

THINGS UNSEEN

Vision, Belief, and Experience in Illuminated Manuscripts



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Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

—Hebrews 11:1 (King James Version)

Medieval and Renaissance manuscript illuminators sought to convey spiritual experience through paint, ink, and gold. Drawn primarily from the Getty Museum's collection, this exhibition explores the innovations of artists striving to visualize the unseeable: miraculous encounters with the divine, grand revelations of the end of time, the intricacies of belief, and the intimacy of prayer. Rather than simply illustrating the otherworldly events described in sacred texts, these images communicate the elusive and ineffable nature of faith through rich materials and painstaking artistry.



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

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.

The first part of the Christian Bible consists of texts from the Hebrew Bible. Since the second century, it has been referred to by Christian writers as the Old Testament (Vetus Testamentum). Medieval Christians understood the Old Testament not only as a historical document, but also as a body of prophecy that foretold the coming of Christ. While some of the texts in this gallery were originally found in the Hebrew Bible, all the manuscripts on display were created by Christians during the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The accompanying labels present these objects in the context of the worldview held by the manuscripts' makers and owners. Thus, the earlier portion of the Bible is referred to here as the Old Testament.



ILLUMINATING VISIONS



In Christian scripture, personal visions of the divine (usually reserved for those chosen as leaders by God) offered promises of future blessings or warnings of impending devastation. Medieval and Renaissance artists, who faced the challenge of rendering these private moments of spiritual clarity for a broader audience, interpreted prophecies as dreamlike scenes or created intricate diagrams to depict complex revelations. These innovative techniques gave viewers access not only to a vision's content but also to the very sensation of receiving sacred revelation.

PICTURING BELIEF



As Church teachings developed over time, artists were called upon to convey complex doctrine through easily readable images. Representations of Christ, the Virgin Mary, or the Holy Trinity posed particular challenges for manuscript illuminators, who risked departing from religious tradition by merely changing the placement of one holy figure relative to another. Depicting lengthy biblical narratives—including humanity’s fall from grace and redemption through Christ—also required great ingenuity on the part of artists. Illuminators created visual formulas to condense such stories into single images, and they compressed other information—such as the genealogy of Christ—into miniatures, within initial letters, or on the margins of pages.

PAINTING PRAYER



Privately owned manuscripts often depict spiritual leaders such as King David or Christ in the act of prayer. By conveying the exchange between the physical and spiritual realms, from joyful Psalms to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, these works provided models upon which the owners and viewers of manuscripts could pattern their interactions with the divine. Illuminated books made for personal use also contain images meant to focus the reader's devotion. These visual cues represent subjects for prayerful reflection—such as the wounds of the crucified Christ—or act as memory aids to guide the faithful through a program of daily worship.

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