

BY ISOBEL SINCLAIR & CALLIE

Italian Culture & Books: The world between the lines *(L'italiano e il libro: il mondo fra le righe)*

On aesthetics, Enrico Tallone—descendant of the Tallone Type—claimed that you wouldn't print Homer in a sans-serif font. Oddly enough, the event welcoming speeches from Tallone and several other distinguished guests in celebration of Italy's traditions of material culture, Renaissance artwork, and literature, were housed amongst the technological jungle of office spaces in the SFU Venture Labs. When we emerged from the bay of elevators and made our way along the 12th floor, there was a startling dichotomy between the discussions of Italian culture we were expecting, and the clinical atmosphere of an

office space meant to chase deep-tech startup success. For the humanities and literary students in the room, however, we became more at home in the heart of the Venture Labs where a table was laid out with books—from Emily Dickinson's poetry to Pinocchio in a dazzling red slipcase, all printed with handset type. They were from Tallone Editore, the Italian printing house run by the keynote speaker of the event: Enrico Tallone, in conjunction with his daughter Elisa Tallone. But beyond filling the Venture Labs with books and prints and fonts, the Tallones filled the room with a vibrance as they pulled out examples of the different letterheads printed along the interrupted tradition of their family's artisan craft. In essence, the Tallones' presence in the Venture Labs was only evidence of the persisting passage of their publishing house as it ventured through the twenty-first century's fascination with the digital.

Photos by Callie



The event, hosted in part by our very own World Languages and Literature department at SFU alongside the Italian Consulate Canada West, was part of a larger celebration of Italian culture through Italian Design Week and Week of Italian Language in the World. The speakers—Enrico Tallone, Elisa Tallone, Ilaria Balda, Dionysios Arkadianos, and the students of ITAL300—were there to discuss the world of Italian literature and its interactions with technology and design. Beginning with the history of the printing press and ending with the future of AI, the presenters took us on a journey through time. By the end of the evening, the future-seeking surroundings were no longer perplexing—the connection between technology and literature was obvious.

The center of this celebration was the traditional craftsmanship of book printing and typography. Beyond simply the history of the printing press and the difference between serif and sans serif print, the Tallones introduced a world of careful aesthetics and artistry through the evolution of printed letters. Each type is crafted to reflect the artistry



of the printed words. Everything on the page is given importance; the black typeface and the white page work together to create visual harmony. As evidence, they gifted a single piece of paper enclosed in a red cover. Arranged in a circle, each line of the poem was printed in a different font: Bembo, Garamond Stempel, Palatino etc. For the Tallones, the printing of letters is as much poetry as the words themselves.

Before the evening concluded with wine and cheese, the final presenters were Prof. Dionysios Arkadianos and Prof. Vlad Vintila's students. With their research, literature becomes science. Their conclusions—that AI is helpful but has its limitations—is not new. What was instead significant, was the ubiquity and mundanity of their findings. Google translate may be widely successful, but it still fails to capture the poetic nuance; AI summaries are general and the analysis is so often obtuse. Yet still, we use it. When re-



searching the text they chose *Incontro Notturmo* by Dino Buzzati. The only information I found online was in Italian and of course Google prompted me to translate it—I immediately selected yes. Even after hearing about its successes and failures, AI and translation are inevitable in a diverse and global world.

As the speeches concluded, the ITAL 300 students took to showing us the world between lines, breaking up the rows of audience chairs into a circle to chat—as one does over Italian wine and cheese in a deeptech lab. The students began to detail us about their journeys to learning Italian—one having previously done an exchange in Italy, another returning to their high school language elective, and another having just returned from backpacking across Alberta—and their conclusions about the limitations of AI translations seemed to take on another weight. Each student’s relationship with learning Italian encapsulated a

journey across different places, across a lifetime, and across encounters with a lifetime of different people. In the same way that a font tells a story, their usage of Italian tells a story. And it is only with the clumsy hands of a student, or the masterful hands of a skilled artisan, that technology can truly encapsulate the story in language. In the digital clutter of the Venture Labs, during a time when AI is ever present, that is how they showed us the world between lines.

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