

ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

By Crystal Toscano



The art of illuminated manuscripts began long before the formation of scriptoria, literally “places for writing.” The scriptoria was a room set apart in Medieval monasteries for book production. There, scribes wrote, copied, or illuminated books of religious and liturgical value. And while the image of monks bent laboriously over desks scribing by candlelight is a popular one, illuminated manuscripts actually had their beginnings in the classical world.

What are illuminated manuscripts? *These are texts written by hand on parchment or vellum scrolls or leaves, the latter often bound into volumes known as codices. The illuminations were hand-drawn illustrations or decorations that used precious gold and silver leaf to ‘illuminate,’ or give light to, the text, or less richly, by using colored pigments. Miniatures of landscapes or figural scenes, when included on the page, were the most important typographical element, and despite their name, miniatures could be full-page illustrations. Illuminated initials of the text’s first letter also were a significant element and could be ‘historiated’ (a story) or ‘inhabited’ (by people or creatures), or merely decorated. Other decorative elements completed the ornamentation, such as vegetative, floral or figural motifs, in the borders, margins and line ends. Illuminated manuscripts are often praised and admired today for their precise typography and renowned artwork.*

From scrolls to codices the decoration of texts can be traced as far back as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a funerary literary practice begun in 1550 BCE and continued for the next 1,000 years. References to illumination can be found in texts of Ancient Rome, such illumination being most likely copied from the Ancient Greeks. Some fragments of illuminated manuscripts exist from the Graeco-Roman period. However the earliest surviving substantial illuminated manuscripts are those from the early Eastern Christian church of the Byzantine Empire, from about 400, including an illuminated *Book of Genesis*, *Books of Gospels*, and also the botanical *Dioscurides* codex. Illumination of manuscripts in the West continued for the next 1,000 years, first in Ireland, then concurrently in Europe and England. The popularity of illumination reached its height in the mid-fifteenth century with mass production of *Horae*, or *Books of Hours*.¹

Illuminated or not, most Medieval manuscripts were written on parchment sheets made from animal skin (usually sheep or goat); vellum, made from calf skin, was used for more precious illuminated manuscripts. Paper (made from cotton or linen rags) had been developed in the West

since the ninth century but was used primarily by merchants and notaries, and later for correspondence from the 1300's. Following Christianization in the fourth century, the codex began to supplant the scroll, scribes preferring the codex as it was cheaper to make, smaller, and more portable to use.

Illuminated manuscripts hold a significant historical and artistic value all their own, representing a belief and a time period in which the making and reading of books was considered a divine practice, or *lectio divina*.² From the Early Christian period of the fourth century until the rise of universities circa 1200, the illumination of manuscripts centered largely in monastic scriptoria; full-scale secular production, in tandem with monastic production, began thereafter, both surviving until about 200 years after the invention of printing in the 1450s. Yet, whether one considered the writing and illuminating of manuscripts a holy practice or a livelihood, the creation of a manuscript was a wholly intensive endeavor, from the making of paper and inks to the organization of the text and the painstakingly intricate illustrations.

The History of the Book

To understand the history of illuminated manuscripts, one must understand the basics of book history. The earliest forms of communication were carved with rudimentary styluses into cuneiform tablets. These slabs of wet clay were the most popular "books" of their time, used mainly for keeping accounts. Written language was undeveloped and non-uniform at that time, employing symbols to convey only the most basic recordings of inventory and tallies. However, written language and its media began to advance slowly towards the format of the book known today. As early as 2600 BCE, papyrus was used in Egypt and then later spread to the Mediterranean and Europe.³ Much of early writing in the classical age was for commercial or administrative texts. On a smaller scale, legal and religious texts were created, and on an even smaller scale, academic, medical, and literary texts were written. Tablets gave way to scrolls with the invention of papyrus; scrolls gave way to codices by the fifth century. The codex comprised leaves bound together in the same format of books today.⁴ In circa 150 BCE, parchment (made from any dried, stretched, and treated animal skin) was invented. Parchment, or on a lesser scale the more costly vellum, became largely more popular for its availability and durability. Unlike the Nile-bound papyrus, parchment could be manufactured anywhere animals could be supplied. It was cheaper, more long-lasting, less susceptible to mold, and more durable, being less prone to tears or rips. It was forgivable; mistakes could be rubbed off with a pumice stone and reused. Even the thinnest vellum was opaque enough to write on both sides, which could not be said for papyrus.⁵ From its development 1,600 years before, it is remarkable of the book today that its technical format has remained the same.

¹ See Middleton, J. H. *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Mediaeval Times: Their Art and Their Technique*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1892), p. 31-44, 62-146.

² "Parchment and Paper: Manuscript Culture 1100–1500." In *A Companion to the History of the Book*, edited by Simon Eliot, by M.T. Clanchy. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007), p. 195.

³ Howard, Nicole. *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

BOOKS OF HOURS



Most general exposure to the written word was through the oral tradition during the classical period, and well into Medieval times. Public oratory, later Bible readings, and theater were often the only experience a common person might have of the written word. Aside from Medieval aristocrats however, the well-to-do merchant class might afford books, both classes commissioning the production of manuscripts for their possession and benefit. Books were a sign of prestige and wealth as well as education, and many with the funds to do so would become patrons to scribes and illuminators. The book's increasing popularity also led to an increase in literacy. Women in particular would own personal prayer books, usually small in size, called books of hours. These books of hours were often used by women to teach their children how to read.⁶ This also led to the writing of vernacular languages (circa the twelfth century) as opposed to the standard Latin for those who only understood their mother tongue.

The main text of the book of hours was the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin, a shortened version of devotions for the eight canonical hours. Having emerged as text in the tenth century as an ecclesiastical province, books of hours by the fourteenth century were being commissioned from private ateliers in enormous numbers by wealthy patrons, in particular France. Illuminated manuscripts of beauty and refinement were the pursuit of these important centers, Paris and Saint Denis among them being home to some of the finest illuminators and scribes at the time.⁷ The practice of elaborate illuminated borders survived there for more than 100 years, depicting colorful patterns of flowers, fruits, butterflies and insects, shells, reptiles, and other animals often accented with bright gold. Other notable decorations were blue, red, and gold diapers (repeating patterns that make a border or a background) and ivy-leaf outgrowths from initials.⁸ Of note too were caricatures of personality types, often depicted anthropomorphically, in the margins and borders of the text. These illustrations were religious, social or cultural commentary rarely expressed in other formats.

⁶ "Parchment and Paper: Manuscript Culture 1100–1500." In *A Companion to the History of the Book*, edited by Simon Eliot, by M.T. Clanchy. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007), p. 195.

⁷ Middleton, J. H. *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Mediaeval Times: Their Art and Their Technique*. (Cambridge: University Press, 1892), p. 129.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 131; 135.



Leaf with an Anthropomorphic Creature Inhabiting a Foliate Border from a Book of Hours

France, ca. 1440; 130 x 100 mm; black, red inks with red, blue, green pigments and gold leaf on vellum; written in Latin in the Gothic style.



Leaf with an Anthropomorphic Creature Inhabiting a Foliate Border from a Book of Hours

France, ca. 1440; 130 x 100 mm; black, red inks with red, blue, green pigments and gold leaf on vellum; written in Latin in the Gothic style.

MANUSCRIPT LEAVES OF BOOKS OF HOURS FROM THE HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY COLLECTION



Leaf with a Floriated Border from a Book of Hours

France, ca. 1460; 121 x 89 mm; black, red inks with blue, green, red pigments and gesso & gold leaf on vellum; written in Latin in the Gothic book hand (also *textualis/blackletter*).



Leaf with a Miniature of the Virgin from a Book of Hours

France, ca. 1490; 159 x 108 mm; black, red inks with blue, red, pink, green pigments and gold leaf on vellum; written in Latin in the French Gothic *bâtarde* style.

The History of Calligraphy

Calligraphy (from the Greek for “beautiful writing”) in the Western world has advanced by finding simpler, more standardized forms of letters; this way, a scribe could write fluidly, with less strokes and pen lifts to achieve better legibility. Calligraphy also evolved into quicker and more precise writing using better handwriting instruments: first the flatbrush and then later a reed or quill sharpened to a wedge-shaped or flat point.⁹ It was using this latter instrument that Romans developed the square capital, or *capitalis quadrata*. The difficulty of writing the strict straight lines of this form led to the formation of italic, or slanted letters. The italic form not only eased the process of writing, but also conserved space on expensive and rare vellum.¹⁰ A rounded form of lettering, the Roman *uncial*, was soon developed afterwards. The *uncial* form, with its sans serif attributes, was also quicker to write. This form led to the *half-uncial* or *semi-uncial*. The *half-uncial* had ascending and descending letters and was written perpendicular to the line, much like today’s lowercase writing.¹¹ After the fall of the Roman Empire, the uniformity of calligraphy in the West suffered. It wasn’t until Charlemagne ordered the revision of Church books in 789 that there was again a standard text.¹²

The *Carolingian* or *Caroline minuscule* was an even truer ancestor to the lowercase than the *half-uncial*. This was a small, rounded, and wide letter with ascending and descending attributes. Another similarity was the form’s majuscules, or capitals, that often began paragraphs, sections, and/or sentences. The *Carolingian minuscule* also introduced more punctuation and arrangement to text than there was ever before; in earlier writing there was little if any punctuation and arrangement. This form was dominant and widespread not only in France but in the whole of Europe during the tenth century.¹³ However, the popular Gothic letter emerged in the eleventh century. Called *Textur* in Germany, *lettre de forme* in France, and more commonly *blackletter* in England, the Gothic letter leaned toward even smaller and more condensed writing, and more importantly a sameness of letters. The *rotunda* form, a rounder form of *blackletter*, was developed in Italy and Spain.¹⁴

⁹ Chappell, Warren, and Robert Bringhurst. *A Short History of the Printed Word*. (Point Roberts, WA: Hartley & Marks Publishers, 1999), p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

ANTIPHONALS



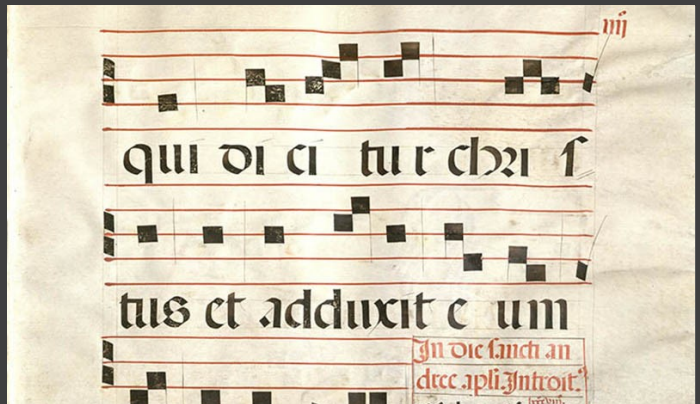
The earliest musical notation books for liturgical use were typically small. With time, reading music became widespread and popular; for this reason the size of the books increased, allowing for choirs to read and sing instead of just one or two cantors.¹⁵ The singing of these antiphons (psalms, chants, and other religious texts) during religious services is perhaps one of the earliest Western liturgical practices. Yet most antiphonals (written books of antiphons) are no older than the Carolingian era, though few do exist before the time of Pope Gregory I.¹⁶ Only by the mid-thirteenth century were antiphonals common enough that many influential religious orders decided to standardize musical notation.¹⁷ Prior to then, the shapes of notes, ligatures and number of lines varied by era and place. Classical punctuation marks, called *neumes*, instructed the melody of each syllable.¹⁸ The introduction of horizontal lines and clefs by Guido d'Arezzo in the early eleventh century made it possible to instruct pitch as well.¹⁹ The religious orders of the thirteenth century sought to continue accuracy and standardization. They regularized musical notation to four lines and imposed strict rules of copying and checking work. No notation was to be altered and antiphons would be checked by singing the entire manuscript sometimes multiple times.²⁰



Leaf with Large Initials from an Antiphonal

Spain or Italy[?], ca. 1500; 591 x 432 mm; red, black inks with red, blue, green pigments and gold leaf on vellum; written in Latin in the Gothic style with rotunda attributes.

ANTIPHONAL MANUSCRIPT LEAVES IN HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS



Leaf with Dual-Function from an Antiphonal

Spain, ca. 1550; 550 x 390.25 mm; red, black inks with blue, red pigments on vellum; written in Latin in the Gothic style.

¹⁵ "The Rimini Antiphonal." In *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage in Honour of Margaret M. Manion*, edited by Bernard J. Muir, by Stinson, John. (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 68.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67-8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

References

Chappell, Warren, and Robert Bringhurst. *A Short History of the Printed Word*. 2nd ed. Point Roberts, WA: Hartley & Marks Publishers, 1999.

Howard, Nicole. *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.

Middleton, J. H. *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Mediaeval Times: Their Art and Their Technique*. Cambridge: University Press, 1892.

"Parchment and Paper: Manuscript Culture 1100–1500." In *A Companion to the History of the Book*, edited by Simon Eliot, by M.T. Clanchy. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007.

"The Rimini Antiphonal." In *Reading Texts and Images: Essays on Medieval and Renaissance Art and Patronage in Honour of Margaret M. Manion*, edited by Bernard J. Muir, by Stinson, John. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 2002.

