

Carlo Vidua's books at the library of the Academy of sciences of Turin

Carlo Vidua, the Count of Conzano, was defined by Alexander von Humboldt, a geographer and explorer of Vidua's days, as "a much-wandering traveller and free researcher".

Vidua was born in Casale Monferrato on the 28th of February 1785 and died on the 25th of December 1830 in Indonesia, aboard a ship in the Ambon harbour. He died due to a severe burn caused by the hot mud erupting from a volcano on the island of Celebes, now Sulawesi.

Vidua was among the most intrepid travellers of the 19th century, and exceptional character, partly influenced by Romantic anxiety, partly heir to the Enlightenment in his healthy rationalism.

He was, we may say, an "atypical Romantic", but also an intellectual and bibliophile who, however, did not leave us a book about his extraordinary travel experience. Between 1819 and 1820 Vidua travelled to Egypt, where he met Bernardino Drovetti, whose collection of Egyptian antiquities served as the core around which the Egyptian Museum of Torino was established, with Vidua's fundamental help and intercession. Due to the fame he had achieved among the Egyptologists of the time, Vidua was invited by Champollion to take part in the great French-Tuscan expedition to Egypt; the count, however, was by that time already far away, engaged in further travels. In 1825, after meeting five American presidents - John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and John Quincy Adams - and reaching the farthest western frontier of the United States, Vidua spent a considerable time in Mexico, where he collected material in order to write a "history of the Mexican revolution". Shortly after coming back to Europe, he left once more to India and the Far East.

Carlo Vidua's legacy consisted of an impressive collection of books and objects accumulated throughout his travels. His notebooks, most importantly, have fortunately been preserved, making it possible to reconstruct his courageous expeditions.

Vidua's direct heirs were his cousin Luigi Leardi and his father Pio Vidua. Part of the traveller's collection, consisting of notebooks, books and objects of all sorts, remained in his birth town, Casale Monferrato. Other parts of his collection were donated by his heirs to the Accademia delle Scienze of Torino in 1933 and in 1940.

In 1933 Pio Vidua donated to the Accademia delle Scienze "books, manuscripts, natural history specimens, ancient and modern weapons, and other similar things collected by his son the Count Carlo in his extensive travels". Among them were over 1200 printed books and manuscripts about Mexico, the United States, the Philippines and China; besides drawings, maps, portraits, newspapers and artefacts from various peoples. In 1940 Luigi Leardi completed Pio Vidua's gift by donating the Accademia "the remaining books collected by the Count and the manuscripts he wrote in his long travels."

One of the strengths of the Fondo Carlo Vidua at the Libreria dell'Accademia delle Scienze of Torino is represented by its "American library". In the traveller's letters, collected and published by Cesare Balbo in 1834, the reader can find interesting information about Vidua's bibliophile passion, who oftentimes recommends that great care be used with his collection. In April 1927 he wrote from Bordeaux to his father mainly to receive information about the state of his books: "I long to be informed whether the collection I sent from America has reached its destination. It consists of seven boxes from the United States and two from Mexico, all shipped from New York"

Especially thanks to his travels to the United States, Vidua's "American library" came to comprise about 1300 volumes. Such figure will appear even more striking if Vidua's collection of American books is compared to that belonging to the British Museum in London, often considered to be the richest in Europe in American volumes, which in 1838 possessed only about one thousand American books.

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