The Aesthetics of Texts: Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts

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Books, as we know them today, emerged from earlier records made successively on tablets, papyrus, and scrolls. Around the 4th century, the first form of a book appeared: a codex written on parchment (sheepskin). A more sophisticated form, the illuminated manuscript (text supplemented with decoration) created on vellum (calfskin) succeeded the codex after the fall of the Roman Empire. It remained a dominant form of written text between the years 600 and 1600 (1, 2). The next major change took place in the 15th century: after the invention of moveable type printing technology by Gutenberg, paper-based books succeeded the illuminated manuscripts.

In the 7th and 8th centuries, the demand for the written word was mostly ecclesiastical, stemming from the requirement for exact transmission of the religious message during the Christianization of Northern Europe. Important centers of manuscript production emerged in monasteries associated with the cult of an Anglo-Saxon monk, St. Cuthbert (ca. 634–687) in the region of today’s Ireland, Scotland, and Northern England (3, 4). There, the monastic culture was grounded in Celtic tradition, and with it came a distinct kind of art now recognized as Insular Art (5). It included stonework, metalwork, and images of plants and animals, as well as semiabstract decorative patterns. There also were influences of early Christian (Coptic) art, and Roman, Byzantine, and eastern elements. Manuscripts produced there combined script with both nonfigurative decoration and figurative paintings. In addition, these manuscripts were given highly decorative covers, which might include gold and jewels, making the books valuable both intellectually and aesthetically—and also very precious. The illustrations in the medieval manuscripts provide an unparalleled insight into early painting in Northern Europe during the period when panel painting was still relatively rare (1).

The cult of St. Cuthbert was associated with monasteries at Melrose and Lindisfarne, both in what was then the Kingdom of Northumbria. Lindisfarne was a priory on the Holy Island just off the coast in the North Sea. The island is, subject to tides, accessible on foot for parts of the day. A bishop of Lindisfarne, Eadfrith (d. 721), created a manuscript known as the Lindisfarne Gospels, a page spread from which is shown in Fig. 1. Its earliest binding was made by another bishop, Ethilwald, who succeeded Eadfrith in 721. The Gospels contain text, paintings, and sophisticated ornamentation, including decorative “carpet pages.” Other books from that period which share similar script are the Book of Durrow (created in the 7th century) and the Book of Kells (created around 800), both now in Trinity College Dublin. The picture shows a double page from the beginning of St. Mark’s gospel. The left hand side is a carpet page with patterns resembling Celtic metalwork: the different shade of its center creates the effect of a metal “knob” attached to the page. The opposite page contains decorative lettering: note the decorations placed inside the characters (6, 7).

On the Continent, manuscript production developed during the reign of Charlemagne, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800. Charlemagne, who regarded acquisition of knowledge—and education—as essential for the Empire, recruited Alcuin (d. 804), an eminent scholar from York, to his court in Aachen. Alcuin subsequently became the abbot of the monastery in Tours, and gained fame for his Latin Bible text, known as the Bible of Tours (8). Characteristically, the Carolingian manuscripts were highly sophisticated with regard to layout. They employed several measures to increase the clarity and readability of text such as large display capitals to highlight chapter openings and a hierarchy of fonts. There were headings, summaries, and running titles. Diagrams and tables are present, for instance, in Bede’s De natura rerum and De temporibus. The scriptorium in Tours introduced a new script known as Carolinian Minuscule, which was subsequently adopted in the entire Carolingian empire (9). This script was revived later, during the Renaissance, and eventually led to the development of the Roman font.

There was also enormous expansion of the themes of the books. Apart from Bibles, biblical commentaries, and psalters, there were copies of the classical texts, legal books, and books addressing botany (herbals) and medicine, as well as history, politics and, increasingly, tales of fiction. Library catalogues were developed to facilitate resourcing the originals to be copied (8).
Around the 12th century, universities started to be established, creating centers of knowledge separate from the monasteries. With this, the illuminators’ workshops appeared in the cities, outside monasteries. The medieval illuminated manuscripts remain an extraordinary medium of knowledge transmission that made a major impact on the culture of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond. Many were also simply beautiful objects. This aesthetic aspect has a contemporary analogy. Today’s e-readers have, for technical reasons, a rather unified look. It is interesting that an entire branch of industry is emerging that provides a range of covers for tablet computers, with increasing varieties of colors, textures, and decoration. Well, the monks of Lindisfarne did a very similar thing 1200 years ago.

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References


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