

Touching the Past

The Hand and the Medieval Book

In the Middle Ages, the hand (*manus* in Latin) had special status. It was considered the servant of the body and the primary organ of touch. Fingers had exceptional powers of expression and were even said to speak. *Manuscript* is derived from the Latin phrase meaning “handwritten” (*manu scripti*). The word reminds us that medieval books were made entirely by hand, for hands. Reading was and remains a manual activity. We “thumb through” a book, a process involving touch as much as vision.

Precious historical artifacts, manuscripts preserve some of the finest examples of medieval art. As art objects, they are at present only seen behind glass, removed from the realm of touch. It is easy to forget that their lavishly illuminated pages were once turned, stroked, stitched, and sometimes even sliced by generations before us. This exhibition explores manuscripts as tangible, tactile objects that invited touch and were handled—reverently, carelessly, obsessively, and critically—by medieval audiences.



Manufacture



Pippin: What are the hands?

Alcuin: The body's workmen.

—Alcuin of York (about 735–804), *The Debate between the Princely and Noble Youth Pippin and Alcuin the Scholar*

The beauty of medieval manuscripts often obscures the story of their arduous making. Faced with the finished product, it is easy to forget that the parchment pages, inks and pigments used for writing and painting, even the wooden boards, string, and leather straps for binding were all products of backbreaking, painstaking manual labor. A cooperative enterprise, making a book took many craftsmen. Though the handiwork of an individual is often difficult to discern, a closer look sometimes reveals the telltale tendencies of an individual scribe or the errors of a particular illuminator.

Manipulation



Turn the pages slowly, and keep your fingers far away from the letters, for just as hail damages crops, so a useless reader ruins both writing and book.

—Florentius, a scribe (written 945)

Books engaged the body, especially the hand. Getting at a manuscript's contents required unfastening clasps, grasping tabs attached to the edges of pages, or lifting protective veils that covered illuminations. Some images were meant to draw the hand in, their meaning dependent on contact or manipulation. These encounters left marks—the grimy buildup of dirt on a page, a scribbled annotation, the loss of pigment where an illumination was reverently rubbed. These traces of touch show the many ways that medieval readers interacted with books.

Manus



*He winketh with the eyes, presseth with
the foot, speaketh with the finger.*

—Proverbs 6:13

The Middle Ages have been called a “civilization of gesture.” As early as the tenth century, novice monks learned systems of sign language through which they communicated while maintaining holy silence. Outside the abbey, the laity swore loyalty, denied charges, cursed, mourned, and married, all with their hands. Such gestures maintained their potency on the page, where hands, often exaggerated in size, were pictured. They point, pray, beckon, and bless, all the while directing the reader’s eye to important passages or helping a viewer navigate an image. Certain signs were symbolic, serving almost as words. Artists employed them as a sort of graphic shorthand, to visualize complex narratives and make their pictures talk.



It is estimated that a well-trained medieval scribe could write, on average, five or six words per minute. Inclement weather, however, chilled fingers and slowed even the most expert hand. It was likely that less writing was done during the cold, dark months of winter.



Many English words contain forms of the Latin for hand, *manus*, within them. *Manipulate* is either derived from the Latin *manipulus*, meaning “handful,” or *manipulare*, “to lead by the hand.”



Counting and even complex calculations were done with the fingers in the Middle Ages. The numbers one through ninety-nine were signed with the left hand and a hundred to 9,999 with the right. Larger numbers were expressed through extravagant gestures that involved the whole upper body.

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