



**Books Are Magical, Essential and Powerful**

Speech of the President of the Max Planck Society

Professor Dr. Patrick Cramer

On the occasion of the donation of the *Biblioteca Serlopiana* to  
Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut

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– Check against delivery –

Mayor Funaro,

Thank you for welcoming us to the magnificent Salone dei Cinquecento. This breathtaking hall was created in 1495, at a time when also the first printed books began to circulate. The invention of the printing press was a revolution. It spread knowledge, raised literacy, and unified language. It sparked the Renaissance and it laid the foundations for education, public discourse, and modern research.

Principi Raffaele e Laetitia Carrega di Lucedio,

Thanks to your extraordinary generosity, I had the privilege yesterday of embarking on an unforgettable journey. It began the moment I stepped into our institute here in Florence. We entered the library and put on gloves—a quiet gesture that signalled something remarkable was about to unfold. Before us lay a selection of works from the *Biblioteca Serlopiana*, a living testament to Europe's intellectual and artistic heritage.

And then I experienced what the mayor just described: I was transported—across space and time. We stood among the ancient ruins of Rome—seen through the eyes of the 18th-century architect Piranesi. We wandered through the animal kingdom—seen through the imagination of Picasso. And we descended into hell and rose to paradise—guided by the vision of Dante. I truly experienced what has been called the 'magic' of books.



Principi, with the *Biblioteca Serlupiana*, you have entrusted us with treasures. Over the decades, you not only preserved this collection—you enriched it, and you cared for it with devotion. To build such a collection requires expertise, patience, and passion. Today, I want to thank you. Thank you for your trust. And I would also like to honour your ancestors, Filippo Serlupi Crescenzi and Gilberta von Ritter de Zahony, whose foresight began this remarkable legacy.

Dear guests,

You should have seen us in the library yesterday: When I spoke with my colleagues, their eyes lit up—in the way only scientists’ eyes do when they see the horizon of new discovery opening right before them. I could feel the excitement, the momentum, the possibility.

The *Biblioteca Serlupiana* opens up new frontiers for research. Scholars are now blending traditional expertise with digital tools and machine learning. This emerging field—often called Computational Humanities—does not *replace* human insight, it *amplifies* it. It allows us to grasp new dimensions of these works, which are far more than mere books. They are works of art. That is why I trust that the *Biblioteca Serlupiana* has found its rightful home. At our institute, the collection is not only cherished and studied—it is also shared with the public.

What an honour it is for the Max Planck Society to be entrusted with such a wonderful gift. Did you know that our Society is home to 84 institutes? With over 25,000 colleagues from 130 nations, we are united by curiosity. We ask big questions. We want to know where the pursuit of knowledge might take humanity. On this journey into the unknown, we must chart new paths—and for that, we need leadership. Outstanding leaders like Professor Wolf, whom I thank wholeheartedly for his inspiring guidance, his caring mentorship and for establishing such a wonderful team of scientists, many of whom are here today.

Esteemed guests,

Books can be magical, yes—but more than that, books are essential. They have shaped our civilisation. They made modern science possible in the first place. They stand for evidence, for open inquiry, and for reason. Really, books are powerful. They can change the way we think—and the way we act. That is why, across history—and even today—books are censored, banned, or even burned.



Yet, books endure. Because knowledge cannot be silenced. Here in Florence, we deeply feel this truth. In the Renaissance, this city became a beacon of learning. And with the help of the printing press, Florence became a force in the spread of humanist thought all across Europe.

Dear friends,

We stand in this humanist tradition, and we must defend it—especially today, when facts and reason are again under pressure in many parts of the world. Perhaps this is the greatest gift of the *Biblioteca Serlopiana*: That it reminds us of where we come from—so we may better find our way forward. Let us walk this path, together. Thank you—and all the best for the journey ahead!