BLURRING THE LINE

MANUSCRIPTS IN THE AGE OF PRINT

Throughout the Middle Ages (about 500–1500), texts and images were disseminated primarily through handwritten and hand-drawn materials—at least among elite members of society. The print revolution that swept Europe in the fifteenth century made it possible for a wider audience to encounter and even own texts and images for the first time. Yet the new medium did not immediately supplant handmade production; instead, there was a rich cross-fertilization between mechanical innovation and painterly tradition. Books sometimes contained both painting and print, codices were printed to look like hand-painted manuscripts, and painted compositions used prints as models. In a kind of backlash to the explosion of printed media, the art of manuscript illumination reached new heights of aesthetic achievement and pictorial invention. The masterpieces on display, both printed and illuminated, reveal the convergence of technology and artistry during the Renaissance.

Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

The pages of manuscripts are made of parchment (specially prepared animal skin), painted with tempera. Because these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.

WHAT WAS "PRINTING TECHNOLOGY" IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES?

Imagine a world in which you have never held a book or an image in your hands, much less owned one. Now imagine that someone hands you a small picture in black ink, its outlines forming a familiar subject such as the face of Christ or an event from his life. But this image is different: it belongs to you. You are not only able to hold it, you can take it home. You might put it on your wall or add color using simple natural pigments. It is difficult to imagine what this felt like to people in fifteenth-century Europe, when the printing of images increased rapidly.

Books produced from about 1450 to 1500, when the medium of print was in its infancy, are called incunables, from the Latin word for cradle. While many of them incorporated images made with simple stamp-like woodblocks, other techniques, such as engraving, were also used in early books.

WHAT DID "REPLICATION" MEAN IN THE MIDDLE AGES?

As a modern viewer, you are no doubt familiar with images that are infinitely reproducible, perhaps originating as a digital file that is printed or scanned, then copied in the hundreds with the touch of a button. To medieval viewers, the printed image was unlike anything they had ever encountered.

In a world before print, images were copied manually in books and on panels by skilled artists, inevitably introducing variations. Exact replication was sometimes associated with divine intervention, a miraculous transfer of likeness through a saintly intermediary, recounted in legends such as Saint Luke's portrait of the Virgin Mary. The printed image opened new and more straightforward possibilities for exact replication while drawing heavily on medieval conventions of composition, such as iconography, two-dimensionality, added color, and portable size.

HOW DID PRINT AND MANUSCRIPT INTERACT?

Major shifts in the dominant modes of media are never straightforward or linear. Do you usually get your news and entertainment digitally? Or do you like the feel of newsprint, the satisfaction of opening a bound book in a well-designed jacket, the sensory experience of holding a glossy magazine? In our digital age, older analog media coexist with newer technologies to disseminate information and provide entertainment.

The transition from manuscript to print was similarly complex. Those with the means to do so continued to commission luxury handmade books, and printers recognized the importance (and market value) of enhancing their new products by imitating the craftsmanship of a form associated with wealth and prestige. Both consumers and professional artists added color to otherwise monochrome printed compositions. The boundaries between media blurred. The late fifteenth century saw an expansion of pictorial literacy as artists exploited the possibilities offered by both traditional and innovative technologies of art making.

DID PRINT CHANGE THE WORLD?

Did the internet change the world? Most people with regular access to it would probably say yes. But what kinds of information and images do you look for online? Often, the same material previously available only via newspapers, magazines, film cameras, handwritten letters, and postcards. The methods and speed of delivery have changed, but we rely on the internet for some of the same things we used to seek out in other ways.

The spread of print in Western Europe had an enormous impact on the way people encountered and interpreted information, in both texts and images. Print has at times been celebrated as the engine of the Renaissance, as if fundamentally opposed to the older system of manuscript illumination. Yet the most popular early printed works (devotional imagery, pilgrimage routes, texts with information about the world and its inhabitants) drew upon centuries of literary and pictorial tradition. A product of the medieval world, print was a medium that grew and changed along with the people who created and consumed it.

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