

PASSION

for Collecting

Manuscripts

The Getty Museum is among the few institutions in the United States that collect and regularly display illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages and Renaissance (about 500–1550 CE). Each of these books has a unique history, and clues in the objects themselves often provide tantalizing evidence of their meanderings through time. When the manuscripts were made, they were used and collected primarily by wealthy (especially male) European aristocrats as well as the powerful Roman Catholic Church and its members. From these origins, the volumes were passed down through families or institutions, dispersed to libraries, purchased by private individuals, or collected by museums.

In the past decade, Getty's Department of Manuscripts has been documenting the history of its collection of about 225 objects and publishing the findings online. The effort not only helps us confirm that the artworks were legally acquired but also increases our understanding of the appreciation for these books at different times. This exhibition celebrates that project by presenting some of the most intriguing stories behind these exceptional works.



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

Unless otherwise noted, all works in the exhibition are from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

The pages of illuminated manuscripts are made of parchment (prepared animal skin), tempera (pigment with egg white or gum arabic), and often gold or silver. Because some of these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.



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LIBRARIES

The practice of collecting books in libraries is nearly as old as the written word itself. In Europe during the Middle Ages, Christian monasteries and churches built up their collections for the use of priests, clerics, monks, and nuns. Lavish liturgical manuscripts were read aloud during religious services and were sometimes displayed to the public, while literary works and scientific treatises were copied to ensure the preservation and expansion of knowledge. Royal and aristocratic patrons of the era created libraries of manuscripts as a sign of wealth and status as well as for education, enjoyment, and spiritual devotion. In later centuries, state, university, and private libraries established manuscript repositories to preserve cultural heritage and to document historical events. Today, institutions like art museums collect illuminated manuscripts to serve as visual libraries of the past.

OWNER'S MARKS

Collectors of manuscripts often left evidence of ownership in the bindings, margins, flyleaves, and illuminations. As a way of laying claim to the work and to show pride of possession, they may have added their family's coat of arms, a portrait, or an identifying stamp or bookplate. The information furnished by such marks can help to reconstruct the manuscript's history from when it was made to the present.

In recent decades, with the availability of online sale catalogues, genealogical records, and databases, scholars are increasingly able to fill in the gaps regarding the movement of individual manuscripts. Each newly deciphered owner's mark helps shed light on the travels and travails of these objects. Because only a fraction of the total number of manuscripts from the Middle Ages have survived, any new finding about a single work makes a significant contribution to our knowledge of the past.



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COLLECTORS in the MODERN AGE

Although illuminated manuscripts have always been prized for their aesthetic appeal, the idea of collecting them as works of art or as financial investments developed long after the Middle Ages. Starting in the sixteenth century, many European monasteries and religious houses were secularized or dissolved, and their manuscripts were dispersed. By the late 1700s, manuscripts had become a valuable commodity and were widely available for purchase on the open market. As a result, cutting illuminations out of books and displaying them individually became a common practice. In the nineteenth century, many dynastic families measured their status by the quality of their library, equating ownership of valuable books with refinement and breeding.

From the twentieth century to today, collecting illuminated manuscripts has been a specialized area of bibliophilia (love of books) that extends to individuals as well as public institutions. The Getty Museum continues to acquire illuminated manuscripts, through purchase or gift, to vary and invigorate its collection and exhibitions.

PROVENANCE in FOCUS

Provenance (meaning “place of origin”) is the ownership history of an object, such as a work of art or manuscript. It is assembled by gathering relevant clues from published and unpublished material, including online databases, digitized archives, and sometimes the work itself, which may bear a stamp, signature, or other identifying mark. Tracing provenance sheds light not only on collecting practices but also on the international political forces that impact the movement of objects. Cultural works today are subject to the laws of their country of origin and can travel across borders only with the appropriate documentation. Although the current owner is accountable for ascertaining a thorough provenance, many objects will continue to have gaps in their histories, which may be filled by further research and future revelations.

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