



Mario Biagioli (1955–2025)

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Last year, the community of scholars devoted to Galileo and his world lost one of its most influential participants with the passing of Mario Biagioli. Born in Prato, where he received his Diploma di Maturità Classica from the Liceo Ginnasio Cicognini (1974), Mario followed Galileo’s path by entering the Italian university system, studying computer science at the University of Pisa for three years before his father insisted that he work in the family business. *Industrie Biagioli* continues to produce *tessuti non tessuti* (non-woven fabrics) and reflects the enduring role of textiles in the Pratese economy but Mario’s intellectual passions eventually called him back to more academic pursuits. Mario never wrote a poem against wearing academic robes, but shared Galileo’s iconoclastic love of institutions of learning. As his UC Davis colleague Daniel Stolzenberg put it, he had a very Realpolitik view of science and academia, which was the heart of his brilliant historical insights, while being utterly devoted to scholarship and academic life in a genuine and uncynical way.

Mario moved to the US to study photography and visual studies at the Rochester Institute of Technology (MFA, 1984), where his interest in the history and philosophy of science grew, leading him to study in this field with his mentor John Heilbron and philosopher Paul Feyerabend at the University of California, Berkeley (PhD, 1989). There he encountered the new interdisciplinary work being done on Italian Renaissance patronage and cultural production under Randolph Starn’s mentorship. For those of us who went to graduate school with Mario – and in Paula Findlen’s case recall him sketching the basic idea of *Galileo, Courtier: The Practice of Science in an Age of Absolutism* (1993) on a

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blackboard during Heilbron's Scientific Revolution seminar in 1986 under John's somewhat skeptical gaze – this stimulating intellectual environment helped incubate Mario's delightfully unorthodox and powerful vision of Galileo as a scientific actor navigating and shaping the world of politics and knowledge. It seemed fitting that when he first began to teach at UCLA, as Visiting Assistant Professor in 1988–89 and then on the regular faculty after receiving his PhD, he found an apartment near Venice Beach. Galileo would have approved.

Navigation was not only a metaphor for Mario, but a way of life as a sailor. During his doctorate, he successfully filed a patent for the masting of sailboats (EP0321425A1), accompanied by twenty-two diagrams of the invention. This patent presaged his later interests in intellectual property, material culture and the visual studies of science, which form some of the key themes of *Galileo's Instruments of Credit: Telescopes, Images, Secrecy* (2006). This second book on Galileo explained how the Italian philosopher moved between different courtly, academic, religious and artisanal economies of credit, mirroring Mario's uncanny ability to reinvent himself as an STS scholar, a professor of law, or an expert on computer science in Russia.

Al Van Helden recalls hearing Mario give an early paper about how court culture influenced Galileo's science and then inviting him to Rice University after *Galileo, Courtier* appeared in 1993, winning over everyone with his talk. In the morning, Mario "rode" with Al and his friends on their daily ten-mile breakfast bike ride, resourcefully, on in-line skates. Always fun, Mario was ever something of a streetfighter. Around this time, he wanted to move to Massachusetts to be near his son Gabriel. His application for a position in the History of Science at Harvard encountered certain obstacles: a contagious skepticism about his entire approach and harangues devoted to particularly controversial arguments. Ever the strategist, he was nimble enough to counter, contain, and charm away most of this resistance, and he got the job. Did he get the job done? Yes! While *Galileo, Courtier* still has its critics, Mario's approach to the practice of science in an absolutist culture transformed the field. We remain indebted to him and wish he were still with us.

Jessica Riskin's first memory of Mario is at a conference. From the back of the room where he stood leaning nonchalantly against the wall, he called out showstopping questions in his gorgeous accent with a wry smile and set the room buzzing. In edited volumes, such as *Nature Engaged* (2012), which he co-edited with Riskin and dedicated to John Heilbron, he used humor and the lightest touch to cajole and inspire the contributors, turning the collective project into a lively conversation. At dinner among friends and colleagues, he lent a dimension of elegance and warmth just by his presence (his experimental cooking in graduate school is well remembered for its delicious successes and occasional technicolor failures – a vibrant beet sauce better photographed than ingested!). Many a graduate student learned elegant and simple Italian cooking as well as Bourdieu from him. Mario knew how to be brilliant, rigorous, and funny all at once, and – most importantly

– he was always gracious: even when Massimo Mazzotti ground his sailing boat into a sandbank off the coast of Boston. The boat barely made it back, but Mario could not stop smiling, as he found the whole thing hilarious. Throughout his career, he showed us that one could be a serious and committed scholar while retaining an ironic detachment and a sprezzatura that would always put things in perspective. Former students fondly recall his fierce advocacy which, in Dániel Margócsy's case, ensured that he did not sleep under a bridge in Utrecht when Harvard forgot to disburse his scholarship! To the field of history of science, his scholarship performed an essential public service, striking bold positions that got people talking and debating. Mario was the life of the party, and the party feels sadly quiet without him.

Among Mario's tricks was a kind of effortless action-at-a-distance. Take, for instance, his influence on a seminar room ca. 1995, the semi-dark setting for some pre-PowerPoint lecture on early modern art and astronomy that Eileen Reeves attended. There had been a little ritualized mudwrestling about exactly what any aesthetic effort might disclose, distort, or even contest about an evolving scientific discipline, to whom, and why. Suddenly someone asked if the speaker's argument was not an illustration of "what Mario Biagioli taught us in *Galileo, Courtier*." Alas, in his excitement the interlocutor referred either to "Mario Bigolo" – rhyming it with "gígolo" – or maybe to the apocryphal *Galileo Courtesan*. Something strange and smutty hung in the air, and yet no one laughed: it was a pertinent query, and one which the audience could and did pursue. Mario was not present at that gathering, and he isn't with us now, but his lessons are. His willingness to identify with precision the stakes and stakeholders of any contest, his insistence that obscurity, distance, delay and even ineptitude were potential resources, and above all the antic iconoclasm with which he treated our cherished Galilean myths, tidy theoretical models, and outworn dichotomies animate us still.

His vivacity was driven not by vanity but generosity; as Nick Wilding recalls, his mind was never at rest, but always playing, probing and exploring, shuttling ideas between disciplines and smuggling them over boundaries. This was the great challenge of *Galileo, Courtier*: to invite us to think freely, productively, heterodoxically; poaching, improvising and bricolaging ideas, methodologies, insights, into strange, new, occasionally enraging intellectual contraptions. Mario guided his students to treat the intellectual enterprise playfully, and not too self-seriously, as well: Elizabeth Yale remembers a formative moment in a seminar when, discussing the work of another brilliant historian of science, Mario declared that when he grew up, he wanted to write like that historian. The old adage that academics resemble their subjects has perhaps never been truer than Mario and Galileo, and Mario's Galileo was far more human and weird than the dogged and defiant hero he first encountered. He gave us an engaged and engaging experimenter, brokering, facilitating and meddling in sometimes vicious debates, manufacturing the conditions to test the tensile strength of social levers, learning by doing, failing, reconfiguring, adapting, lathing

his own tools of self-fashioning within unstable systems. And like Galileo, Mario's easy *ingegno* rendered him an instinctive gift-giver, spontaneous, and sparkling.

Unlike Galileo, Mario's gifts were not transactional, or rather, the currency in which he thrived was not political power but intellectual stimulation, which meant social life. There was something uncannily alchemical about his ability to transmute a student's footnote into the outline of a book, to breathe brilliance into the dim embers of colleagues' faltering efforts, with nothing owed in return but membership in a community of pleasure and refreshingly serious ideas. Fittingly for a scholar of intellectual property and authorship, his contributions are not limited to the works that bear his name, but are felt in the tendrils that bind together once disparate individuals wherever he encountered and engendered interest. This is qualitatively different from mere networking. Few thinkers could operate simultaneously in so many domains, not opportunistically but with serious wit, to show, say, how contemporary problems of scientific falsification illuminate and are rooted in early modern practice, or how crucial translation is to media and systems. Not just the dance of an ambitious courtier navigating a stagnant system, his unorthodox career moves worked to fuse, bridge, alloy and ally individuals, groups and fields into new forms, capable of making new kinds of knowledge. He also freely imparted to his students what he learned from the course he charted through academia, offering strategies for sailing through choppy seas and around submerged dangers as they built their careers, even for many years after they graduated.

Mario's long career teaching history of science, STS, and law began in the History Department at UCLA where he completed his first major study of Galileo. He subsequently taught in the Department of the History of Science at Harvard University, with a brief stint at Aberdeen. His colleague Katy Park fondly recalls Mario as a person of real integrity who made their time together in the Harvard History of Science Department rewarding, both personally and professionally. Mario then moved to the University of California, Davis where he founded their Center for Science and Innovation Studies and held a joint appointment in the School of Law, Science and Technology Studies, and History. Mario returned to UCLA in 2019, as Distinguished Professor of Law and Communication.

While Mario's scholarship and teaching expanded beyond the early modern period in the second part of his career, as he became more interested in contemporary questions of science, law, and intellectual property, he never left Galileo behind. As Matt Jones recalls, it was precisely his deep sense of the historical contingency of questions of genre, authorship, property and propriety in early science enabled and animated his extraordinary and transformative scholarship in intellectual property law. Indeed, his long-gestating article on Galileo's geometric and military compass, "Replicating Mathematical Inventions," appeared in *Perspectives on Science* in 2022 (30/3: 437–462). Many of us are grateful that we were able to spend time with him in February 2024 during a two-day workshop at the Stanford Humanities Center on Galileo's correspondence. The forthcoming book edited

by Paula Findlen and Hannah Marcus, *Reading Galileo's Letters: Experiments in Friendship, Knowledge, and Community* (University of Chicago Press, 2026) is dedicated to the memory of two passionate Galileo scholars, John Heilbron and Mario Biagioli.

Mario is survived by his wife, Kriss Ravetto-Biagioli, and his sons Luka and Gabriel. Testimony to his intellectual generosity and sociability is the extensive community of friends and scholars that also remain, a community that he delighted in teasing into being through conferences, publications and brilliant dinners around the world - spanning age groups, languages and specializations to bring people together with kindness, curiosity, humor and wit. Those ties still endure, binding his many students and colleagues, now infiltrated into journals, learning institutions, and the different cultures in which he moved both inside and outside of academia, which continue to come together in the constantly evolving spirit of his uniquely irreverent mixture of thinking, learning and scholarship. He would find this praise excessive, if not ridiculous, but we collectively bestow it upon him with affection, knowing that he enjoyed laughing as much as Galileo ever did.

In the spirit of Mario's own sense of playful seriousness, we conclude with an excerpt of a poem that Randy Starn wrote for Mario's 66th birthday:

Eppur si muove for Mario Biagioli

The tree fell,
 Truth to tell,
 None too soon,
 Because he could see it
 Coming down
 In Bishop Berkeley's town
 When he turned
 Galileo's cut-off finger
 into a middle finger's zinger
 for hagiography's Pure Science.
 As Galileo stopped the sun,
 The Biagio charmed mentors
 With Galileo's moves and moons
 For his patrons' swoons -
 And job lessons opportune.
 If Galileo had skis and bikes
 For darting and dodging
 He might have kept the pace;
 Better for him that for his crashes

He only served Arcetri-time in place.
Eppure Mario, even screwed tight bionic
Muove still, the tonic,
That he always took
Every few years or so
Across continents and seas,
Disciplines and dumpster deans,
Unconverted at Harvard,
Unmooing at Davis,
Mafia clean at Aberdeen,
Under cover at St. Pete
With Metrics everywhere to beat.