

SMALL WONDERS

The Artistry of Medieval Miniatures

Jeff Shuster

University of South Florida

School of Information

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About this Exhibit

- ♦ The pairing of pictures with text goes back thousands of years, but the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance still captivate audiences to this day. This exhibit will take place at the Boston Public Library's Central Branch where items from its own collection of medieval art will be displayed. Also, gathered for this exhibit will be leafs and intact manuscripts from all over Europe and even Persia. These rare finds are on loan from the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, Princeton University Library, and the Morgan Library & Museum. My goal with this exhibit is to give a brief overview of medieval miniatures, the craft in making them, and their eventual decline.

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What is a miniature?

Miniature refers to a painting that originally accompanied the illuminated manuscripts created by monks and other artists during the middle ages. These could be small paintings accompanying the text or could take up the whole page (MIA, n.d., para. 3).



Augustine sits at a writing desk where a monk holds a bowl of ink at the ready.

Exhibit 1: De civitate Dei, fol 2, 1466; Boston Public Library, MS f Med.10.

Miniatori

- In Christian monasteries, these illustrations could be done by those carefully writing on parchment, but monasteries also had those who specialized in painting miniatures. They were called “miniatori” (Haraszti, 1928, p. 5).

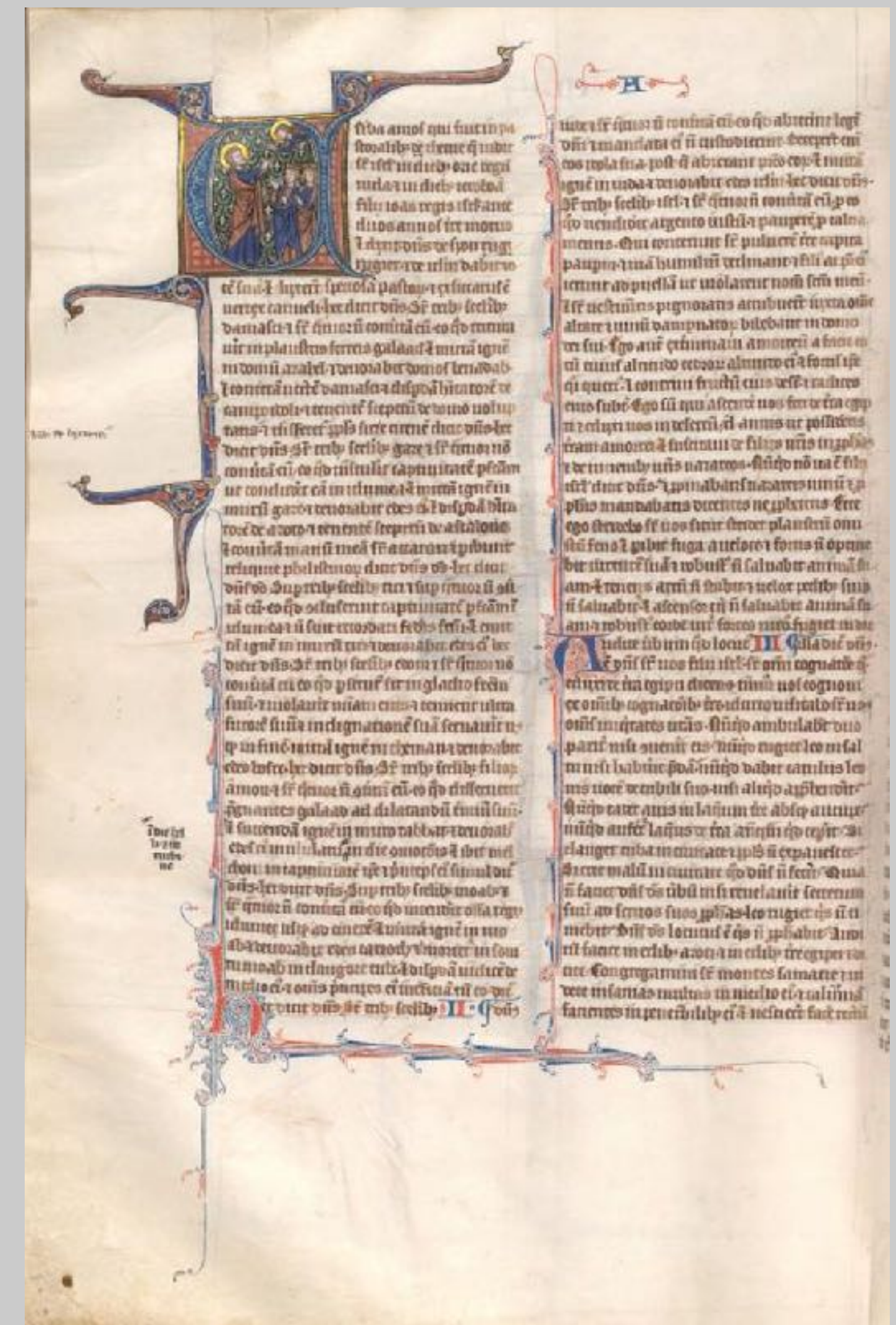


Exhibit 2: Amos, historiated initial, with detail, single leaf, 1275-1299; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 004

Illumination

- ♦ Gold and silver was used in manuscripts and miniatures to illuminate them. The layering of these precious metal on the parchment allowed it to catch the light thus illuminating the page (Haraszti, 1928, p. 5).



Exhibit 3: Single leaf from a 15th-century Book of Hours, single leaf, 1450; Boston Public Library, MS pb Med.236.

Go to School

- ♦ The art of miniature painting moved beyond the monastery at the beginning of the Renaissance as wealthy patrons wanted illustrated manuscripts that rivaled those of the church. Local schools for miniaturists grew in cities such as Paris, Florence, Bruges, and Antwerp (Haraszti, 1928, p. 6).



Exhibit 4: Dogale conferring title on Giovanni Cappello, fol 7r, 1486, Princeton University Library, Garrett MS. 159.

The Craft of Color

- ♦ The artisans of the middle ages were also experts on mixing colors, a complex preparation they did themselves. In fact, the study of mixing colors was one of the first things a medieval artist had to learn (Haraszti, 1928, p. 6).



Image of painter from *Omne Bonum*. License purchased from British Library.

Courtesy British Library Royal 6 E. VI

Byzantine Empire

- While the miniatures used in every Book of Gospels are different, Byzantine tradition shows they still have some common characteristics in how the four Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are portrayed. Each evangelist sits on a backless chair with a footstool in front of them. Red and black ink is at the ready for them to copy the Gospel into a book. Colorful buildings can be seen amidst a golden background (U-M Library, n.d., para. 5).



Exhibit 5: Gospels., fol 44v, 11th-13th century, Princeton University Library, Garrett MS. 2

Armenia

- ♦ Much of the surviving Armenian art comes from miniature work present in the Gospels. A common trait in many Armenian miniatures is a focus on the expressions on people represented. These figures are typically show front-facing with choice of colors done purely for decorative purposes (Fresno State, n.d., section B., para. 2).



Exhibit 6: Gospels in Armenian, fol 44v, 1475,
Boston Public Library, MS q Med.34

England

- ♦ At nearly 900 years-old, the *Miscellany on the life of St. Edmund* is a testimony to an English Saint and King who died at the hands of invaders. This manuscript begins with 32 full page miniatures and they are accredited to the Alexis Master, originator of the St. Albans school. He created England's first Romanesque technique through a combination of Byzantine, Ottonian, and Anglo-Saxon methods (MLM, n.d., para. 2).



Exhibit 7: Edmund of England: Scene, Tribes crossing Sea to Britain by the Alexis Master and his workshop, Fol. 007r, 1130; The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.736

Italy

- ♦ Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci was an Italian monk who created a series of choir books at the Santa Maria degli Angeli monastery in Florence, Italy. His miniatures' rich colors and quiet rhythm brought him recognition as an important figure of the early Italian Renaissance (Russell, 1977, pp. 192-195).



Exhibit 8: Magi beholding Star by Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci , Fol. 5r, 1392-1399; The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.653 no. 5 (l.15)

France

One persistent feature of medieval manuscripts are the illustrations of vines and flowering plants that surround texts and miniatures. The grape vine is associated with communion wine and the blood sacrificed by Jesus Christ. This foliage design became known as “vignette” and was a calling card Parisian manuscript production (Lichmanova, 2025, para. 5).



Exhibit 9: Miniature of Mary and Jesus, border design and initial, French text, fol. 141r, 1400-1450; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 029

The Book of Hours



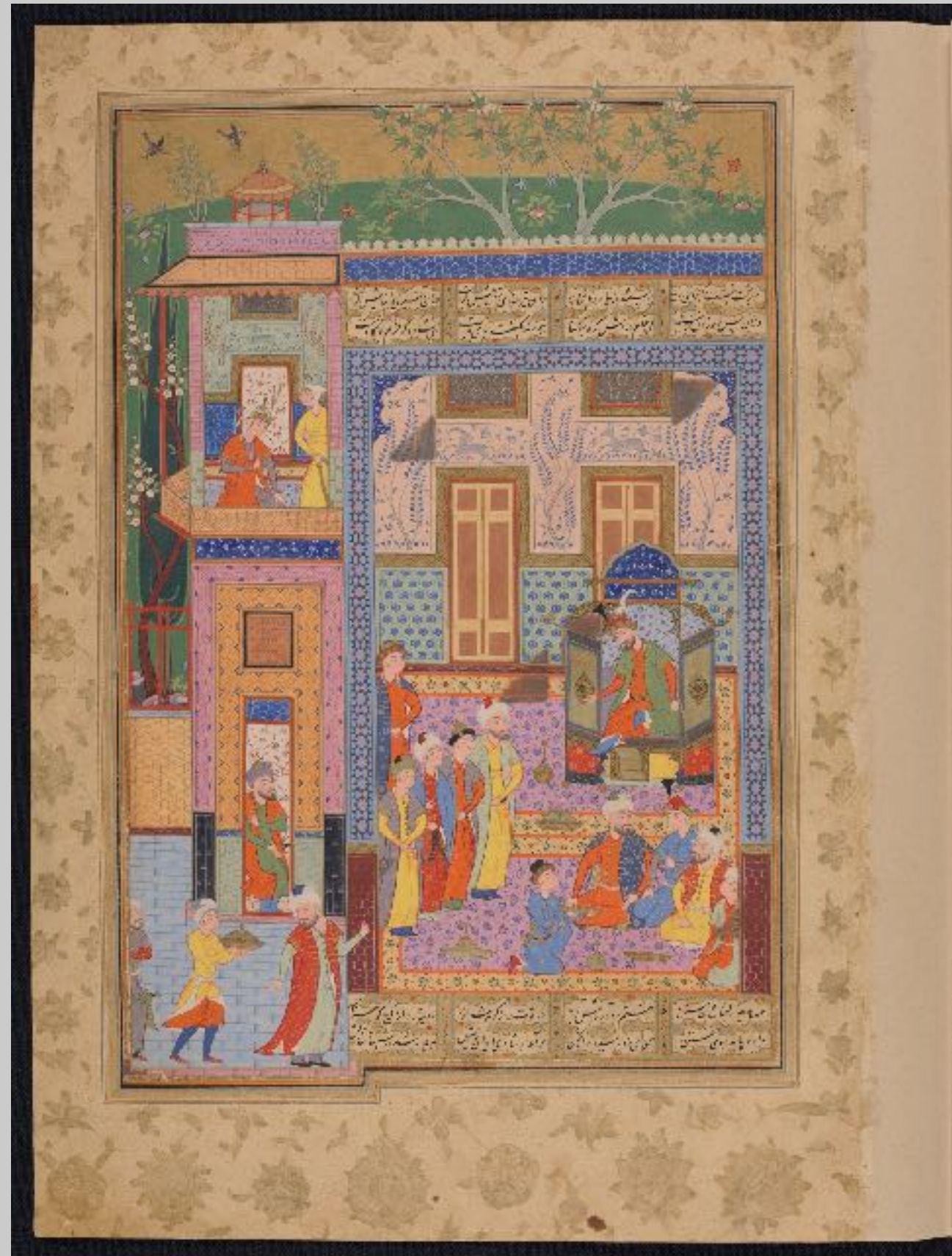
Exhibit 10: The four evangelists in four compartments forming a single miniature, fol. 14v-15r, 1400-1499; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 038

- The Book of Hours was a hugely popular prayers book among the non-clergy in medieval life (Stein, 2017, para. 2). Designed to help the faithful pray regularly at different hours of the day, the beautiful miniatures in these books also serve as markers as these books have no chapters or bookmarks (Stein, 2017, para. 5).



Exhibit 11: Deathbed/Souls Tormented in Purgatory by Master of Catherine of Cleves, f. 97r, 1440; Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.917/945

Persian Miniature Paintings



Kitāb-i Shāhnāmah, fol. 95a, 1589 or 90; Princeton University Library, Islamic Manuscripts, Third Series no. 310e

Miniature paintings also show up in manuscripts far away from the shores of Europe in countries such as Persia. Calligraphers and painters were seen as prized resources in Persian Courts. Private workshops known as ateliers would take on apprentices and teach them the craft of painting. Eventually, these Persian influenced painting schools eventually took root throughout the Mughul Empire (Benham, n.d., paras. 1-2).

The Book of Kings

These manuscript pages are from two editions of Shāhnāmeḥ (Book of Kings), a classic piece of Persian literature written by the poet Abū al-Qāsim Firdawsī. This is a renowned epic of pre-Islamic Persia. These half-page miniatures feature fierce battles.



Exhibit 13: Shāhnāmah of Firdawsī, fol. 409a, 17th or 18th century; Library of Congress, PK6455 .A1 1600z



Exhibit 14: Shāhnāmah of Firdawsī, fol. 12b, 17th century, Library of Congress, PK6455 .A2 1618

The Printed Page and the Woodcut

- ♦ For a time, the hand-scribed manuscript and the printed book pioneered by Johannes Gutenberg coexisted. However, the increased use of woodcuts pioneered William Caxton's second edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* was the beginning of the end for hand-painted miniature in manuscripts (Wellesley, pp. 251-255).

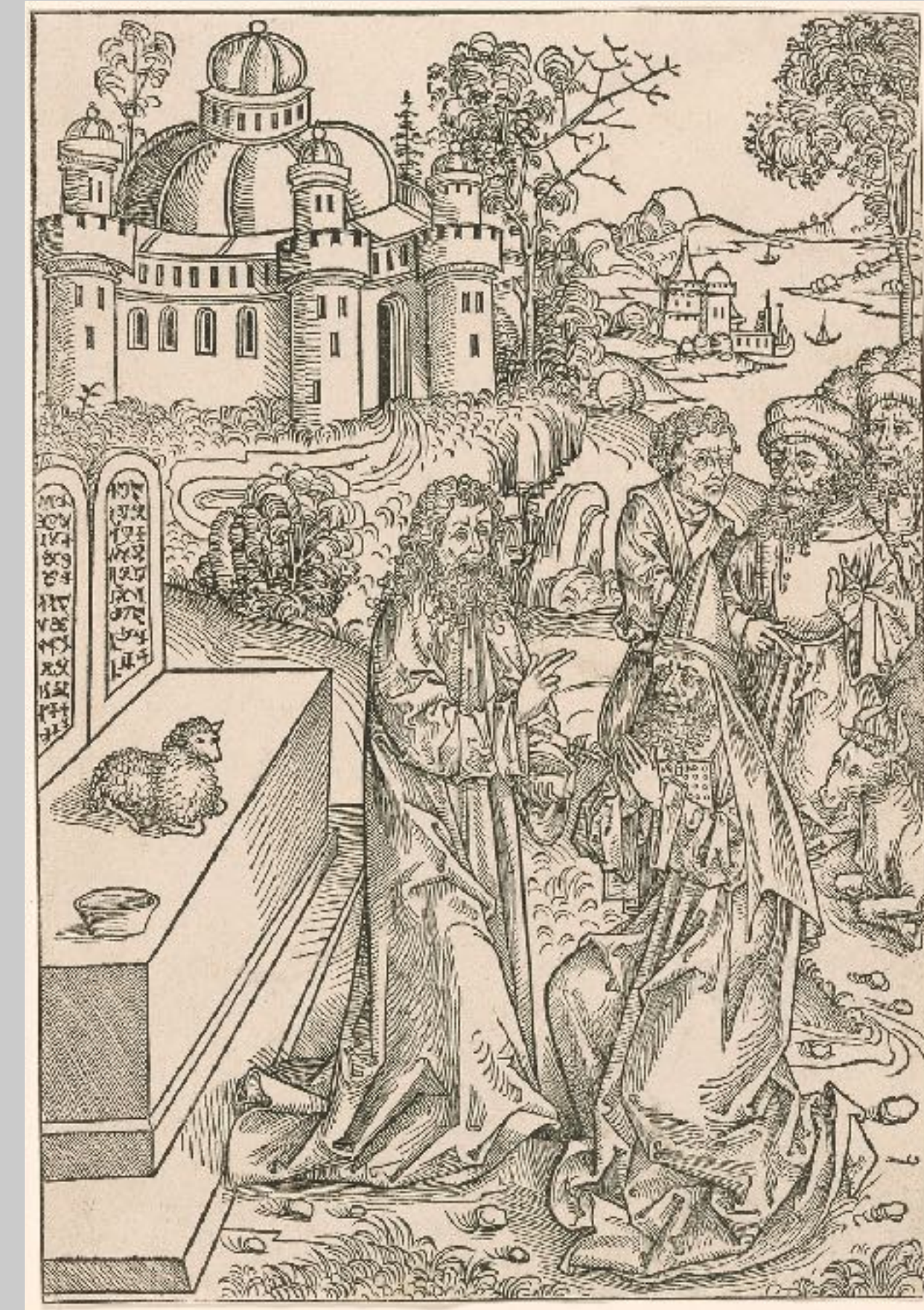


Exhibit 15: Moses Consecrating Aaron as High Priest [print], proof, 15th century; Morgan Library & Museum, s G. 15-16.1

Miniature Portraits

- ♦ The art of miniature painting lived on in the form of portrait miniatures. Prior to invention of photography, husbands and wives would trade portraits of each other. The wealthy who commissioned these would house them in expensive lockets to be worn around the neck as jewelry (Goldring, 2026, para. 3).

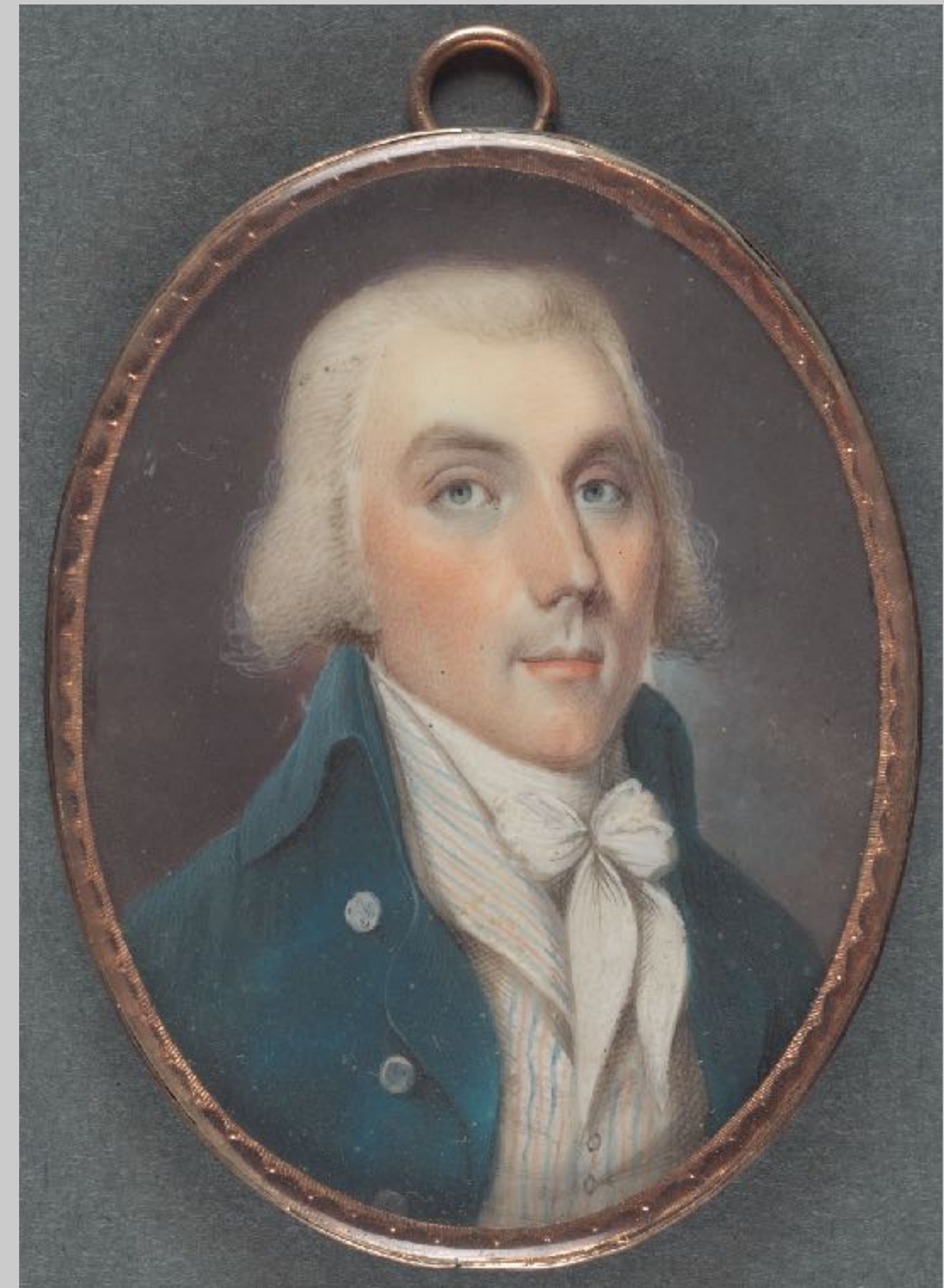


Exhibit 16: Miniature portrait of Samuel S. Forman, 1790; New York Public Library, Image ID 57509325

Carl H. Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle



Exhibit 17: Watercolor portrait of Laurette Tighe, 1827 - 1829; New York Public Library, Image ID 57150746



Exhibit 18: Watercolor portrait of Lord Byron, 1825; New York Public Library, Image ID 58843750



Exhibit 19: Watercolor portrait of Lady Mount Cashell, 1827-1829; New York Public Library, Image ID 57150745

Conclusion

- ♦ It is extraordinary what Medieval artisans were able to accomplish with pen and brush to parchment. While many of these artists remain unknown, I did reference names when available. They are a testament to what we humans were capable of creating before the invention of printing and photography. These miniature paintings still captivate audiences to this day thanks to their dedication to craftsmanship hundreds of years ago.

Exhibition Checklist

1. De civitate Dei by Uten Broec, Antonis Rogiersz, fol 2, 1466; Boston Public Library, MS f Med.10., <https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/v2/record/S75C8444649>
2. Amos, historiated initial, with detail, single page, 1275-1299; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 004, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/ed98eab0-c5ca-012f-b841-58d385a7bc34?canvasIndex=1>
3. Single leaf from a 15th-century Book of Hours, single leaf, 1450; Boston Public Library, MS pb Med.236., <https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/v2/record/S75C8444762>
4. Dogale conferring title on Giovanni Cappello, fol 7r., 1486, Princeton University Library, Garrett MS. 159., <https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/99113559513506421#viewer-container>

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5. Gospels, fol 44v, 11th-13th century, Princeton University Library, Garrett MS. 2 <https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/99108781403506421#viewer-container>

6. Gospels in Armenian, fol 44v, 1475, Boston Public Library, MS q Med.34 <https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/v2/record/S75C8444905>

7. Edmund of England: Scene, Tribes crossing Sea to Britain by the Alexis Master and his workshop, Fol. 007r, 1130, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.736 <https://corsair.themorgan.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?searchId=827&recCount=50&recPointer=0&bibId=243323>

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8. Magi beholding Star by Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci , Fol. 5r, 1392-1399, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.653 no. 5 (I.15) <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/5/1130149>

9. Miniature of Mary and Jesus, border design and initial, French text, fol. 141r, 1400-1450; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 029 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/3a09d420-c5cb-012f-55bd-58d385a7bc34?canvasIndex=0>

10. The four evangelists in four compartments forming a single miniature, fol. 14v-15r, 1400-1499; New York Public Library, NYPL MA 038 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/50c93900-c5cb-012f-7a90-58d385a7bc34?canvasIndex=0>

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11. Deathbed/Souls Tormented in Purgatory by Master of Catherine of Cleves, fol. 97r, 1440, Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.917/945 <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/115>
12. Kitāb-i Shāhnāmah, fol. 95a, 1589 or 90, Princeton University Library, Islamic Manuscripts, Third Series no. 310e <https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/9930604743506421>
13. Shāhnāmah of Firdawsī, fol. 409a, 17th or 18th century; Library of Congress, PK6455 .A1 1600z <https://www.loc.gov/resource/plmp.m013/?sp=22&st=gallery>

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14. Shāhnāmah of Firdawsī, fol 12b, 17th century, Library of Congress, PK6455 .A2 1618
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/plmp.m012/?st=gallery>

15. Moses Consecrating Aaron as High Priest [print], proof, 15th century; Morgan Library & Museum, s G. 15-16.1 <https://corsair.themorgan.org/vwebv/holdingsInfo?bibId=145041>

16. Miniature portrait of Samuel S. Forman, 1790; New York Public Library, Image ID 57509325 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/21e15ca0-47e3-0136-4998-59d8dd70b216?canvasIndex=0>

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17. Watercolor portrait of Laurette Tighe, 1827 - 1829; New York Public Library, Image ID 57150746 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/cbd59340-e675-0134-b65a-07d80d208b6c?canvasIndex=0>

18. Watercolor portrait of Lord Byron, 1825; New York Public Library, Image ID 58843750 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/34b8adc0-a2a6-013c-66c3-0242ac110002?canvasIndex=0>

19. Watercolor portrait of Lady Mount Cashell, 1827-1829; New York Public Library, Image ID 57150745 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d9632b10-e674-0134-fba1-015b2f7d552e>

Promoting the Exhibit

- ♦ Maintain a presence on the library's own website with a banner ad in the events section.
- ♦ Commit to regular postings on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok showing off samples from the exhibition.
- ♦ Reach out our contact at the local newspaper to get coverage in the Arts & Leisure section.
- ♦ Attach flyers for the exhibition on the bulletin boards of local community centers and businesses.
- ♦ Build up anticipation with a "Coming Soon" poster in the current exhibition. Have flyers ready for the next exhibition near the poster.

References

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- Medieval illuminated manuscripts. Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA). (n.d.). <https://new.artsmia.org/programs/teachers-and-students/teaching-the-arts/art-in-context/medieval-illuminated-manuscripts>

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- ♦ Miscellany on the life of St. Edmund (ms m.736). Miscellany on the life of St. Edmund (MS M.736). | MS M.736 | Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts | The Morgan Library & Museum. (n.d.). <https://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/143847>
- ♦ The Morgan Library and Museum. (2022, September 7). St. Edmund's 900 Year Old Manuscript | Collection in Focus. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8g8WWojVh1w>
- ♦ *Omne Bonum* [Painting]. British Royal Library, United Kingdom. <https://www.imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/12527>
- ♦ Russell, F. (1977). Don Silvestro dei Gherarducci and an Illumination from the Collection of William Young Ottley. *The Burlington Magazine*, 119(888), 192–195. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/878741>
- ♦ Stein, W. A. (2017, June 1). The book of hours: A medieval bestseller. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. <https://www.metmuseum.org/essays/the-book-of-hours-in-medieval-christianity>
- ♦ University of Michigan Library. (n.d.). *The byzantine bible*. M Library Online Exhibets. <https://apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/sacred-hands/the-byzantine-bible>
- ♦ Wellesley, M. (2021). *The Gilded Page: The Secret Lives of Medieval Manuscripts*. Basic Books.