IN THE RENAISSANCE, ELABORATE CUSTOM-MADE ILLUSTRATED BOOKS WERE EXTRAVAGANT ONE-OF-A-KIND TREASURES THAT SPELLED LUXURY AND SOCIAL SUCCESS

How the Humble Book of Today Began as the Status Symbol of Yesterday

They were all the rage in Europe during the Renaissance. Their popularity spread across the continent and sprouted an industry of skilled and innovative artists who worked to feed the demand. The wealthy, royal, powerful, and ambitious clamored for personalized, custom-made versions. Much like the Lexus, the Berkin bag from Hermes, or Monolo Blahnik shoes, owning one meant that you had arrived. They were the status symbols of the day. They were exclusive. They were luxurious. They were illuminated books.

In the Renaissance, before the printing press made its appearance, books were written, decorated, and bound entirely by hand. They were precious commodities that only the rich and powerful could afford. The best artists were commissioned to illuminate these manuscripts, in the process producing some of the most beautiful works of art of the Renaissance. Many of the paintings depicted the wealthy and influential patrons in the company of great religious, historical, and mythical figures. Other personalized touches, such as the inclusion of coats of arms and mottoes, were added symbols of position and power. The ornate manuscripts were usually decorated with gold leaf, and the most luxurious examples contained precious gems in the binding, along with gold and silver metalwork. No expense was spared for these treasured books. They were meant to last for generations, as a testament to the wealth, taste, and status of the owners.

Handmade books of the Renaissance were markers of the cultural and social scene, documenting and reflecting the fashions and attitudes of the day. Some of the most beautiful books of this period were created between 1470 and 1560 by Flemish artists who worked -more-
under the patronage of the most powerful ruling families of Europe. The manuscripts they produced captured the material glamour of the European court ceremony with sumptuous colors and depictions of extravagant jewels and the finely woven brocades for which Flanders was famous. Flemish nobility were portrayed wearing the most desirable and opulent costumes, making lavish fashion statements that the rest of Europe would emulate. In *Alexander Takes the Hand of Roxanne*, an image from a book about the history of Alexander the Great made for the Duke of Burgundy, the artist not only paid great attention to the details of the magnificent court costumes, but also to the exquisite features of the noblewomen portrayed in this scene of a historic royal banquet. Much like the glossy magazines of today and the society photos that appear in them, Renaissance books documented a slice of the social scene for posterity.

More than just a symbol of wealth and social status, a luxurious Flemish manuscript was also a vehicle of politics and piety. The great manuscript illuminator Simon Bening was commissioned by a Portuguese prince to produce a book to justify his family's claims to power and territory. The *Genealogical Tree of the Kings of Aragon*, a leaf from the manuscript, traces the prince's family ancestry through other legitimized royal lineages, all the way back to Noah. Not only did the book accommodate a political goal, it also reflected the devout faith of the patron, and stood as a testament to the good character and nobility of the patron's family, reinstating their steadfast position at the top of the social ladder.

The beauty and glamour of Flemish manuscripts dominated Europe for nearly a century. The continent's nobility had long prized Flemish luxury goods such as tapestries, sculpture, metalwork, jewelry, and painting in part because of their association with the splendor of the Burgundian court. Flemish manuscripts and other Renaissance books held sway as highly sought-after prizes until the art of manuscript illumination declined following the rise of the printed book. But even as other symbols of wealth and power rose to take their place, the impact of Renaissance manuscripts was not forgotten. The pride of the artists' workmanship and the essence of the lives lived are forever locked within the pages of these rare treasures.

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