



ABOUT MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPTS

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What is an illuminated manuscript?

An illuminated manuscript is a book written and decorated by hand. Its name is derived from the Latin *manus* meaning hand and *scriptus* meaning writing. Manuscripts which were decorated with gold, silver or bright paint are called illuminated, from the Latin *illuminare* meaning to lighten or brighten up.

How were illuminated manuscripts made?

During the medieval period, books were written and decorated on parchment, a type of animal skin. Most parchment came from cow skins which were prepared through an elaborate process that involved soaking, scraping, drying and treating the skins. The finest quality parchment, noted for its thin and supple character, was called vellum. Once the necessary number of vellum skins were prepared and cut to size for pages, they were then marked along both margins with small pinholes. Using these holes as a guide, lines were then inscribed or drawn on the page to establish the layout for the scribes and decorators.

Following this, a calligrapher or scribe would write on the parchment with a reed or feather quill pen. In the early Middle Ages, the best quills came from several varieties of geese found off the coast of England. The scribe used an ink derived either from carbon soot or gall nuts. In one method, carbon soot from beeswax candles or linseed oil lamps was combined with gum arabic to produce an indelible black ink. In the other, gall nuts, the swollen nodules produced by certain insects living in oak trees, was mixed with iron salts, making an ink which eventually turned brown from exposure to the atmosphere.

While the main body of the text was usually written in black or brown ink, colored lines of writing, called rubrics (from the Latin *rubrica* meaning red), were most often, but not always, written in red. Rubrics served as instructional guides to the reader, providing descriptive headings and marking divisions in the text. Rather than write original works spontaneously onto the page, medieval scribes, more often than not, copied their work from model texts, called exemplars. When the text was completed,

the manuscript was decorated or illuminated in the blank spaces the scribe had intentionally left for the illuminator.

How were illuminated manuscripts decorated?

The illuminator, who was a specialist distinct from the scribe, had a repertoire of visual motifs which he or she employed to decorate the manuscript according to the nature of the text and the expense of the commission. Letters which began new chapters or important passages in the book could be decorated or historiated. Decorated letters were embellished with geometric, foliate, and zoomorphic designs, or with mixed elements of all three. Historiated initials, deriving their name from the French *histoire*, served as frames which enclosed small figural or narrative scenes.

To further enliven the text, the margins of the page were often adorned with decorated borders. Their decoration varied from small line drawings of a whimsical character, known as "drolleries," to elaborately painted floral patterns filling the entire border. In some instances, small scenes were incorporated into the border in the form of medallions called roundels or rectangular panels in the lower margin known by their French term, *bas de page*.

For more expensive commissions, paintings known as miniatures were often included in the decorative program. Miniatures are named not for their small size but from the Latin word *minium*, which is a red pigment used in paint. Miniatures enhanced the beauty of the book with narrative and symbolic scenes. Their functions ranged from illustrating the text and dividing the book into sections, to serving as devotional icons and aids to study and prayer. Within this context, a diverse range of regional and personal styles developed; making each manuscript unique in both style and content.

The paint used to decorate manuscripts and paint miniatures came from a variety of sources including oxidized metals as well as vegetable and animal matter in a tempera base. Vermilion was made from mercury and sulfur, while ultramarine blue, a pigment as expensive as gold, was made from crushing lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone imported from Afghanistan during the Middle Ages. Materials were very expensive, and sometimes substitutes for real gold were used.

What books were illuminated, where, and for whom?

Illuminated manuscripts exist in two categories; religious and secular. The religious manuscripts consist of books used during the services of the Roman Catholic Church and at home for personal devotion. Many of these service books included music in the form of Gregorian chants with their texts.

[Click here to see an example of a Music Manuscript leaf.](#)

In the early Middle Ages, lavish biblical manuscripts, called treasure books, were

richly illuminated in order to praise God, since they contained God's word. In the latter Middle Ages, deluxe personal prayer books, called Books of Hours, were the expressions of wealth and social status, like expensive jewelry and fine clothing. Secular manuscripts, books of literature, on various topics such as hunting and politics, exist in far fewer numbers than religious books, and consequently are often much more expensive.

Before the thirteenth century, medieval manuscripts were initially produced in monasteries by monks working in the scriptorium, or writing room where books were made. More than five hundred monasteries existed in England alone by the twelfth century, and a typical monastic library might possess over three hundred books in its library. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, the growth of towns and the establishment of universities in Paris, Oxford, and Bologna led to the rise of secular scribes and artists who served students and professors as well as the nobility.

Later in the fourteenth century a rise in literacy and the development of an upper-middle class created a large demand for illuminated manuscripts. The production of illuminated manuscripts of prayerbooks for personal devotions, called Books of Hours, increased dramatically.

How do manuscripts acquire value?

Medieval and renaissance illuminated manuscripts have never been without substantial value. Because of their striking beauty and great allure, many have been considered treasures from the time of their creation to the present day. In the inventories of kings and dukes who commissioned them, manuscripts were listed among their most precious objects with great care. Many illuminated manuscripts were made for or collected by the world's most powerful men and women, who possessed expensive and refined taste.

Almost ten centuries ago, lavishly illuminated biblical manuscripts or treasure books were made for the Carolingian and Ottonian emperors of Germany. These illuminated Gospels numbered among the most valuable items in the imperial treasury, where they were stored and displayed with other treasure to proclaim the wealth and status of the owner. It is no coincidence that one such book, the Gospels of Henry the Lion, sold at Sotheby's auction house in 1983 for almost 12 million dollars - the highest price ever paid for a work of art at the time.

Later generations of medieval royalty, especially in France, commissioned and collected a variety of illuminated manuscripts. Among the greatest of these medieval bibliophiles were Jean, Duke of Berry, and Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The libraries they formed have become legendary, and their contents now constitute the nucleus of many of the world's greatest institutions.

To the modern collector, illuminated manuscripts represent the finest examples of Western painting from the medieval period. Their jewel-like quality inspires a passion which transcends time. Such noted figures as John Pierpont Morgan, Collis

Huntington, Henry Walters, Robert Lehman, and John Paul Getty Jr. Have all avidly collected important medieval and renaissance manuscripts and miniatures.

Today, manuscripts are collected in the form of complete books, known as codexes, and as single leaves (individual pages) and cuttings (cut-out portions of pages). High quality examples are uncommon and of considerable value. The collecting of single leaves and cuttings dates back to at least the eighteenth century when many miniatures were separated from their texts to be appreciated and displayed independently as small works of art by celebrated collectors of paintings and drawings. In England, an import tax on books by weight encouraged the wholesale destruction of many large heavy Italian manuscripts, from which the illuminated initials were cut.

Illuminated manuscripts retain significance today not only for their great aesthetic appeal, but also for their depth as sophisticated cultural objects which may be appreciated in a great variety of ways. As great drawings, illuminated manuscripts represent some of the finest artistic production of the medieval period in its original unrestored state. This is in contrast to panel paintings of the same time which have often been heavily restored and cost several orders of magnitude more than manuscripts. Even textual pieces with minimal painting are highly valued as some of the best examples of the waning art of calligraphy. Stories of the sale and purchase of great manuscripts are among the most colorful and legendary in the history of the world's most renowned auction rooms.

Today, the supply of medieval and renaissance manuscripts is dwindling. Dr. Christopher de Hamel, Director of Sotheby's in London, estimates that approximately fifty to seventy percent of the medieval and renaissance manuscripts sold at public auction each year may never again be resold. It is a fitting and final tribute to the universal appeal of manuscripts that the highly refined aesthetic taste of the East, especially in Japan, has begun to recognize the value of these western treasures, and its collectors have aggressively entered the manuscript market.