

THE MOTTO OF IL CENACOLO:

“ITALA GENTE DALLE MOLTE VITE”



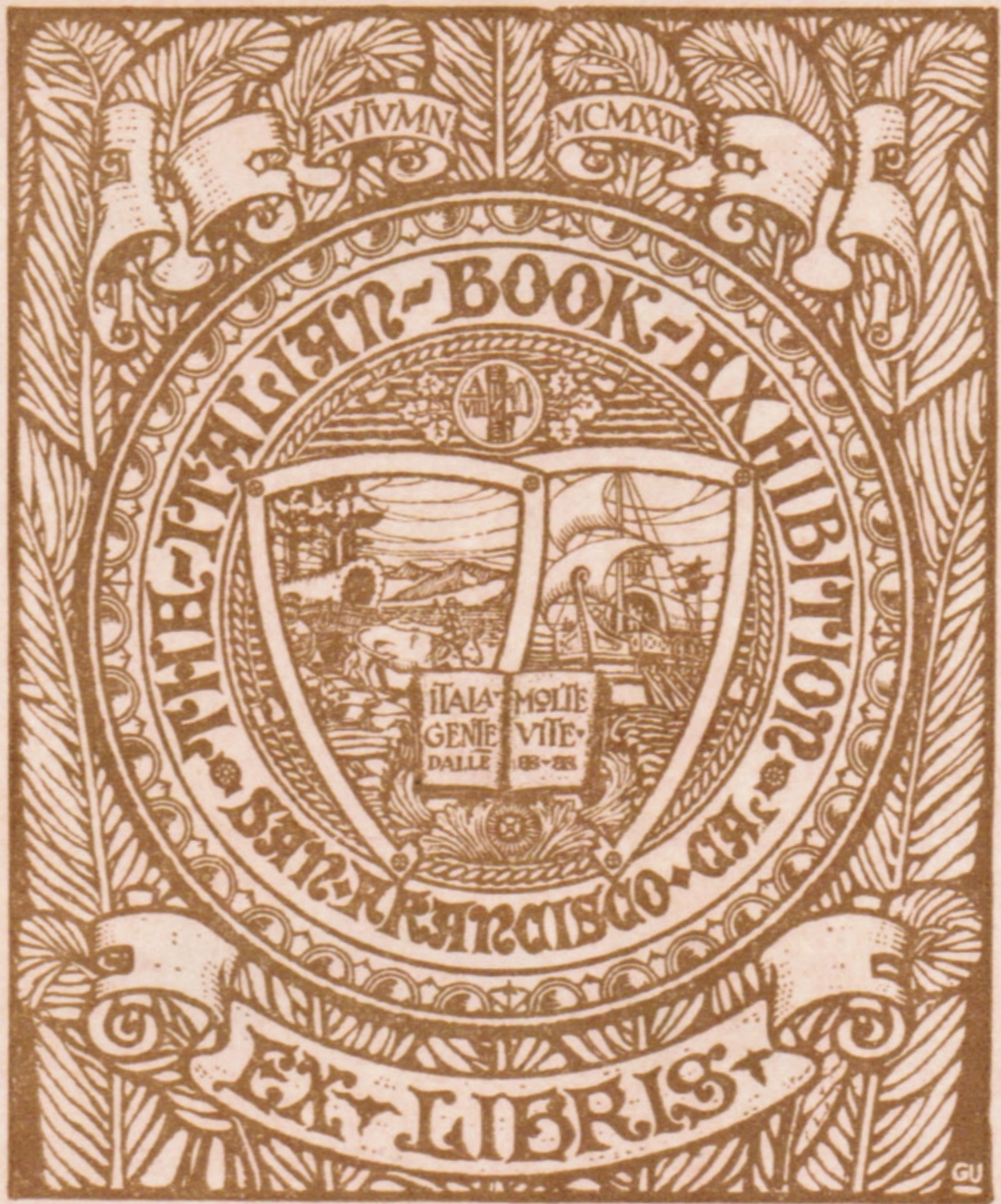
This month’s Alla Corrente essay is based on the Board of Director’s decision to have the May theme of luncheon presentations based on Il Cenacolo. I have always been intrigued with Il Cenacolo’s motto and logo, as I’m sure many of you have been. I have heard various answers to my questions about them over the years since joining the organization. So, I decided to ask our unofficial Club historian, Andy Canepa, to write an essay that gives some explanation about the motto. According to Andy, there are no records describing what the elaborate graphic design in the logo means or where it came from. But he is sure about the motto, and has written a wonderful piece on it. I want to thank Andy for researching and writing this terrific essay. I hope you find it informative and interesting.

—James J. Boitano, PhD

Our club motto, “*ITALA GENTE DALLE MOLTE VITE*,” is translated literally as “Italian people of the many lives,” or, more poetically, “Many-lived Italian people.” It is open to different interpretations. It might refer to the ability of Italians collectively to engage in rebirth, revival and reinvention, after prolonged periods of abject decline, as in *Rinascimento* (cultural renaissance), *Risorgimento* (political resurgence), the postwar “*Boom degli Anni Sessanta*” (1960s “economic miracle”). Or—and this is my preference within the context of Il Cenacolo—“*le molte vite*” refers to the many personifications and myriad contributions of Italians to their country and to the world at large, as well as to the historical breadth of the Italian experience itself. Just think about the various presentations made to our club within the last few years: Enrico Fermi, Filippo Mazzei, Joseph Di Giorgio, Charles Ponzi—certainly a sampling of the “many lives” referenced in our slogan.

The phrase originally appeared in an ode by Giosuè Carducci (1825-1907) entitled “*La Chiesa di Polenta*” (“The Church of Polenta”). This 1897 poem was not about a house of worship made of cornmeal mush. Polenta is actually a *frazione*, or hamlet, of the town of Bertinoro, situated about six kilometers from Forlì in the Romagna. In the original text, the phrase is “*itala gente da le molte vite*,” where the divided preposition/definite article (*da le*) serves a metric purpose within the poem, akin to “o’er the ramparts” in our own national anthem, where “over” would add an unwanted syllable. In the early years of the present millennium, it was decided by the Board of Directors to modernize the phrase to “*dalle molte vite*,” also because the successive reprinting of our logo through the decades had reduced the original motto to virtual illegibility. I think it was Augusto Troiani who first identified the literary source of the motto. Gus was a longtime member of Il Cenacolo who retired to Florida in 1991. I admit that there are purists, such as Ebe Cavagnaro, Tuscan-born and an instructor of Italian, who insist on the original “*da le*.” Unfortunately, they are wrong...and not only because “*da le molte vite*” is archaic and stilted. It turns out that the phrase was lifted for Il Cenacolo’s purpose from a 1929 *ex libris* (or “bookplate,” a patch glued onto the inside front cover of a book to denote ownership or provenance; see accompanying illustration). Our first president, Armando Pedrini, was chairman of that year’s *Mostra del Libro Italiano* (Italian Book Exhibition) in San Francisco. Many of the early books in our club library (now conserved in our archives) came from that expo and bear that *ex libris* with, at its center, “*itala gente dalle molte vite*.” So the phrase had already been modernized back in 1929! Now that we know what our motto means and how we, as a club, acquired it, the next task is to decipher and trace the origins of our logo or emblem. Any volunteers?

—Andrew M. Canepa



The original ex libris (bookplate) from the Italian Book Exhibition in San Francisco in 1929.