

Illuminating WOMEN IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

Modern images of medieval women include stereotypical figures such as damsels in distress, mystics in convents, female laborers in the field, and even women of ill repute. In reality, however, the lives of women in the Middle Ages were nuanced and varied, reflecting diverse geographic, financial, and religious circumstances. The illuminated manuscripts in this exhibition reveal the many facets of and attitudes toward medieval womanhood, including the daily life of women, the romantic role of lovers, and the powerful social and political functions of wives and patrons. Drawn primarily from the Getty Museum's permanent collection, *Illuminating Women in the Medieval World* also presents the biblical heroines, female saints, and pious nuns who embodied ideals of proper behavior, as well as their counterpoints—figures such as Eve and other women who strayed from the path of righteousness.



MEDIEVAL IDEALS OF WOMANHOOD

For medieval Christians, the Virgin Mary was the ultimate female archetype. Her obedience to God, conception of Jesus without sin, and love for her son from his childhood through his death on the cross all set examples for the faithful. Female figures from the Old Testament also appear frequently in illuminations. Demure and obedient yet often powerful and strong-willed, many of these women leveraged their sexuality to catch men off guard while still maintaining their chastity and dignity. Early Christian female martyrs, who were brutally tortured for refusing to worship pagan gods or marry outside their faith, set examples as women who were heroic in their piety. Similarly, female saints from the recent medieval past provided contemporary exemplars for women (and men) to follow.

WARNINGS TO MEDIEVAL WOMEN

Medieval artists and thinkers used the Judeo-Christian story of the creation of the world to reinforce negative conceptions about women. In these traditions, Adam and Eve were tempted to partake of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, giving rise to original sin. In the Middle Ages, authors and theologians largely blamed Eve for this indiscretion; as a result, women were thought by many to be weak in character, unable to select the best course of action, and in need of guidance. Many stories and images of errant women, such as Eve, were likely intended for male readers and a male gaze; thus, they often reveal misogynist attitudes. The direct and dramatic illuminations in this gallery served as visual warnings that prompted the medieval reader to pause and consider his or her own behavior.

MEDIEVAL WOMEN IN DAILY LIFE

Images in illuminated manuscripts attest to women's active participation in most aspects of medieval life. Many women followed a path from courtship to marriage and from childbearing to child-rearing. In the ruling classes, wives also performed an important political role as negotiators, and they cemented political and economic relationships by marrying. Women of the lower and middle classes harvested crops, raised livestock, and made and sold crafts, while upper-class women drove the market for luxury goods. Other women took religious vows, and it was in convents that female literacy was first taught and encouraged, eventually spreading to the royalty, the nobility, and the middle class.

MEDIEVAL WOMEN IN THE ARTS

Books of hours were the most common type of manuscript owned by medieval Christian women. They were considered appropriate possessions for wealthy women and proof of individual piety. Many female owners chose to have their portraits painted into these heavily illuminated books; they usually appear kneeling in prayer before the Virgin or a patron saint.

Compared to male authors and artists, relatively few women composed texts or painted images in medieval manuscripts. Nevertheless, some records survive of women's work as artists in bookshops and ateliers and as authors in the European courts. Other women likely trained in manuscript workshops run by their fathers or husbands, and convents included scriptoria (copying rooms) where nuns illuminated the manuscripts they used in their daily prayer and devotion.

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