CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Beasts, street scenes, shops, objects of everyday life, planets, women, saints, and prophets: these are amongst the subjects depicted in the fifteenth-century Florentine manuscript illustrations that are the focus of this book. I explore the role played by images in helping readers to assimilate knowledge, but not the knowledge that we usually associate with the Florentine Renaissance (such as the re-discovered philosophical postulates of Plato and Hermes Trismegistus). Instead, this book is about knowledge for everyday life: the moral principles that 1 helped people to live with each other; the mathematics that facilitated business transactions; the geometry that helped craftsmen and merchants in their trade and provided the young with a basic understanding of the cosmos and the world; and the insights into human nature that would be necessary in an often treacherous environment. This book also investigates the cultural and cognitive factors that empowered images themselves to transmit knowledge. Illustrations of vernacular texts were more than just visual memory aids; they allowed readers to associate new information with personal experience, and to apply the newly acquired knowledge to everyday life.

The illustrations discussed in this book are found in manuscripts of vernacular works that enjoyed a wide diffusion in Quattrocento Florence: the *Fior di virtù* (an early fourteenth-century anonymous treatise on the virtues and the vices, incorporating a bestiary); the *Esopo volgarizzato per uno da Siena* (a late fourteenth-century anonymous Tuscan version of Aesop's

Fables illustrated mostly with animal scenes); *libri d'abbaco* (mathematics manuals and treatises illustrated with geometrical figures and narrative scenes); and the *Sfera* (the poem on cosmology and geography composed by Goro Dati, probably in the 1430s, illustrated with diagrams and maps). Manuscripts produced by amateur copyists have a prominent place in this book; in addition to the works listed above, I have included two rare miscellanies combining religious and literary texts copied and illustrated by two youths: Romigi d'Ardingo de' Ricci (1382–1438) and Zanobi di Pagolo Perini (1384/93–after 1409).

The reason for including Romigi's and Zanobi's miscellanies in this book is to consider the role of images in the formation of young Florentines into full-grown adults. Scholars across generations have argued that some of the texts that are discussed in this book were used in late medieval and Renaissance Italy to educate children. As I shall demonstrate, their arguments are supported by evidence in manuscripts that include those texts. It is important, however, to bear in mind that in the late Middle Ages childhood was a different experience than it is now. True, children were loved by their parents and were treated as children but, compared with now, more in the sense of incomplete, defective adults.[1] Nevertheless, the majority of Florentine boys were in their early teens when they started work, and girls were commonly in their mid-teens when they married.[2] So teenagers were starting work and getting married at important stages in their cognitive and emotional development. Their education was not confined to a teenage environment as it would be today, but continued in working life. We have thus to think in terms of a culture common to youths and adults. Therefore, my investigation of the didactic functions of illustrations covers the world of children, teenagers, and adults.

The aim of this book is to explore how images accompanying vernacular texts related to aspects of fifteenth-century Florentine culture, how these images could transmit knowledge by addressing those aspects. Granted, it is impossible for us to reconstruct the personal experiences of fifteenth-century readers. But there is sufficient information on the culture and society of fifteenth-century Florentines to develop a good understanding of what people saw in pictures, as demonstrated by Michael Baxandall in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy*.[3] Baxandall's concept of the 'Period Eye', despite the criticism it initially received, has provided generations of scholars with a fruitful approach for exploring the relationship between visual culture and society in the Florentine Quattrocento.[4] Baxandall has shown that to explore how people perceived images, it is essential to gain as much insight as possible into the meanings and nuances of the words that were used to refer to them.[5] In this book, language also has an important place. My 'Period Eye', however, looks through areas of experience not explored in Baxandall's book – for example politics, animals, games, taxation, travelling, and sex.

Since the publication of *Painting and Experience*, there have been considerable advances in our understanding of how people perceive images. David Freedberg, in *The Power of Images*, established an important lead in research by exploring emotional responses to pictures, particularly those depicting the human body.[6] In recent decades, scholars have investigated the ways in which our responses to pictures may actually be 'embodied'.[7] Scientists have discovered that the neural networks in our brains that switch on when we perform an action also activate when we see images of this action; similarly, the circuits relating to physical sensations also activate when we see images evoking sensory experiences.[8]

Furthermore, important contributions have been made by scholars of medieval literature. Mary Carruthers has thoroughly investigated how medieval theologians and writers adopted classical mnemotechnics and employed images, either real or imagined, for remembering, thinking, and composing ideas.[9] Lina Bolzoni, in her book *La rete degli imagini* (*The Web of Images*), has shown how in the late Middle Ages preachers developed an efficacious approach for teaching religious precepts to the little-educated population by using sophisticated rhetorical devices, such as exempla, allegory, and metaphor, to verbally fix images in the minds of their listeners.[10] More importantly, Bolzoni has shown that these rhetorical devices had an influence on the ways in which medieval Tuscans looked at images.

Building on these studies, my approach to illustrations in vernacular Florentine manuscripts is to marry medieval Aristotelian postulates on perception and memory with modern cognitive theory. I also explore how tropes such as metaphor and simile articulated the relationship between the illustrations and the text. The illustration of didactic texts in the Renaissance has recently been the subject of innovative studies – for example, Sachiko Kusakawa's book on sixteenth-century botanical and anatomical images, and *The Art of Philosophy*, in which Susanna Berger explores how engravings representing philosophical subjects served as instruments for visual thinking on abstract matters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France.[11] This book is new and distinctive since it is the first published study that considers a wide range of illustrated subjects in the context of a specific period, place, and culture.

VERNACULAR TEXTS AND EDUCATION

The production and circulation of vernacular manuscripts was a fundamental aspect of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florentine culture.[12] Whilst humanists and prestigious booksellers such as Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421–98) oversaw the production of Latin books for a small elite, throughout the period an increasingly rich corpus of vernacular literature was read by the majority of

literate Florentines, and more and more copies were produced by individuals for their own use.[13] These individuals copied texts into paper quires in their everyday cursive handwriting (referred to as *mercantesca*), often imitating gothic *textualis* and *littera antica* (known in English as humanist minuscule), which they usually compiled into miscellanies.[14] The fragility of paper manuscripts has certainly been detrimental to their survival: we probably have to multiply by ten the number that has come down to us.[15] Such copyists have been named by Vittore Branca 'copisti per passione', but as Armando Petrucci rightly pointed out, it was most likely that it was out of necessity that they copied texts to provide books for themselves and their families.[16]

The level of literacy in late medieval Florence was high. According to the chronicler Giovanni Villani (late 1270s–1348), in 1338 there were between eight and ten thousand children of both sexes learning to read.[17] Based on Villani's reckoning, Paul Grendler has concluded that this represents 67 to 83 per cent of the male population.[18] From the Florentine Castasto of 1427, Robert Black established that at least 63 per cent of the adult male population was then sufficiently literate to write their own tax returns.[19] The evidence of literacy in the female population is more elusive, nevertheless Black observed that many women also wrote their own tax returns, and that in general those from the upper classes could read and write.[20] Only a few men and even fewer women studied Latin, however. Florentines usually received their elementary schooling between the ages of six and eleven.[21] They were taught to read with Latin texts by rote (usually Psalms and prayers and a Latin grammar manual known as the *Donadello*), so without necessarily understanding their meaning.[22] Some historians have argued that already by the fourteenth century vernacular texts were employed to teach children to read at school, but the evidence is not conclusive.[23] After completing elementary schooling, for boys there were two main choices: Latin grammar schools (which they attended for up to five years), or mathematics schools known as *botteghe* or *scuole d'abbaco* (which they attended just for two years).[24] The large majority attended *botteghe d'abbaco*, and immediately after completing their studies were engaged as apprentices in shops and trading companies.[25]

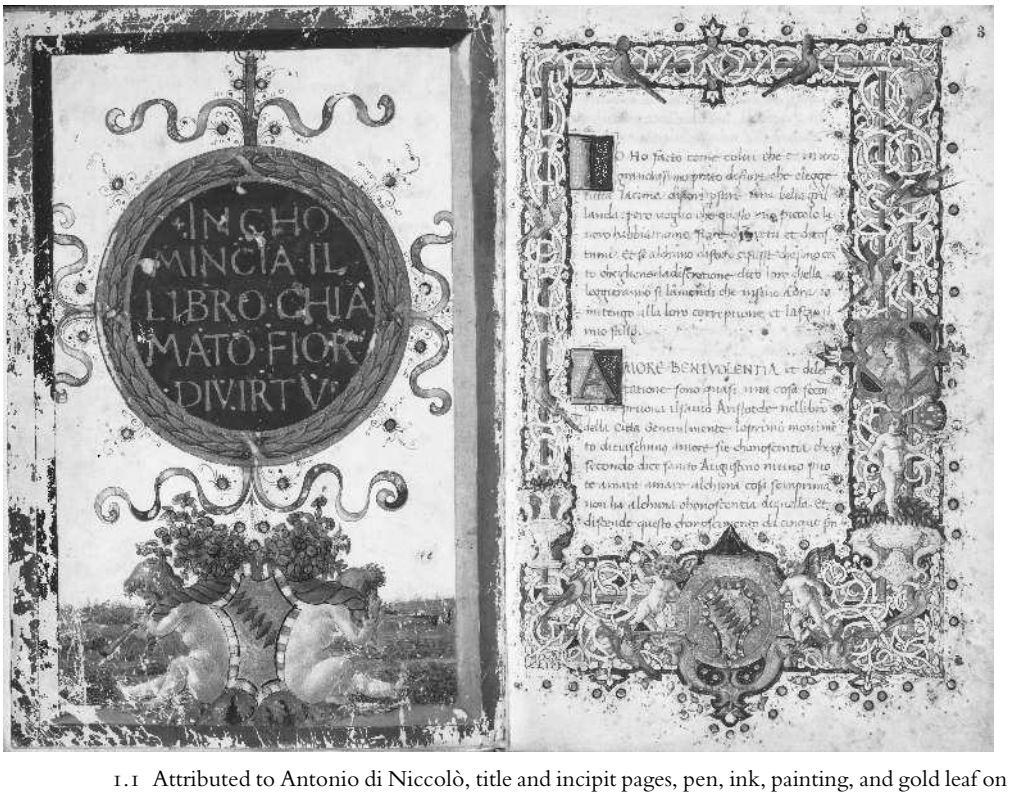
Florentine merchants saw reading books as a means to self-improvement.[26] Their cultural aspirations were influenced by the humanist movement.[27] Whilst it was once thought that the interests of humanists were confined to the Latin language, recent scholarship has demonstrated that humanists played an important role in promoting vernacular literature, first of all by translating the classics and their own works into the vernacular.[28] Andrea Rizzi has shown that humanists took into account the needs and limitations of fifteenth-century readers when producing their translations.[29] Moreover, as demonstrated by James Hankins, the leading humanist and Chancellor of Florence, Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444), popularised humanist themes through his vernacular

works.[30] Such works were copied and collected by readers, notably by members of the Benci family, whose collection of classics consisted mostly of vernacular translations.[31] Likewise, in the inventories of the Magistrato dei Pupilli (the institution that administrated the inheritances of orphans until they reached the age of majority), most of the classics listed were in the vernacular.[32] Furthermore, amongst the most widely read texts in Quattrocento Florence, instead of those from the classical Latin past as revived by humanists, we discover works of the medieval vernacular tradition – Dante's *Divina commedia*, Domenico Cavalca's *Lo specchio della Croce* and his *Vite degli Santi Padri*, the *Fior di virtù*, and Aesop's *Fables* in Tuscan.[33] Medieval texts – including Cavalca's works and the *Fior di virtù* – were amongst the most successful early printed books in Italy.[34]

THE *FIOR DI VIRTÙ*, THE *ESOPO VOLGARIZZATO*, THE *SFERA*, AND *LIBRI D'ABBACO*

The works that form the core of this book – the *Fior di virtù*, the *Esopo volgarizzato*, the *Sfera*, and *libri d'abbaco* – have not in recent times received the scholarly attention they deserve, and have not been researched in any depth by art historians. This is not the only reason for focussing on them in this study. Looking for internal evidence of young readership, I examined at least two hundred and fifty manuscripts containing vernacular texts in Florentine libraries. I also conducted archival research to establish the ages of manuscripts' owners (when their names are recorded), and the makeup of their families. From that preliminary research, I concluded that the most compelling evidence for young readership of illustrated vernacular texts in Quattrocento Florence is provided by the *Fior*, the *Esopo*, the *Sfera*, and *libri d'abbaco*. My choice was also influenced by the cultural importance and dissemination of these particular works.

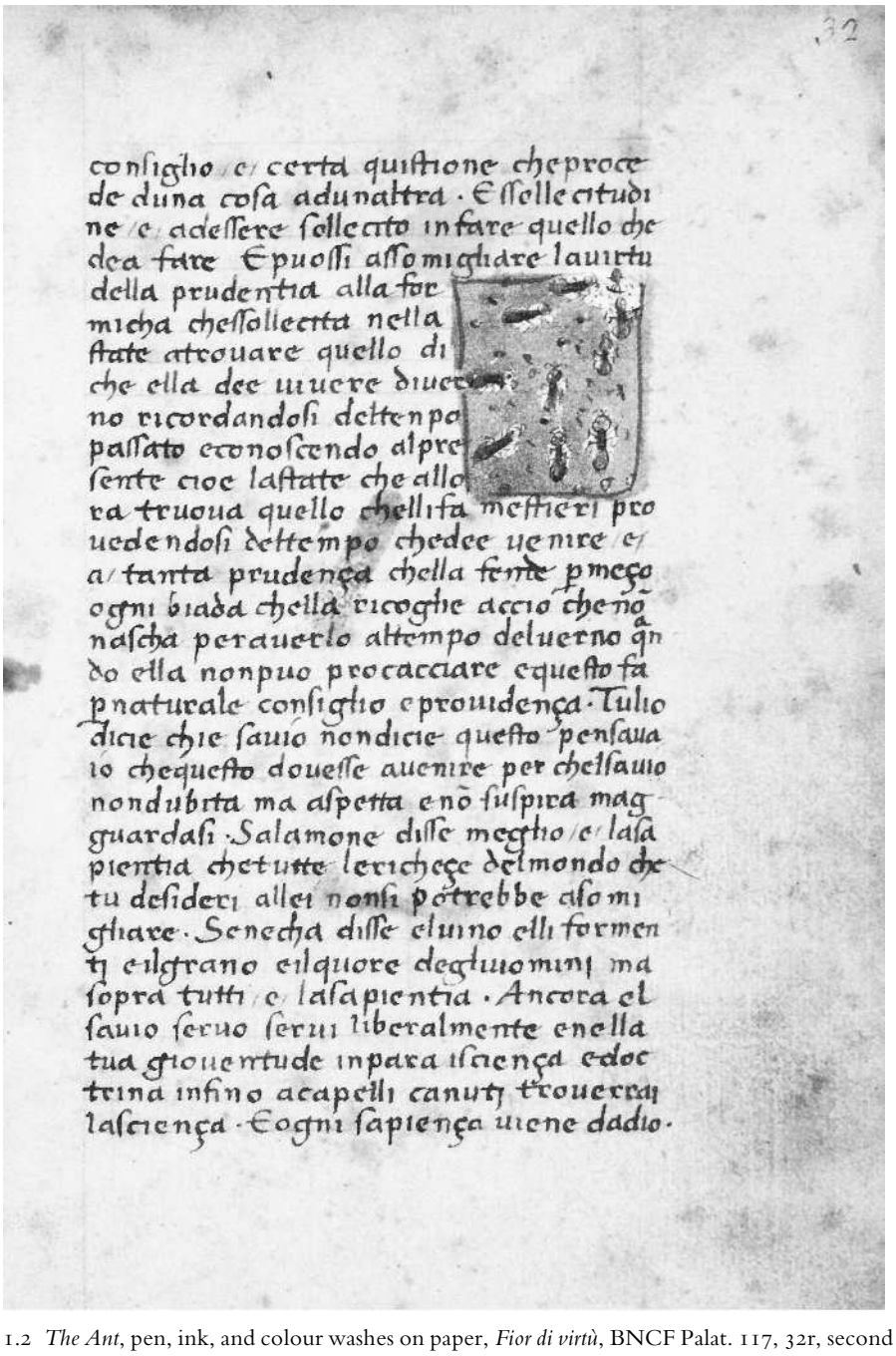
The *Fiore di virtù e di costumi* (known by Tuscans as the *Fior di virtù*), a florilegium composed in fourteenth-century Bologna, was one of the most successful works on the virtues and the vices ever: there are at least eighty surviving manuscripts containing the *Fior* produced between *c.* 1330 and *c.* 1500.[35] In the short period between 1471 and 1501, fifty-seven editions were printed in Italy, as well as seven in Spain, two in France, and one in Germany – the first illustrated edition was printed in Florence in 1491.[36] The surviving manuscripts of the *Fior* include lavishly illuminated parchment codices (Plate III, Figure 1.1), as well as more modest and numerous paper copies that are sometimes illustrated with tinted drawings (Figure 1.2). Amongst the readers of the *Fior* we encounter members of wealthy patrician families, a humble apothecary, and the celebrated Leonardo da Vinci.[37] In the last two centuries, the *Fior* has been studied by Romance philologists, notably



1.1 Attributed to Antonio di Niccolò, title and incipit pages, pen, ink, painting, and gold leaf on parchment, *Fior di virtù*, BRF 1711, 2v–3r, *c.* 1490. Credit: Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze

Hermann Varnhagen and Maria Corti who partially identified its numerous sources.[38] However, despite its importance, a critical edition of the *Fior* has never been produced, and today scholars of literature seldom study the *Fior*.[39] Even more surprisingly, its extensive illustrative programme has been the subject of only one article, published in 1940.[40]

The late fourteenth-century *Esopo volgarizzato per uno da Siena* did not achieve the editorial success of the *Fior*. Only sixteen manuscripts of the *Esopo volgarizzato* are known; nonetheless, amongst many vernacular collections of Aesop's *Fables* read in Renaissance Italy, it is the only one that includes an extensive cycle of illustrations.[41] Most of the surviving illustrated manuscripts of the *Esopo volgarizzato* are made of paper and include tinted drawings. Despite the relatively modest quality of these manuscripts, amongst their owners we discover Francesco di Cambio Orlandi (a high-ranking magistrate and close friend of Cosimo 'il Vecchio' de' Medici), and Giovanni and Tommaso di Lorenzo Benci, who frequented the Neo-Platonist circle of Marsilio Ficino (Plate IV, Figure 1.3, Figure 1.4).[42] In the twentieth century,



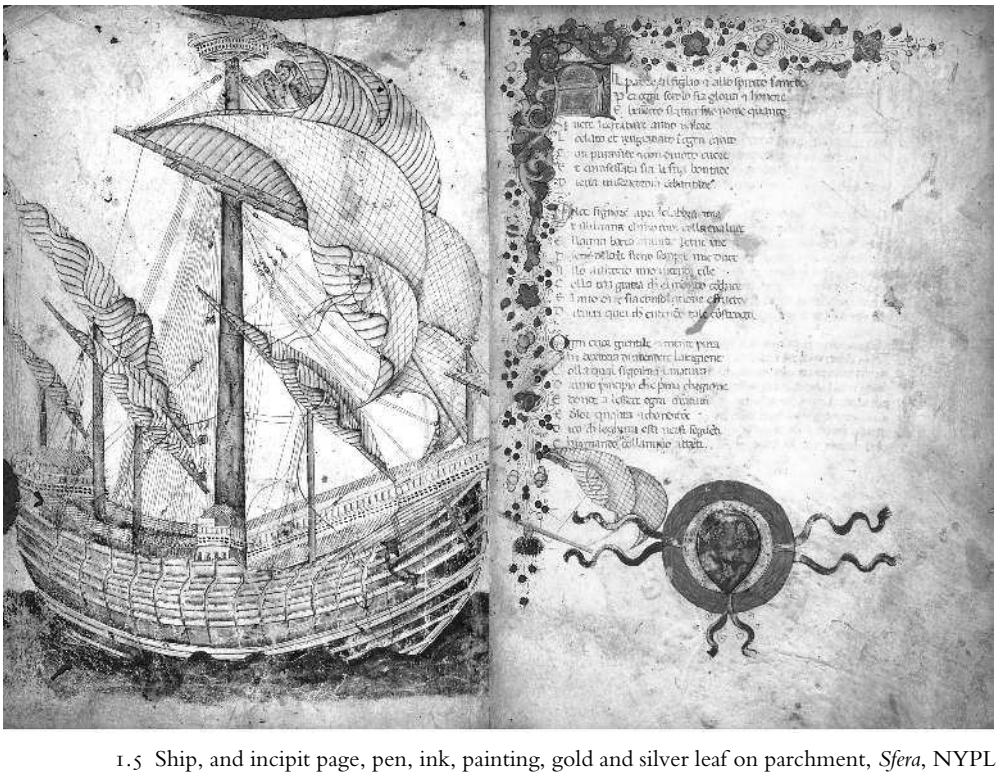
1.2 *The Ant*, pen, ink, and colour washes on paper, *Fior di virtù*, BNCF Palat. 117, 32r, second half of the fifteenth century. Credit: Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Biblioteca Riccardiana, Firenze

1.3 Attributed to Francesco di Cambio Orlandi, *Of the Town Mouse and the Village Mouse*, pen, ink, and colour washes on paper, *Esopo volgarizzato per uno da Siena*, BAUD Bart. 83, 16v, 1449. Credit: Archivio Storico dell'Arcidiocesi di Udine

two editions of the *Esopo* were published, one by Vittore Branca and the other by Claudio Ciociola, each produced from a different manuscript.[43] However, a critical edition of this significant text has yet to be made; likewise, its illustrations have not yet been the subject of much art-historical investigation.[44]

1.4 Filippo Benci, *Of the Town Mouse and the Village Mouse*, pen, ink, and colour washes on paper, *Esopo volgarizzato per uno da Siena*, BNCF II.II.83, 13r, 1450s. Credit: Su concessione del Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali / Biblioteca Nazionale, Firenze

The *Sfera*, the poem on the configuration of the cosmos and the World composed by Goro Dati (1362–1435), was the most successful illustrated vernacular work of fifteenth-century Tuscany. More than one hundred and fifty manuscripts of the *Sfera* have survived; and seventeen editions were



1.5 Ship, and incipit page, pen, ink, painting, gold and silver leaf on parchment, *Sfera*, NYPL 110, 1v–2r, c. 1450. Credit: Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

printed in Italy between 1472 and 1500.[45] The surviving manuscripts include luxurious illuminated codices (Figure 1.5), as well as far more modest paper versions that in many instances were copied and illustrated by readers (Plate VIII). Amongst the owners of manuscripts of the *Sfera* we discover merchants, magistrates, at least one celebrated architect (Antonio da Sangallo), as well as members of powerful families from other Italian cities (for instance, the Barbo of Venice and the Piccolomini of Siena).[46] Neglected for most of the twentieth century, in recent decades the text has been the subject of a few studies.[47] Whilst maps illustrating the *Sfera* have received sustained attention from scholars, curiously the diagrams have not excited any interest.[48]

Libri d'abbaco (or just *abbaci*) is the designation given to a variety of treatises on practical mathematics and collections of arithmetic and geometry problems. *Abbaci* were used by merchants and bankers, as well as by artists and craftsmen – Leonardo owned five *libri d'abbaco*, one with illustrations.[49] *Abbaci* have survived in almost three hundred manuscripts, produced roughly between 1290 and 1550, and in more than one hundred and fifty editions printed between