

## **ILLUMINATING THE RENAISSANCE: THE TRIUMPH OF FLEMISH MANUSCRIPT PAINTING IN EUROPE**

by Thomas Kren and Scot McKendrick. J. Paul Getty Museum, 2003. 640 pp., illus. ISBN 0-89236-703-2 (trade); ISBN 0-89236-704-0 (paper). Exhibition at the Getty Center, Los Angeles, 17 June–7 September 2003, <www.getty.edu>; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 25 November 2003–22 February 2004, <www.royalacademy.org.uk>.

## **TREASURES OF A LOST ART: ITALIAN MANUSCRIPT PAINTING OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND RENAISSANCE**

by Pia Palladino. Yale/Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003. 204 pp., illus. ISBN 0-300-09879-0. Exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art, 23 February–4 May 2003; the San Francisco Museums of Fine Art, 7 June–31 August 2003; the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), 30 September 2003–1 February 2004.

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Many explain the proliferation of images in our world today in terms of a trajectory originating with the invention of photography in the early 19th century, a technology that offered a means to dependably fix once-transient images. The thrust of this view is that

static representations slowly morphed from the monotonous of 19th-century photography into colorful film, video and eventually digital productions. Others, perhaps postmodern visual culture theorists, see the visual montage of our lives and speak about how this assortment implicitly influences popular culture, advertising, politics, etc. A third view, less widely discussed, compares the text/image integration of today with examples that existed prior to the invention of movable type. This view highlights the degree to which the visual/textual relationship changed when the popular hand-made books gave way to less expensive editions of the printing press. Indeed, despite the evident beauty of the luxurious illuminated manuscripts of earlier epochs and their equally fine bindings, these splendid books were replaced by printed publications that were largely monochromatic. As a result, up until late in the 20th century, the literature for all topics (including art) was weighted toward what could be inexpensively conveyed in a black-and-white format.

Two recent shows, “Illuminating the Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe” and “Treasures of a Lost Art: Italian Manuscript Painting of the Middle Ages and Renaissance,” allow us to engage with these exquisite illustrations. Both exhibitions and their accompanying catalogs expose the beauty of the works. We also can directly see why the term “illumination” is an apt one: it refers to the frequent use of gold and silver embellishment, in conjunction with colored paints, which literally makes the page appear to “light up.” Their appeal, moreover, is not simply one of first impressions. A careful viewer, particularly one aided by a magnifying glass, is quickly drawn to look closely at the lavish details, the numerous ways the illuminators developed a mastery of light and space in the miniatures, and the conventions of manuscript painting in all its glory. Visiting these shows is an indescribable treat. On the one hand,

engagement with the objects (and accompanying catalogs) aids greatly in building an understanding of their functions, production and history. In addition, since the closed books have had little exposure to environmental elements, their colors remain rich, fresh and well preserved.

Walking through “Illuminating the Renaissance” at the Getty exhibition, which closed on 8 September 2003, I was keenly aware of the degree to which the show and the catalog complement each other while offering unique perspectives. The actual objects provide an experience that printed reproductions can never duplicate. As the Getty advertising points out, the more than 130 dazzling manuscripts, drawings, and paintings from 49 lenders worldwide (including the British Library, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art) offer the first comprehensive look at the greatest epoch in Flemish manuscript illumination. Covering the period between 1470 and 1560, the exhibit shows how illuminators transformed the appearance of the illustrated page with a new naturalism that captured the imagination of collec-

tors across Europe. Impressive and comprehensive, the vast array of handmade books and splendid single pages from Northern Renaissance manuscripts allows the viewer to engage with the various shapes and sizes adorned by gold, gold leaf and pigment. Seeing the wide-ranging splendor also allows one better to conceptualize their multifaceted functions culturally. Small prayer books, primarily used privately, could easily fit into a pocket. Over-sized books were easier to share and might serve several in a church setting or, if secular in nature, might be read aloud in a group. Their hefty size conveys their weightiness in a way a picture of the book cannot replicate. Similarly, the intricate, well-executed bindings and adornments of the collection are harder to appreciate from viewing the catalog pages.

The catalog, on the other hand, adds details and angles that the display cases omit. In addition, the publication adds a great deal of foundation to the artifacts on display. Compiled by Thomas Kren (curator of manuscripts at the Getty Museum) and Scot McKendrick (curator of manuscripts at the British Library), with contributions from several experts in the field, the essays display an extraordinary quality of research. Each section comprehensively demonstrates that the individuals involved spent years intensively investigating the material. Enthusiasts will appreciate the stellar academic foundation the publication adds. The articles elaborate on the compelling aesthetics, the pigments used to create them, and the expense involved in production. I found the sections on how the cost of producing manuscripts now aid in our study of the books particularly useful. The examples of work that was halted when money ran out ironically help scholars visualize the overall production process. Equally of interest are the sections that discuss those who painted the small masterpieces and their patrons. Innovators of this new style, including artists such as Simon Marmion, the Vienna Master of Mary of Burgundy, and Simon Bening, are well represented. Their sumptuous colors, like the depictions of finely woven brocades and extravagant jewels, convey that the luxurious Flemish manuscript was a vehicle of politics, social status and piety. Finally, and to their credit, the curators demonstrate that many panel painters were associated with manuscript illuminators (e.g.

Rogier van der Weyden and Gerard David). Unfortunately, since we cannot handle the books, we are only able to appreciate what the curator shows us. The catalog shows additional views of the manuscript pages, and the Getty and Royal Academy of Arts in London plan to highlight different pages.

As I viewed the Getty exhibition, the thought stood out that someone valued these books enough to preserve them. The Robert Lehman collection, "Treasures of a Lost Art," offers another side of the historical record. This exhibition presents to the public the magnificent Italian illuminated manuscripts collected by Robert Lehman (1891–1969). Ranging in date from the 13th to the 16th century, the single leaves, cuttings and two bound volumes offer a sharp contrast to the many full volumes found throughout the Getty show. Nearly all of the examples on view are single leaves or cuttings of individual initials, the result of the 19th-century practice of mutilating manuscripts for their beautiful miniatures. The removal of such works from their original context creates especially daunting challenges for scholars who must decipher how they were used and constructed. As a result, and the catalog underscores this, "Treasures of a Lost Art" reflects important new research on the collection in matters of dating, attribution and provenance.

In this excellent overview of the major centers of manuscript production in Italy, the objects are presented as framed paintings. I could not help but think that these stunning wall-hung compositions were in fact excised from their original context, although a speaker at the museum said that most were saved simply because they were cut out of the books. From her perspective, these cuttings survived only because they were removed from volumes that were destroyed. In either case, the display underscores why some characterize the Lehman manuscripts as one of the finest private collections of Italian manuscripts ever assembled after the First World War. Formed by Robert Lehman to complement his father's holdings of early Italian panel paintings, the collection focuses on the major schools of illumination in southern Italy, Umbria, Tuscany, Emilia, Lombardy and the Veneto. Comparable only to the Cini Collection in Venice in its breadth and scope, the collection traces the art form's development from the otherworldly, abstracting traditions of late-medieval painting to the cou-

quest of space and form seen during the High Renaissance. I was particularly impressed by the ability of these cuttings to convey their liturgical purpose. Briefly, all medieval churches and monasteries were required to own essential sets of liturgical manuscripts. The majority of works from the Lehman Collection are from the over-size choir books, known as antiphonaries and graduals, which contain the sung parts of the mass. The typical form of decoration for these books was large initials, often several inches square, placed at the beginning of each hymn and used as a framing device for a narrative scene appropriate to the text. Carried out by artists of the highest caliber, the miniatures are masterpieces. Their complexity, moreover, makes them work well when we now see them hung on the wall as paintings.

In summary, we find that both "Treasures of a Lost Art" and "Illuminating the Renaissance" map a common ground of convention. We see this in the painters' envisioning of biblical scenes, such as the Crucifixion, and in the costumes and landscapes that offer us a vision of other times and settings. Each show also asks us to re-think how text and images work in tandem. This exercise, ironically, is enhanced by the way the exhibits have turned to computer technology to offer us an opportunity to visit the shows remotely. Going on-line, we can adopt contemporary visual/text possibilities to access the examples of an earlier time. At the Getty site <[www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/flemish/home.html](http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/flemish/home.html)>, audio explanations and descriptive text features allow us to look closely at details, aiding immensely in studying the books on display. Among the elaborate pieces available are the Vienna Master of Mary of Burgundy's *Alexander Takes the Hand of Roxanne* and Simon Bening's *Genealogical Tree of the Kings of Aragon*. Information on the Italian manuscripts <[www.thinker.org/legion/exhibitions/exhibition.asp?exhibitionkey=252](http://www.thinker.org/legion/exhibitions/exhibition.asp?exhibitionkey=252)>, although more limited, does offer a taste of the Lehman collection. Finally, a highlight of these shows was the useful educational events that were scheduled to accompany them. Displays about pigments, the making of paper and parchment, and the ins and outs of bookmaking in general served to demonstrate that illuminated manuscripts are an integral part of the art, science and technology story.