

## **A first edition of the first octavo produced by Aldus, Virgil's collected works**

Publius Vergilius Maro. *Opera*. Venice: Aldus Manutius, 1501. 6 3/8 inches x 4 1/4 inches (162 x 108 mm), 455 pages, illuminated initials throughout.

With this Virgil from April 1501, Aldus initiated his successful series of octavo volumes, printed in “minuscola italica,” well aware of the significance of this innovation, which perfectly complemented his editorial and cultural endeavors. Aldus in his dedication, entitled *In grammatoglyptae laudem* (“In praise of letter-cutting”), pays homage to the punch cutter Francesco Griffo of Bologna who with consummate skill engraved these slender, highly legible letters. From then on, the octavo format and the italic letter characterized not only Aldus' imprints but — widely dispersed and imitated — a type of publishing distinguished by affordability and portability. The 1501 Virgil soon went out of print. It was followed by further editions in 1505 and 1514, containing a dedication to Pietro Bembo, in whose father's library, abounding in small codices, Aldus claimed to have found his inspiration for the octavo format.

Virgil (70 B.C.–19 B.C.) was born in the village of Andes, near Mantua in what is now northern Italy. He is the most revered of the Roman poets, and his *Aeneid* is a cornerstone of classical studies curricula. Virgil began his studies at the age of five and was eventually sent to Rome where he was taught medicine, astronomy, rhetoric, and philosophy. During this time, he began to write poems, but none survive that can be attributed definitively to him. The *Eclogues*, Virgil's earliest published poetry issued ca. 37 B.C., are concerned with rural life and thus known to some as the “Bucolics.” They were modeled after the idylls ascribed to Theocritus.

Virgil was soon admitted to the circle of Octavian's agent Maecenas, and he made the acquaintance of other prominent literary figures, such as Horace and Varius. After the completion of the *Eclogues*, Virgil turned his attention to the *Georgics* (“On Farming”), which acclaimed Maecenas and was the origin of the phrase *tempus fugit* (time flies). At the urging of Octavian, who ruled under the name Augustus, Virgil began work in 29 B.C. on the *Aeneid*,

an epic poem celebrating the emperor's reign. At the time of Virgil's death in 19 B.C., the *Aeneid* — although complete in length — was unfinished. Augustus ordered the poem to be completed with minimal editorial changes, contrary to Virgil's instructions that it be destroyed, and so Virgil's masterpiece is known to us today.

This copy of Aldus' first octavo edition of Virgil's works was part of the collection of John Henry Nash (1871–1947), one of the most accomplished and famous printers in early-twentieth-century San Francisco. The book, which has illuminated initials throughout is now at the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and it is bound in green morocco with gilt tooling and goffered edges.

Octavo code: virver