

REMEMBERING ANTIQUITY

The Ancient World
Through Medieval Eyes



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People in the Middle Ages saw themselves as the inheritors of a rich classical tradition. For over a millennium following the fall of Rome, antiquity was evoked, performed, and preserved through visual arts, ceremony, and manuscript culture. At the hands of scribes, many of the great works of Greek and Latin literature were copied, passing them on to posterity and providing a foundation for medieval scholasticism. For authors and artists alike, the process of historical remembering often involved embellishment or invention, as stories of ancient rulers and mythological heroes were employed and adapted for inclusion in Christian texts. Although the rediscovery of Greco-Roman art and literature has come to be associated with the Renaissance, particularly in Italy from about 1400 through the 1500s, antiquity was never forgotten. This exhibition, drawn largely from the Getty Museum's collections, explores the constant, iterative, and multivalent engagement of medieval people with the classical past.

THE LANGUAGE OF FORMS



The styles and motifs of classical art provided a rich vocabulary for medieval artists and patrons. The formal characteristics of ancient Latin script were often employed to imbue religious texts with the authority of imperial Rome. Ferocious beasts once associated with Greek and Roman myth came to carry specifically Christian meaning, symbolizing the struggle of mankind against sin. This section explores the fluidity of artistic forms from antiquity through the Middle Ages. Whether through quotation, emulation, transformation, or invention, the medieval world drew upon the classical, exploiting its expressive visual language.

TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE



The study of medicine and the natural world, based largely on classical sources, flourished in medieval universities. Latin translations of the writings of the Greek physician Galen (AD 129–about 216) and Arabic commentaries on other ancient medical texts shaped these disciplines throughout the Middle Ages. Medieval physicians saw the body as a microcosm of the physical universe. Their practice sought to counteract imbalances in the four humors (black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood), which were affected by such natural phenomena as the earth's climate, tides, and the position of celestial bodies.

HISTORY AND INVENTION



During the Middle Ages, history was seen as the unfolding of God's will over time, and great effort was made to align ancient historical accounts with the Bible. Medieval authors mined classical texts, which were seen not only as essential documents of the past but also as ideal tools for learning the grammar and rhetoric of Latin, the official language of the Church.

In their compendia of classical lore, medieval illuminators often updated the appearances of ancient figures, representing them in contemporary costumes and architectural contexts. Such artistic devices blurred the lines between antiquity and the medieval present, demonstrating how people in the Middle Ages viewed their culture as a continuation of the Greco-Roman past.

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