

**Investigate an unsolved 500-year-old mystery with this sumptuously crafted Renaissance masterpiece**

Francesco Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*. Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1499. 12 7/8 inches x 8 3/4 inches (327 x 222 mm), 468 pages, woodcuts throughout.

The *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* has been shrouded in mystery ever since its first appearance over 500 years ago, at the height of the Italian Renaissance. Written in densely allusive, hermetic prose and illustrated with magnificently graceful yet profoundly enigmatic woodcuts, it has guarded its secrets — including the very identity of its author, still a matter of dispute — up to this very day. Although it has long been treasured by bibliophiles, it has only recently received its first full English translation (by Joscelyn Godwin).

Godwin's translation has focused interest upon the original edition, copies of which have for centuries been locked away from public examination. While the *Hypnerotomachia* is firmly established as the masterpiece of Aldus Manutius, the finest printer of the Italian Renaissance, its puzzling text and illustrations have only rarely been examined as components of an integrated and purposeful artistic production. This complex work, in which some have glimpsed typographic ciphers and others hermetic emblems, is in fact only fully manifest in its inaccessible first edition of 1499, one of the most prized books in existence (and one that was frequently mutilated in earlier and less tolerant times). This very inaccessibility and the work's disputed meaning have led it to be seen as one of the world's great unsolved literary mysteries.

This fully intact original copy of the *Hypnerotomachia*, from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection at the Library of Congress is bound in contemporary black leather over wooden boards with four clasps, with both covers and spine blind-stamped. The history of this copy before the twentieth century is unknown. Only the last two owners have left their marks as a memento to posterity: Mortimer Leo Schiff and Lessing J. Rosenwald.

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