

**Lush hand-colored plates illustrate the Vicomte de Cormenin's massive work on the history of the popes.**

Cormenin, Louis-Marie de Lahaye, vicomte de. *The public and private history of the popes of Rome: from the earliest period to the present time, including the history of saints, martyrs, fathers of the church, religious orders, cardinals, inquisitions, schisms, and the great reformers*. Philadelphia: James M. Campbell, 1847. 9 7/8 inches (250 mm), 2 volumes: 478 pp. + 432 pp.

In 19th-century North America, Roman Catholicism held much the same position as Islam does today. A French-Canadian population that seeped down into New England and a wave of Irish immigration, particularly after the Potato Famine, gave rise to an inevitable protestant, nativist backlash. The fictionalized memoirs of a Montreal nun held in sexual bondage, *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk* (1836), was a bestseller, and perhaps the most influential work of the century in forming popular attitudes. No matter who the publisher, the novel was always a cheap octavo, sometimes with a few lurid wood-engravings. The luxury book market looked elsewhere for stimulus.

This book on the papacy by the French careerist aristocrat the Vicomte de Cormenin (1788–1868) provided an ideal pseudo-scholarly vehicle, rich in verve and prejudice, for lush colored plates. Born into the non-emigrating nobility, Cormenin weathered the French Revolution *in situ*, later writing innumerable books and pamphlets, full of violent rhetoric, shifting his allegiances as the political winds changed direction—from Napoleon to Louis XVIII to the extremes of left-wing demagoguery. The hand-colored lithographic plates, by the Philadelphia firm of Wagner & McGuigan, are the book's *raison d'être*. Philadelphia was then the center of illustrated book production in the United States, and the decades from 1830 to 1850 marked the heyday of hand-colored lithography, before its eclipse by the chromolithograph.

The sixteen colored plates in the book do include one or two depictions of popes in unimpeachable circumstances, but the general emphasis is on sex and violence, not all of it papal. Crusaders (**Spread 261**), Charlemagne (**Spread 108**) and Clovis (**Spread 52**) offer armed secular incursions, and even popes put on their armor as needed. **Spread 172**

shows the 11th-century Pope Benedict VIII resisting the entreaties of his share of the booty after battle, the beautiful wife of the Saracen leader. He “cut off her head with his own hand,” Cormenin informs us, “despoiled the dead body ... and gave her corpse to his soldiers.”

More than half the plates offer a generous measure of titillation. Three unclothed maidens (a foretaste of the pleasures of Paradise) float like romantic ballerinas around Mahomet at **Spread 91**, “Popess Joan” is on **121**, and a chained and naked early Christian female is about to be devoured by a rather benevolent-looking lion and tiger at **438**. “The Orgies of the Vatican” at **372** offer a spectacle of wine, women and song that might have come straight out of Donizetti or Verdi. At **341** Lucretia Borgia, dressed as a bacchante, with ivy-leaf crown and thyrsus, flashes a Thurber-like leer over her plunging neckline at her cardinal brother Cesare. The 10th-century Pope John XII, whose mother “the infamous Marozia had already, by a double incest, initiated him into the most shameful debaucheries,” is depicted at **Spread 155** with a ballerina in a décolletage reminiscent of Grisi or Taglioni: apparently, “in order to render religious ceremonies more attractive, he thought of admitting into the churches, actresses and courtesans, who should perform lascivious dances to the sound of music.”

In style, these plates have much in common with the French and Italian opera and ballet posters of the period. What Hollywood is to *People* magazine, the tinseltown of Rome was to these Philadelphia lithographers—“the most abominable city in the world” (**Spread 411**) and utterly irresistible.