

Seraphinianus is that you can't read it. No one can, but that hasn't stopped people from trying.

"I must say that at the beginning, especially, writers were interested in my work; Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, Italo Calvino, all those people. They were my first fans," Luigi Serafini says from his studio in Rome, Italy.

"Their lives were writing pages," Serafini adds, "They were fascinated by something which cannot be read, so that's really funny."

Serafini, 72, began creating his Codex in the mid-1970s, very possibly under the influence of psychedelics or otherworldly forces. A cross between a field guide to alien flora and fauna and an assembly manual for bizarre biomechanical devices, it's like something you'd find on a shelf in Dr. Strange's library – an arcane artifact that's recognizably a book, just not one from our reality.

"I've been drawing since my childhood. My parents were worried because I was drawing all the time. Like a disease, drawing for me. I preferred making drawings rather than playing with friends," he says. "So drawing for me was better than talk. When I draw, I enter into another dimension."



Like a disease, drawing for me.

- Luigi Serafini

Though his images are often grotesque or disturbing, Serafini's vibrant colored pencils can render them soft and whimsical. He credits the decorative gothic painter Carlo Crivelli and the surrealists with informing his style. "I have many masters. I really believe in masters. Really, it's very difficult to say who was the master who really gave me more than others," he says.

Serafini, for his part, didn't exactly know what he was setting out to

do in creating the Codex.

"So I don't know why but at a certain moment in my life, I started making pages of the Codex," Serafini continues. "And I always tell this story: an old friend, he invited me to a movie. I answered to him, 'I can't because I'm making an encyclopedia.' But I didn't know why and what I was drawing."



(c) Luigi Serafini / Courtesy of Rizzoli New York

After a period of "two and a half years of drawing like a hermit" while wearing out the grooves of a vinyl copy of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" ("That was the soundtrack of the Codex. I almost broke it."), Serafini's publisher demanded he put his pencils down.

Color printing was quite expensive in the late '70s and Milan-based art publisher Franco Maria Ricci was a bit worried about putting out a nearly 300-page full-color book that was also unreadable. "I was afraid because I had too many drawings at that time," Serafini says. "So I was stopped by him. He say, 'OK, that's enough.'"

"So I surrendered," Serafini says. "I said, 'Okay, okay: I stop.'"

It was Ricci who came up with the idea of calling the work a Codex,

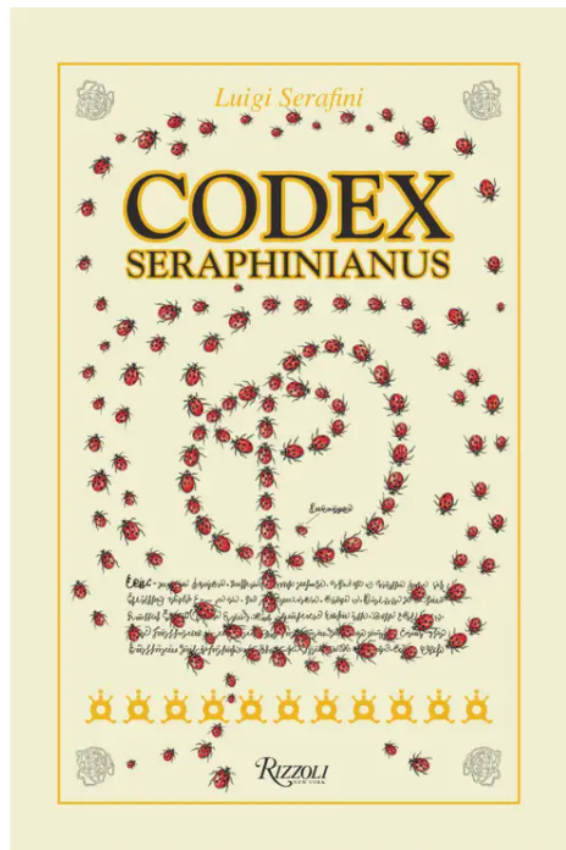
something that summoned a connection to [Leonardo da Vinci's legendary Codex Atlanticus](#).

Serafini liked the idea but didn't want to put his name on the book. Citing the mysterious Voynich Manuscript, an undeciphered text from the 15th century, Serafini saw himself as more of an unknown monk of the Middle Ages, transcribing messages from another world: "I really needed to be anonymous, I don't know why," he says.

They eventually compromised, with "Serafini" becoming "Seraphinianus" to sound more Latin. There was no real byline on those early printings, but Serafini hand-signed the first editions. Published in 1981 in Italy as a two-volume affair, the Codex was later reprinted as a single volume in the US, Germany, and the Netherlands. Few copies were made, and it remained out of print (and he remained mostly anonymous) until 1993, when Ricci published a new edition in France and Spain with a foreword from Serafini superfan Calvino.

Rizzoli published an expanded version in Italy in 2006, but it wasn't until 2013 that the book became available again in America. Its relative rarity until then only added to its mystique.

Released last month, [the new 40th edition](#), which at six pounds is fat enough to flatten a rat, contains 18 new plates. Because, as it turns out, Serafini never stopped drawing.



"40 years after, I keep drawing the pages of the Codex. It's a need for me, but I do other things also. I don't make only pages of the Codex. But I could make a page every day," he says.

Serafini agrees when I suggest the Codex is almost like a diary or precursor to visual blogs like Tumblr: "When I write the Codex, I use the Codex writing, I feel absolutely harmonious. When I write in Italian or other languages, using a known language, my writing is horrible. It's horrible, in terms of graphic, yeah? My real writing is the Codex writing."



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- Luigi Serafini

In an essay published as a foreword to the 1993 edition, Italo Calvino, who was no stranger to metamorphic fantasy, wrote: "In the universe that Luigi Serafini describes, I believe the written word came first: that flowing script penned with such precision, which we come so close to understanding but which nevertheless eludes our grasp."

The first writing I could find on the Codex was an essay in "Metamagical Themas: Questing for the Essence of Mind and Pattern," a 1985 book by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Douglas Hofstadter, who studies human consciousness and discoveries in math and physics.

I wrote Hofstadter – who since 1988 has been Professor of Cognitive Science and Comparative Literature at Indiana University – and asked if he had any thoughts on the Codex forty years later. He wrote a new essay in response:

"Way back in 1983 in a tiny Parisian Left-Bank librairie. I

randomly ran into this astonishing work, and after having feasted my increasingly bulging eyes on it for an hour or more, I finally succumbed, purchasing it for the astronomical price of \$200 (something like \$1000 in 2021) — and yet never once since then have I regretted that impetuous but irresistible decision. Even today, after almost four decades of knowing this work intimately, I remain in reverential awe of the wildly creative imagination of the mind behind it — the scintillating, bubbling, boiling, churning mind of Luigi Serafini.

The idea of producing, completely off the top of one's head, a richly illustrated two-volume encyclopedia definitively documenting a hypothetical world filled to the brim with bizarre blends and unfathomable paradoxes would have been hugely daunting to any artist in any land or era, but Serafini, who set himself that unprecedented challenge, carried it off with truly virtuosic panache and an amazing and mesmerizing coherency.

On top of dreaming up a magnificently mysterious curly script in which all the articles were written (readable only by inhabitants of that world, sad to say, yet beautiful to behold by outsiders like us earthlings), he painted hundreds of fantastic, surreal scenes that would have sent chills up and down the spines of such madly possessed magicians as Hieronymus Bosch, Giuseppe Arcimboldo, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte, and M. C. Escher. Without any doubt, Luigi Serafini belongs in the ranks of those immortal geniuses, each of whom was gifted with a unique brand of deliciously demonic inventivity. Serafini matches them all at every level and in every dimension. I tip my hat with boundless admiration to this marvelous thinker, miraculous creator, and magistral artist." — Douglas Hofstadter

Umberto Eco and Roland Barthes were unavailable for comment.

Serafini has never given his invented language a name but says it has no sound. However, his calligraphy and images share a similar power to wordless music.

"Music goes directly to the unconscious. When you listen to music, immediately [you feel] emotions. The musical connection with the unconscious."

When I tell him I can see the connection between the plates in the Codex and Mozart, he's reminded that the very first image he created for the Codex was made in the small village of Hallein, just outside the composer's hometown of Salzburg, Austria.

"I don't know why, it's maybe the first time I've made this connection, or maybe the second time," he recalls. "Because it's a memory of, I don't know, ages ago. I was in Salzburg one summer just to follow two or three operas of Mozart. And I don't know why but one day I saw that I was making a different drawing with colors. It was connected with Mozart, but I didn't know that [yet]."

When asked to elaborate, Serafini provides a possible (subconscious) explanation:

"'The Magic Flute,' it's interesting because it's not only music, but it's dramatic and it's funny. There are so many different aspects of mankind, all together. And so, it's kind of a concentration of all of the feelings of humanity," he says. "And 'The Magic Flute,' there is a connection with the world of birds, because the songs of the birds are for me absolutely like a language which comes from I don't know where."



(c) Luigi Serafini / Courtesy of Rizzoli New York

The trait that demonstrates the ultimate power of the Codex Seraphinianus — what makes it simultaneously modern and timeless — is how it speaks to the subconscious.

"Readers" (if you can truly call them that) might not understand what they're seeing, but on some level they experience a connection to something, even if it's an alien one.

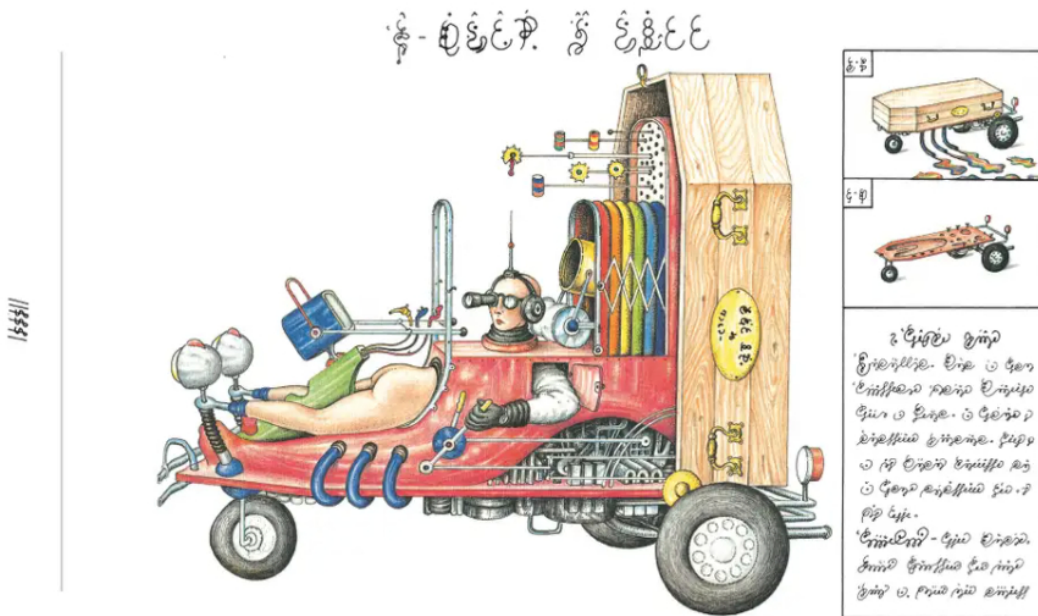
"I believe there is a collective consciousness. So maybe when I draw I connect myself with this," Serafini says. "And I'm happy about that because it means that I can be useful for people. Because I can help people with my drawings, because I can help to develop the unconscious of people, to recognize their unconscious, to create. Because something which I really like is the reaction of people."

He refused to tell me his favorite drawing in the Codex, but Serafini, who keeps up with technology and social media, said he found it interesting to discover images from the Codex people choose to get as tattoos: "It's not my favorite but the fish with the eyes, the fish eyes, the eyes fishes. That was really strange to see the drawings transform into tattoos," he says. "And I imagine that maybe now there is a Codex on the skin of the people that are walking around the world. And something I would like to do one day is to gather all these people with tattoos of the Codex and create a living Codex."



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- Luigi Serafini



(c) Luigi Serafini / Courtesy of Rizzoli New York

Serafini continues to work in mediums from sculpture to furniture design to architecture, theater scenery, and costumes. When I asked him if he's ever thought of combining his disciplines with music and creating a film or animated version of the Codex, he mentions his late friend (and another Codex fan), master filmmaker Federico Fellini.

"It's very strange that I have never done movies. [My] only possibility to get into the movie business was when Federico Fellini asked me to be young Fellini [in "Intervista"]. But I was so embarrassed so I didn't accept because I said it's not possible," he says. "Maybe it's something which will come soon. I never thought

says. maybe it's something which will come soon. I never thought of making a movie myself, or developing animations, but who knows? Maybe. I'm very young, I'm only 72, so we'll see."

As for now, Serafini has two or three ideas about what he'll do next and suggests a new edition of the Codex at some point in the future. When I mention a possible 50th anniversary edition with even more new drawings, he points out he's added new pages to the last three editions: "Every day I make an invisible page of the Codex. So every day is almost one page of the Codex, or every year, or whatever. So 40 years ago, it was page, I don't know, 300," he says. "My life, my years are almost pages of the Codex, you know?"

After telling the reclusive artist that I hope to speak to him again about a potential future version of the Codex, he insists that we must: "No, we have to," he says. "It's just the beginning of the conversation."

"All my life wishing. Life and Codex maybe are the same for me."

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