**Resource for the Book of Hours**

Winter 2011 History

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Object Presented in a Student-Curated Athenaeum Exhibit

         Manuscript Decorations

         This prayer missal, of which we have two leaves, is an example of an illuminated manuscript from fourteenth or fifteenth century France. It features a small amount of gilding as well as marginal figures. The decoration of the border uses ivy as a motif. The colors red and blue are used extensively, probably because they were easily obtainable. The two figures are examples of creatures that were commonly found in medieval manuscripts.

         Manuscripts were not bound until after they were illustrated, so artists would be working on sets of pages that did not necessarily follow each other sequentially.

This is probably the case with the prayer missal pages, and might explain the change in decorative styles from one page to the next. Often several different decorators would have a hand in the production of an illuminated manuscript. These artisans often lived near each other, which made it easier for them to collaborate on projects. Two examples of early fifteenth century French manuscripts show evidence of nine different artists’ work between them.

  Some artists had model books, which would contain the patterns they used most frequently to decorate manuscripts. A system of standardization of decorative components is found in early fifteenth century Parisian manuscripts. Any trained artist would be able to follow instructions for the construction of a given manuscript.

         Medieval page-making was a complicated and time-consuming process.  While the Chinese discovered paper-making in the eighth century, Europeans did not begin to utilize this technology until after the medieval age.  Instead, they used specially treated animal skins, often those of sheep. First, the skins were soaked in a lime-based solutions to knock the fur off.  Page-makers then stretched the skins to make them straighter and scraped bits of skin off with a knife to make them thinner.  They repeated these two steps several times until the skin was of the appropriate thickness.  The entire process took several days.  Due to their dependence on animal skins, Europeans page-makers were limited by the number of killed animals they could get their hands upon.  This, combined with the time it took to make the pages, led to pages that were less numerous and more expensive than their Chinese counterparts.

         After the page was stretched and thinned, it was ready to be written upon.  Scribes used two types of materials for page decorations: paints and thin layers of gold called gold leaf.  Scribes would first draw a sketch of their decorations before writing anything on the page.  Then they would cover the cover the areas of the page which they wished to cover with gold leaf with a sticky substance, often sap.  After sticking the gold leaf to the adhesive, the scribes would move on to painting.  Using paints made from “ground minerals, organic dyes extracted from plants, and chemically produced colorants”, the scribes painted the pages.

         The usage of gold in illuminated manuscripts throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century was called gilding. Gold leaf is the most valued form of manuscript gilding.  This technique was most often used because upon completion the process created the illusion of solid gold

.  Gilding was a common way to illustrate and decorate the interior of books in Europe during the medieval period.  When a book contained gold leaf decorations it allowed the text to become an object of value, as well as a means of storing and sharing information.  One reason gold was highly valued was because gold does not oxidize over time, as most other metals do, so it doesn’t lose its color or shine

.  Gold was a costly commodity, so it was mostly used in important pieces.  Religious texts were the most common object to have gilding because the gold was used as a sign of devotion to God, and it showed prestige and wealth.

  The prayer missal would have been viewed as a gift to God because of the usage of gold.  Generally, it was churches that owned manuscripts that had gilding because it was used to honor God in a powerful way.

         In the prayer missal an array of many different colors are used as decorations around the pages, but red and blue seem to be the dominate colors.  The red and blue pigments are used for the capitalization of letters to start a new paragraph, and are the commanding color on the decorative pattern around the text.  Vermilion, or more commonly known as red mercury, was formed from a substance that was easy to obtain and there were six different ways to produce the color red. The color blue was produced from the rock lapis lazuli, but you could also produce this pigment from plant based substances

.  The reason that blue and red were the overshadowing colors in the prayer missal was because the artists could get the colors from various sources that were in abundance.

         Ivy borders became popular in French manuscripts during the beginning of the fourteenth century.  They were “universally used there” for a century.  After this they continued to be used, but sometimes in conjunction with acanthus leaves.   Beginning in the middle of the fifteenth century there was a shift to the use of shapes such as rectangles and diamonds in borders.  The pages from the manuscript contain both each of the three aforementioned characteristics.  So it was probably made in the middle of the fourteenth century during the transition from ivy to shape borders.

         The dragon in the margin is actually a fairly common motif in the art and literature of Medieval Europe. Indeed, dragons may often be found in the margins of both religious and secular medieval manuscripts, though they are especially common in prayer books.

 Even the Bayeaux tapestry contains dragons in its margins. Beyond simply being put into margins of manuscripts, dragons can be found in murals depicting biblical events in order to “frighten the faithful to good actions.”

 This may also be a reason for the inclusion of the dragon in this prayer missal.

In terms of appearance, the dragon in the manuscript appears to be similar to other medieval dragons that contained things such as “big wings, horns, a horrible ugly face, huge teeth, an oversized head, large cloven feet equipped with eagle-like claws and a long twirled tail.“

Many monsters of Medieval Europe were extremely humanoid in appearance. Many of these monsters were said to inhabit faraway lands such as Ethiopia and India.

 The supposed existence of these humanoid creatures led to a bit of discussion about whether or not these creatures had souls. Some thinkers believed that all the monsters were terrible creatures, while others thought that if they were also descendants of Adam and Eve, then they were capable of achieving salvation.

 The nude figure in the margin of one of the pages may be one of these monstrous races, since his figure, with his extremely curved back and large endowment, doesn’t appear to be especially human.

Some in the church railed against what they saw as a distraction that stemmed from this monstrous imagery. St Bernard was particularly opposed to this, saying

What excuse can there be for these ridiculous monstrosities in the cloisters where the monks do their reading, extraordinary things at once beautiful and ugly? Here we find filthy monkeys and fierce lions, fearful centaurs, harpies, and striped tigers… Here is one head with many bodies, there is one body with many heads. Over there is a beast with a serpent for a tail, a fish with an animal’s head, and a creature that is horse in front and goat behind, and a second beast with horns and the rear of a horse.

Though some monks appear to have heeded this call for simpler decorations, conditions were changing in Europe that would result in these decorations remaining, and indeed flourishing on religious and secular texts throughout Medieval Europe. While in years past these texts were mainly created by monks for others in the religious community, from the 13thcentury onwards, more and more lay people were learning to read, and it was increasingly possible, though undoubtedly expensive, to commission illuminated manuscripts from professional scribes or other lay-owned illuminators in towns and cities.