



Give AND YE SHALL Receive

GIFT GIVING IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Even more so than today, in the Middle Ages gift exchange was the social interaction that helped people define and express their relationships to family and friends, to acquaintances and strangers, to God and the church. This exhibition examines the gift-giving culture of the Middle Ages as depicted in illuminated manuscripts. Devotional texts feature models for giving, including such exemplars as the three Magi presenting precious gifts to the Christ child and the acts of generosity found in the lives of the saints. *Give and Ye Shall Receive* also explores giving in medieval society, for example, when individuals gave alms to the poor or when rulers presented precious objects to gain favor with their friends and foes. Vitaly important, too, were the wealthy patrons who commissioned luxury manuscripts and dictated their appearance and content. The medieval book itself was a particularly powerful present, an object filled with words and images meant to edify and flatter the recipient and one that solidified political and social relationships.

Illuminated manuscripts are made of parchment (specially prepared animal skin) painted with tempera and often gold leaf. Because these materials are sensitive to light, the books on view in this exhibition are displayed at low light levels.



Models for Giving

Giving freely to those who are less fortunate is one of the central tenets of medieval and modern-day Christianity. Medieval texts and images presented many models of generosity for Christians to follow. Saints' lives, for example, were filled with stories of holy men and women who gave up their personal possessions, whether numerous or few, to support the needs of others. The moral of these stories is often that those who give generously reap great rewards in return. Manuscript images depicting monetary donations as well as food and clothing given to the poor and the infirm provided a visual guide for proper Christian behavior.

The Culture of Giving

Gift giving permeated all aspects of medieval life, including the economy, politics, spirituality, and even the act of book-making itself. Our understanding of this culture is informed, in part, by the images of donation and patronage found in medieval manuscripts. Scenes of well-off individuals giving charity to the needy demonstrate the key role of such donations in helping an economically diverse world function smoothly. Political leaders are shown changing the course of events by currying favor through a well-considered gift. Sometimes illuminated manuscripts depict an author, scribe, or artist presenting his or her book to a royal or ecclesiastical patron who sponsored the creation and copying of the text. In each case, these scenes display the often-complex dynamic between the gift giver and the recipient in the medieval world.

Patrons and Their Books

Today the role of the artist is regarded as paramount in the inception and creation of a work of art; however, in the Middle Ages the person commissioning an object or book was more instrumental in shaping its appearance and content. Owners oftentimes had their books personalized with their portraits, their coats of arms, their mottoes, or symbols representing them. These prominent displays of ownership endured for generations as the book was passed down within a family. When the manuscript was later given or transferred to unrelated individuals, the new owners might themselves add to and embellish these volumes with marks of their possession.

The Book as Gift

Expensive, infinitely customizable, and highly portable, illuminated manuscripts were ideal gifts in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. These treasures were frequently offered by patrons to churches and monasteries, presented from one secular ruler to another, and given between husband and wife or from parent to child. Gospel books, books of private prayer, and family genealogies were some of the most common types of books given as gifts. With their combination of carefully handwritten script and vibrant images painted using precious materials, illuminated books had the power to communicate the wealth of the commissioner and convey meaning to the recipient, whether related to spiritual guidance, intellectual knowledge, or love.

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