

A Quick Tour of Manuscript Books

RALPH STANTON articulates what's known about the now-pricey productions that predated printed works—and divulges where they can be seen in the flesh (as it were).

THE FAMILIAR IMAGE of a monk in a medieval monastery working patiently on a manuscript book is misleading. In reality, most manuscripts from the Middle Ages were the stuff of ordinary life: contracts, court judgments, letters, indentures. Most of these documents have been lost, although some survive in archives. Meanwhile, manuscript books are found in the best libraries and in some museums. Occasionally a few appear on the antiquarian book market, while outstanding examples find their way to the great auction houses. Some were the texts of important works, and a portion of these received the attention of the illuminators and binders whose skills with leather, rare paints as well as gold and silver created works of great beauty, and cultural and monetary value.

The best manuscript books were expensive to produce. They required months or even years of labour to write and illustrate, and they were made from animal skin that is itself expensive in comparison to paper made from vegetable matter. Our present view of the manuscript book is probably distorted, since the more valuable and hence treasured examples likely have a higher survival rate due to less use and greater care than the more humble examples.

AN OBSCURE HISTORY

It is safe to say that the richly illuminated manuscript book was made for a religious or secular elite. These books were symbols of status, gifts to important visitors or the

currency of diplomatic exchange. They also served as ceremonial items for use in important churches, cathedrals and monasteries; facilitated the entertainment or personal devotions of aristocrats; and functioned as vessels of knowledge for established scholars and rich collectors. Priests working in smaller churches and students or younger scholars used the more humble examples.

Of all the forms that the book takes, the manuscript codex is the most difficult to know anything about. The expert in printed books can rely on set styles based on European historical periods and national or regional factors, as well as the established styles of individual presses. Would-be connoisseurs of manuscript books—produced mainly from about 400 CE until the 16th century—face a world far more difficult to understand. They must contend with widely varying styles of illustration and handwriting, diverse production locations, and the rarity of the books themselves (it is difficult to learn about something when you have difficulty seeing the real thing).

During the second half of the 15th century, printed books established a reputation as viable, and far cheaper, commercial products, and the manuscript book began to decline in prestige and value. Not until the 19th century and the emergence of the Gothic Revival did its fortunes reverse.

Today, a modest, un-illustrated medieval manuscript book may sell in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and competition to



purchase these treasures is often fierce. Where people of fairly modest means in the 19th century could aspire to collect manuscript books, the best collectors might do today is gather a few manuscript leaves, for which there is an active market.

AROUND THE WORLD OF MANUSCRIPTS

Not so long ago it was necessary to travel far and wide to see illuminated manuscripts, and as often as not the item on display was a reproduction and not an original. Digitization now allows us to see some of the greatest works of medieval art on home computers. However, while reproductions on paper or on computers are often extremely good, they cannot replace the experience of seeing the original, especially in the case of illuminated manuscripts, where the play of light on gold or silver illumination provides a dynamic, sensory experience.

In North America, one of the best places to see medieval manuscripts is the Getty Center in Los Angeles, which often displays a portion of its very substantial collection. The Huntington Library in San Marino near Los Angeles holds a very special manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*—the *Ellesmere Chaucer*, produced around 1400. The New York Public Library has about 300 medieval manuscripts, but this collection is eclipsed by the 1,100 manuscript books at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York. The collection at the Morgan is wide-ranging and comprises Middle Eastern as well as European works, including the *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* and the celebrated *Hours of Cardinal Alessandro Farnese*, an exceptional Italian Renaissance manuscript.

Many of the best collections are of course in Europe, where almost every national library holds important works, and a number of university and special libraries hold outstanding examples. Smaller towns like Trier, Rouen, Utrecht and Sienna have university or municipal libraries with fine examples, and you may find the librarians there more receptive to a visit beyond the exhibition case. If you have any connections with a cathedral library, these are places where the public does not often go and where treasures appear in a setting often as old as the manuscripts themselves.

The Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris has an outstanding collection and good



The beginning of The Knight's Tale in the Ellesmere Chaucer.

exhibition facilities, but smaller libraries like the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève should be on your list too. The great monastic libraries of France were nationalized and centralized after the Revolution, and this explains in part the strength of their collections. The Musée Condé at Chantilly, north of Paris, holds the *Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry*, famous for its splendid illustrations of life in medieval France. The château museum displays a copy but its website (domainedechantilly.com) shows an excellent digital version, far more complete than the paper reproduction published in 1969.¹

Turning to Britain, the British Library holds one of the world's greatest collections of these books, and the library has instituted a project to digitize its collection (see www.bl.uk/manuscripts). The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is also a good source. The various libraries at Cambridge and Oxford universities

1. *The Très Riches Heures of Jean, Duke of Berry* (George Braziller, 1969).

are important, none more so than the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

In Germany, the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich has outstanding holdings and the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbüttel is worth visiting, as it is one of the oldest libraries in Europe.

The Vatican Library (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana), the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan and the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence are libraries with worthwhile collections of Renaissance manuscript books. This last flowering of manuscript books came after the advent of printed books, its books undertaken for wealthy collectors who still wanted to honour the old techniques but whose reading and aesthetic taste was distinctly humanist in orientation.

In Western Canada, most university and public libraries will have reproductions of medieval manuscripts, some available for circulation, but the more expensive examples will be in their rare books areas. They will also often have examples of individual leaves and the occasional complete manuscript book.

If this subject interests you and you want to know more, then Christopher de Hamel's *History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (2nd revised

edition, 1994) is an excellent place to start. To understand the technical side of these books, try Michelle P. Brown's *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* (first edition, J. Paul Getty Museum, 1994). Medieval book illumination is explained by Jonathan Alexander in *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work* (Yale University Press, 1992), while the changes brought on by the Renaissance are explained in an exquisite exhibition catalogue titled *The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination, 1450–1550* (Prestel Publishers, 1994).

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~ Ralph Stanton is the former head of Rare Books & Special Collections at the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and a director of the Alcuin Society. This is the second in a series of occasional columns.

✂ The art of illuminating manuscripts is not dead! See Jonathan Shipley and Peter Mitham's article on Kelly Houle's production of an illuminated edition of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* in *Amphora* 160 (Spring 2012).

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The Alcuin Society wishes to welcome the following new members:

Barbara Galeski, Nanaimo, BC

Sarah Sutherland, Vancouver, BC



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