectacles



Many scholars rank the invention of eyeglasses among the most important contributions to humankind in the last 2,000 years. They were probably invented at the end of the thirteenth century by a craftsman living near Pisa. The evidence originates from a passage by Friar Giordano da Pisa who recounts having met the anonymous craftsman in 1286. A friend of

Giordano named Friar Allesandro della Spina learned how to make them shortly thereafter and shared the secret with the public.

Scholars believe that by the end of the fifteenth century, spectacles were probably being sold and produced throughout most of Europe, with countries like England importing them by the thousands. Florence led the way in manufacturing and apparently produced some of the highest quality spectacles. Despite this widespread production, there are relatively few surviving specimens.

Yet, while conducting a survey of manuscript waste found in early printed books, a scholar noticed a faint reddish-brown impression of a pair of spectacles on the rear parchment endpapers of a copy of the [Opera of Fr. Luigi di Granata](#). The endpapers in this book comprise a piece of parchment taken from a page in a medieval manuscript. Among the many thousands of medieval manuscripts and early printed books in U.S. libraries, only a handful of similar discoveries have been made: a pair of spectacles found in the Folger copy 46 of the First Folio at the Folger Shakespeare Library; the outline of a pair spectacles carved into the wooden boards of a sixteenth-century volume in the rare books department at Catholic University of America and in a 15th-century Breviary at the Fribourg, Bibliothèque Cantonale et Universitaire (seen in

Christopher De Hamel's *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, fig. 193); and an impression in a manuscript at the Walters Art Museum.

The spectacles here conform to the physical features and rough time period for early medieval leather-framed spectacles (late 1400s-early 1500s) --[see those of Willibald Pirckheimer](#) (1470-1530). Because the book was printed in Venice, Italy, the tantalizing possibility exists that the wearer who deposited his spectacles in between the parchment leaves may have been using a pair of the earliest eyeglasses ever made, because Florence, where eyeglasses were invented, is less than 165 miles from Venice.

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