

Hortus sanitatis (The garden of health)

Louise Wilson and Robyn Sloggett

This book is a modified Latin translation of the famous Greek herbal written by Dioscorides Pedanius of Anazarbos who lived in the 1st century CE. Dioscorides' five-volume treatise (usually referred to as *De materia medica*) and its various derivatives and translations were the most popular and influential herbal books of their times, serving as an encyclopaedia of the plant, animal and mineral kingdoms and the medical applications of their products.

A German translation of Dioscorides was published by Peter Schöffer in Mainz in 1485. The 1491 Latin edition is the only one by Meydenbach and was followed by three editions published by Johann Prüss who reduced the amount (and cost) of paper required by setting 55 lines per column and employing a smaller type than Meydenbach. Prüss used the same woodcut illustrations as Meydenbach, but used some of them more than once. The Baillieu Library copy has 47 lines per column and figures are not repeated, indicative of the Meydenbach edition. And although missing the title page, it contains a handwritten note indicating it is the 1491 Meydenbach first edition. Comparative studies indicate that the binding is a later addition, possibly dating from the 17th century (based on advice from

Julianne Simpson, former Deputy Curator, Special Collections, Baillieu Library).

Before conservation treatment, the book was in extremely fragile condition with the binding detaching from the text block. The pages were affected by surface dirt and many tears had been supported with crude repairs that concealed hand-coloured woodcuts. Pages affected by surface dirt were cleaned using a soft brush and old repairs were removed by first softening them using a methylcellulose poultice and then lifting them mechanically. Tears were realigned and repaired using toned Japanese tissue and wheat starch paste. The visual impact of some tear mends was reduced with minor retouching using Winsor and Newton watercolours. A custom-made phase box now protects the book. Further research is needed to determine what the original binding would have been, and to identify a title page from a Meydenbach edition.

Louise Wilson has a Bachelor of Arts in Art History and a Bachelor of Applied Science in Conservation of Cultural Materials (Paper Specialisation). On completion of her formal training she undertook an internship in book and paper conservation at the State Library of Victoria. Until recently she was Project Conservator at the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation, University of Melbourne. She is currently Conservator Works on Paper at the National Gallery of Victoria.



Hortus sanitatis (The garden of health), Mainz: Jacob Meydenbach, 1491.

George McArthur Bequest, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

Above: illustration of *Aquilegia* showing image transfer from page opposite and discolouration associated with acidity on edge of page.

Below: front opening before treatment.

All photographs by Louise Wilson, Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation.