

Illuminating Illuminated Manuscripts

Agnieszka Rec 00:05

[Music fades in] Illuminated manuscripts are a special class of manuscripts. The illumination part of it comes from the fact that you were using either gold or silver to decorate the book. The term sometimes gets used of books that are exceptionally rich in color, and illuminated manuscripts are created all over Europe, you have them coming out of Islamic traditions, out of Jewish traditions, out of Eastern Christian traditions also, and they're just absolutely stunning in various ways. Illumination allows you to decorate a manuscript more richly. And the reason for using either gold or silver is because they will reflect light. You can imagine reading these by candlelight, they'll sparkle as you're reading them. [Music fades out]

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:57

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:59

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS). Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. In this episode of The Object of History, Erin Olding, a W. Dean Eastman Undergraduate resident at the MHS, joins us in examining some unique texts held at the Massachusetts Historical Society. Erin discusses these items with Dr. Agnieszka Rec, the Early Materials Cataloger at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:56

As you heard, Dr. Rec explained in the introduction, we are looking at manuscripts from the medieval period that have been enhanced or illuminated with gold and silver. Along the way, Erin

sits down with the MHS Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey and Curator of Art & Artifacts, Anne Bentley, to hear more about the collection, and how these items came to the MHS.

Cassie Cloutier 02:27

Although the Massachusetts Historical Society is known for its collection of American history, objects from various regions and time periods have found their way into our repository. The MHS holds several Christian manuscripts from the 15th and 16th centuries that contain various prayers and passages. Between the fall of 2022 and spring 2023 Erin Olding served as one of the Massachusetts Historical Society's inaugural W. Dean Eastman Undergraduate residents. While working in the MHS library, Erin wanted to explore the medieval items within our collection. We asked her to investigate how these manuscripts arrived at the MHS and what makes them so distinct. Erin first sat down with Peter Drummey, the MHS's Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian to discuss the significance of illuminated manuscripts.

Peter Drummey 03:25

If you have really old documents in your library, they are medieval manuscripts. But I think that it's worth keeping in mind that there's a distinction to be made of having a very old manuscript document might be a will or a land transaction or a legal document and having a medieval manuscript which is in book form written on vellum. And then in many instances, what was most desirable would be a book that had been illuminated that had color illustrations, and then it had illuminated letters, that is the decorations of titles of parts of a book or chapters or a combination of coloring and gilt to make a book essentially beautiful.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:11

Erin sat with Peter in the Dowse Library to discuss the manuscripts. Thomas Dowse, one of the greatest benefactors to the Massachusetts Historical Society, was also a lifelong book collector. Peter explained how this collection came together.

Peter Drummey 04:27

Thomas Dowse was an avid book collector. We're talking about early books and manuscripts, but in fact, the bulk of the library that surrounds us because that's where we're doing this interview are books from England and the British Isles. Dowse was self-educated, didn't read foreign languages or classical languages. He would not be able to read books in Latin, either books or a manuscript in Latin, and he wouldn't know what medieval manuscript meant because medieval wasn't a word that had become into wide use during his lifetime. So, he was thinking of these more as artifacts, I think then it's books.

Erin Olding 05:08

That's a really extensive collection.

Peter Drummey 05:11

Yes, the Dowse Library, the catalog of it has 2,200 volumes. It contains material on a wide range of topics, but mostly known as a library of English literature. If you were a distinguished visitor to Boston, you would be brought to Mr. Dowse's house in Cambridgeport to gaze upon his books because this was one of the star attractions in literary Boston, certainly, which is interesting because he was considered to be a reclusive man. But nevertheless, for the mid-19th century, this was a library that stood out.

Erin Olding 05:47

Speaking of having people over to look upon his extensive library for 19th century American book collectors, would a medieval manuscript be a prized item?

Peter Drummey 06:00

I think it was considered a cornerstone item to have in your library, like it wouldn't be the first thing you collected. But if you built a library, I think almost certainly at some point, you would want to have an early manuscript from the Middle Ages or late Middle Ages, or a very early printed book. A good example of this is when the Massachusetts Historical Society was founded, one of the first

gifts by one of our 10 first members, Jeremy Belknap, was a medieval manuscript. I think he thought, just as someone might want to have a medieval manuscript or an early, very early printed book in their library, the historical society itself should have a like item in its sort of founding library.

Erin Olding 06:48

Do you know or have a rough estimate of how many medieval books are in Dowse's Library?

Peter Drummey 06:55

I think the number is very small, because in the census of medieval manuscripts and renaissance materials in American libraries, that was done back in the 1930s. I don't believe it has the I say, the Dowse manuscript because there's a medieval manuscript that seems to me to been very clearly collected as an exemplar.

Erin Olding 07:17

One of the manuscripts that we looked at, it looked like it was completely rebound. And do you have any comments or thoughts on those practices, then compared to now, especially with something centuries old, like a medieval book?

Peter Drummey 07:33

Sure, we think of a bookbinding, having historic quality to it. It tells us something about the book. We have to remember that often they were thinking of rebinding books to protect the contents. We're here in New England where there are extraordinary changes in relative humidity, which affects paper and vellum in the 19th century, at least in Dowse's own time. We're talking about places that were heated by wood or coal, so you have people protecting their books by binding them. One of the things you see in medieval manuscripts as you have these clasps, an early manuscript or an early very early printed book is printed or written on vellum and vellum becomes three dimensional and often books had leather bindings over wooden boards. So, it made your book wasn't a book that easily opened as we think of a modern book, but you had unfastened the

clasps on the outer edge of the pages, which became a sort of decoration in their own right and Dowse's case almost all of the historical books that he purchased, thousands of books, he had systematically rebound and that was some protection. But it also was to make the elegant appearance of a room holding his books. Now the way they're stored now you're only seeing the spines of them, but it's essentially decorating with books as well as protecting the contents.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:05

Erin then sat down with Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley to take a closer look at the materials and methods used to make these manuscripts. They examined a book of hours and another text known as a missal.

Erin Olding 09:21

What materials are these books made of?

Anne Bentley 09:25

These two particular volumes are made of vellum pages. That is calfskin that has been stripped of all flesh, all hairs and skived or pared down to the basic basic under skin. Once it's been treated, and dried and flattened and then rubbed with pumice stone it makes a lovely surface for the engrossing or writing in ink of a medieval manuscript. In this case have an illuminated medieval manuscript that is then bound in book form. So, the basic pages are a vellum. They have been written on in iron gall ink. They have been illuminated or illustrated using mineral and natural stones that have been ground and turned into paints and any vegetable colorings that they cared to use for the manuscripts. And then they've been sewn together and bound into book form using wooden covers, which is why we call them boards and the boards the bound volume has then been covered in leather that has been stamped and gold leaf foil stamped and then has brass clasps attached at the fore edge to hold the board shut so that the vellum pages won't swell in humidity and didn't exposure to moisture.

Erin Olding 10:58

I think a lot of people assume that if you made a mistake back then you would have to start all over and there would be no way to erase your mistake, but there was.

Anne Bentley 11:10

Yes, and the fact that so many different people are involved in the creation of these volumes, you've got the tanners who create the sheepskin parchment or the calfskin for vellum. You've then got the people who write the script because that's the first thing they do is the calligraphers who do the engrossing on these parchments on these vellums. And then the text goes to an illustrator who does the drawings for the illustrations. And after the basic drawing is down usually in a very faint ink then that goes to the illuminator to the person who applies the gold leaf because the gold leaf goes down first and after the gold leaf has been done for the entire book, then the painter comes along and paints using all of the colors that are hand mixed and applied to the pages between these things, you've got all this text, and if you've made a mistake, you aren't going to see your own mistakes as well as a proofreader will. So, there were proofreaders in that day, very important thing and they're the ones that would notice the mistakes that the scribe had made and have that repaired before it goes on to all the other processes. But once the actual text is all done, then the text goes to the book binder. The book binder is the one who sews it all together and that may be even split into the binder may be the one that sews it, and another binder may be the one that does the actual outside the boards and the covering in either leather or precious metal or even fabric. We have another illuminated manuscript written circa 1500. It's the missal. Usually, the missal is the book of the mass for Roman Catholicism. This is a much bolder if you will illustrated manuscript because the gold leaf throughout has been applied very very thickly and each page just jumps out at you because there is gold leaf on every single page. And one of the things that we had been speaking about earlier was the creation of these pages. These books these particular ones are made vellum, which is calfskin, which has been soaked in lime for up to 10 days to remove all of the hair and the flesh. Then they are scraped, and further hair and flesh are removed and then they are stretched on a wooden frame and they are wet and then allowed to dry on the frame to shrink and this happens several times over each time it's wet they use a skiving knife, which is a curved blade to scrape away more layers of flesh from the actual skin the epidermis and there are times when the skiving knife

gets a little too close to the edge and you wind up with a small hole or tear in the stretched sheet of vellum that you're creating. And usually these are small enough that it's not a problem because the structure is very, very secure. And a hole at the edge of a page is not a danger, it's not going to make the entire page rip apart. So, every now and then in these volumes, you do see a page with a small hole in it. And that's what we have on one particular page. It's a text page and in the lower right-hand corner there is the hole and very strong and nothing has happened to it. Sometimes you can see a little scraping or one letter that doesn't look like the others in a page and that's a case of a mistake that has been scraped out of the text and the paper has been burnished and the proper letter has been written in in its place so the vellum pages were strong enough that they could correct their errors that way. Vellum is a is a very, very stable product as long as you don't expose it to direct moisture. And as long as you try to control the relative humidity in your library where you store these in addition to humidity and climate controls in our special collections where these are stored, we also for some of them make microclimates by storing them within an archival box that we make specially for that particular item.

Erin Olding 15:33

What is a microclimate?

Anne Bentley 15:35

A microclimate is taking the preservative measures you can so that within say our little microclimate box, should we happen to have a spike in humidity in the special collections, that spike won't register on our book within its microclimate because that's an extra protection. It takes a lot longer for that humidity to reach the contents of the box. We're in the Dowse Library. You look around us all of our books in the bookcases are behind glass. That creates a microclimate in this room. If there is a spike in humidity, we can get the dehumidifiers in here and lower the humidity in the overall room before it ever gets to the books behind the glass. The one thing you must be careful of though, when you have glass as an agent in preventing humidity and moisture from getting to your collection is that the sun does not beat directly in on that glass because then what happens is the glass will heat up and create an undesired microclimate because it'll rain inside your inside your

shelves and you don't want that. So, it's not a cure all you have to know how to use it and when to use it if you're using glass front cases for your books.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:49

To find out more about these manuscripts, Erin spoke with Dr. Agnieszka Rec, the Early Materials Cataloger at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

Erin Olding 17:01

So, we have been discussing what these texts are made of and how they are preserved. But what is a missal and what is a book of hours and what were they used for?

Agnieszka Rec 17:12

So, a missal contains the full range of texts said and sung during the mass, because there are moments when you're speaking, there are moments when either the priest or the congregation will sing. And this includes prayers that are recited by the priests through readings from scriptures or readings from the Bible. Chants that are sung by the choir. So those are missals on the one hand, and those are again, for conducting mass. They're accompanied by books like graduals, which if you've ever seen these absolutely enormous medieval church books that have musical notes that are probably about the size of your hand. Those are meant to be choir books that you have on a stand in front of lots of people. Books of hours, on the other hand, develop out of these traditions, but they're meant for personal devotion. It's a genre that develops starting in the middle of the 13th century, and then continues through the 16th. But these tend to be much smaller, they are meant to allow lay people, that is people who are neither monks, nuns, they're not priests, but they are people of faith, who want to be able to pray at home and imitate the lives of committed religious people. And the reason that they're called books of hours is that the monastic life was governed by what are known as canonical hours, which were set times during the day, that monks would come together nuns would do this to they would pray, go about their work, come together and pray. And this would repeat itself over the course of the day and books of hours allowed royalty, aristocracy, the middle class very, very often women, in fact, the majority of these are produced by women to

imitate that kind of cycle of prayer, but do it from the comfort of their own home in theory at the same time as monks and nuns would.

Cassie Cloutier 18:44

Anne then told us more about when these manuscripts would have been used.

Anne Bentley 18:49

When we talk about canonical hours, back in these days, the faithful were expected to pray up to seven times a day, and the hours were matins were between 2:30 and 3:00 in the morning. Lauds were between 5:00 and 6:00 in the morning. Prime was around 7:30, shortly before daybreak. Terce was around 9:00 in the morning. Sext was at noon. None was between 2:00 and 3:00 in the afternoon. Vespers around sunset and compline was around 6:00 pm. So, you have these specific prayers that had to be said at these specific hours. I often wondered who on earth is up at 2:30 and 3:00 in the morning, for pete's sake, that's crazy to expect everybody to get up and do that. But recently, it has been rediscovered or discovered that the sleep pattern in this period came in two parts. The first sleep was between 9:00 to 11:00 pm. And then you had your first wakefulness. The watch, which usually lasted from around 11:00 pm to 1:00 am. And then the morning sleep, which lasted from around 2:00 am to 6:30 am, or 7:00 am. So, this was something that was universal worldwide before the Industrial Revolution and illumination at night.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:26

Erin then continued to examine the illuminated manuscripts with both Agnieszka and Anne.

Erin Olding 20:32

Can you tell us more about the images and details within the manuscripts?

Agnieszka Rec 20:38

So, yeah, I'm happy to talk about some of the images and illustrations in the books of hours and that is one of the reasons they are such a joy. And I think one of the reasons that they were so

popular is they can be incredibly richly illustrated, and often richly illuminated, like we talked about with either gold or silver, far more often gold, because silver will tend to tarnish and damage the book over time. People tend to use gold more often when they can. I mentioned briefly that different books of hours will have different kinds of texts, depending on the desires of the person commissioning this book. Very often, though, not exclusively, books of hours were made to order. And so, you had, again, a calendar of saints, the little hours of the Virgin. And then there were some standard texts that tended to follow but you could choose depending on the kind of prayer you wanted to engage in, but just as you could choose the texts that go and you can also choose what images you would like and how much decoration and this is both to personal taste, but also very strongly linked to cost and how much money you want to spend on it. So, if you have illumination far more expensive. When I think about cataloging one of these, one of the things I will do in discussing decoration is you start with the largest images and then work your way down. So, in a manuscript context, we refer to what are known as miniatures. Regardless of how big these are, you can have a full-page miniature and it's still a miniature even though that tiny, full page miniatures will cost you more than a half page or a column with miniature. The more complicated the design, the more colors more expensive things will be. The Flemish Book of Hours at the MHS owns has some absolutely extraordinary what are known as initials. So, if miniatures are images, whether it's the Virgin Mary, Jesus, various biblical scenes. When we talk about initials, we're talking about decorative letters, which are often used at the beginning of a text at the beginning of chapters, they're used to mark off different kinds of headings. And similar to how miniatures, the bigger they are, the more expensive similarly initials, the bigger they are, the more expensive and so you can have a six-line initial which is as tall as six lines of text, which is going to be more expensive than a single line initial. You also have what are known as historiated initials, which, especially in letters like 'o' 'd' these nice letters that have big, nice round spaces in them, you can have little figural scenes that represent what's going on in the text. They might represent the donor or the commissioner of the manuscript. These are all among the various ways that the owners of books of hours can express themselves. One of the experts on medieval manuscripts is a man by the name of Christopher de Hamel. I was reading his history of illuminated manuscripts in preparation for this conversation, and one of the things that he points out is that books of hours are actually because

they are so so incredibly common 1000s of these were produced. And because they have so many illustrations, they are some of our best sources for medieval art, and even renaissance art, because you have 1000s of these, with many images in each one of them produced over three or 400 years. And so, you can track art developments and various places based just on books of hours, which I think is pretty fantastic.

Anne Bentley 23:35

The missal that we looked at is very, very, very different in style from the book of hours. The book of hours is heavily illustrated major single page illustrations for the woman that commissioned it. The missal, on the other hand, is mostly borders, and these borders are very wide. All four edges of each page of very, very fine vegetable matter, little vines with tiny little pinpricks of gold everywhere. It's almost Persian in design, even in just basic daylight. You remember we turn the pages and it just glitters. We have an illuminated page of the Annunciation, the angel appearing to Mary. The illustration takes up the entire page and you have the angel Gabriel on the left, the Virgin Mary on a throne on a golden throne at the right and she is in prayer with her missal on her lap and there is a radiant dove descending on golden rays from the upper left corner to Mary's head and there is the most magnificent red and green and white marble floor. The gilding the gold leaf, which is the first thing that is applied to an illumination in a manuscript that has been diluted and so it has been brushed on and the edges all the border is this deluded gold leaf that is just a lovely hazy gilt. But the gold in the actual illumination of the manuscript has been applied as usual, which is a binding agent glare which is a white some chalk is usually added to that and then the gold leaf is pressed onto that, and then the excess is brushed away. And then it's burnished with a hard tool so that it's lovely and shiny. That appears to be how it's applied on her throne and their halos and the angel Gabriel's clothing from the foreground to the distant background. Each of those color tiles has little painted almost floral decorations within it. And it adds very much to the vanishing point in the background behind the angel Gabriel. There is a scarlet ceiling above the angel that is just beautifully rendered, and then the barrel vaulting is just glimpsed at and a bit of red above the dove. When we put the image up on our website, you'll be able to see that it's just gorgeous. The principal colors are the blue. There are several options that we could use for a blue in medieval manuscripts.

Lapis lazuli was the most expensive. Azurite was sometimes used in place of it because it's a lot less expensive than grinding up lapis lazuli stone. Indigo was another blue and woad. These are the two vegetable dyes that were used in illuminated manuscripts for the blue. The greens are copper sulfates, or for more expensive manuscripts, they could be malachite, ground down and use your very, very lovely dark green for turquoise green also and verdigris another form of green dye used to make these colors for the illuminated manuscripts.

Erin Olding 27:01

So, the things that come together to make a medieval book, the hand and the writing, gilding, quality of paper, whether it's vellum or parchment, how do these things show their age?

Agnieszka Rec 27:15

So, there's a really great project that is led by a scholar at St. Andrews by the name of Kathryn Rudy, who was interested in what she called the dirty books. If you have a book that's been in your house and read by your family for ages and ages, these books will start to get dirty in various ways. They'll start to get worn in various ways. And what Kathryn Rudy has started doing is just looking at the dirt that is on medieval manuscripts and looking at the patterns of dirt to figure out, okay, if I have a book, and I'm holding it, right, so if you imagine opening a book, where are you putting your thumbs when you're holding this, if you have kind of a hand size book, some people will hold it in the middle, some people will hold it in the middle of the outside, some people will hold it at the bottom that will leave dirt stains. And so, what Kathryn Rudy is doing is making scientific analyses of that dirt and what might be on there. So, you can start thinking about if I am a wealthy woman reading a book of hours in the Middle Ages, the kind of dirt that I'm depositing on a book is going to be much different than if I am a printer in the Middle Ages, who is using a manuscript to set type and then print my book. In that case, I have printers ink all over my hands. I'm going to get all sorts of dirt all over the book. And another one of the medieval manuscripts, the renaissance manuscripts that the MHS has is possibly a printers copy of a particular text. And you can see thumb prints in ink in various parts all over this book. So that's one of the ways that you can kind of tell the age of a book as these books are being read over a very, very long time, whether on parchment, which is

animal skin, or on early modern paper, both of those materials are very durable if you keep them in decent conditions. And so, these books get passed down through families for centuries, or get sold on and continue to be read. And so, you can get these kinds of patterns of use is one. The other thing is that you do get medieval manuscripts and early print that has not led such comfortable lives of being just passed from one library to another. But will get water stained or water damaged in various ways. And for parchment in particular, you can tell when that happens because the parchment will warp and then it can become incredibly difficult to close the book again. We own an Armenian manuscript here at the Beinecke that was sufficiently water damaged that you simply cannot close it again. Normally, when you're done reading a book, you close the covers and kind of put it on a shelf or put it back in his box. This book actually has to be kept with both covers flat in the box that it's housed in because the parchment is so warped that it can no longer close. One of the things that you can figure it out by really paying attention to where and where the dirt is, is that you might expect somebody to be reading a book of hours from start to finish and ideally every day start to finish but that's not usually what's happening. Or at least that's not always what's happening. Different owners might feel more moved by prayer at different times of day or books of hours are often composed of different texts and each one of them is slightly different. They will usually have a calendar they will usually have what is known as the little hours of the Virgin and then it will have a collection of other things and collection of other prayers. And by studying dirt or by studying where and other ways you can tell which portions of the text people are actually paying attention to, which will vary book by book.

Erin Olding 30:10

Interesting thing I'd like to segue into is how we in the 21st century, see and look at preserving and conserving these old texts and how people a couple of centuries ago just kind of played with them. What are those differences in ideologies?

Agnieszka Rec 30:28

There was in the middle of the 20th century, a very strong desire to collect books that were pristine. This is more true of print, but not exclusively, I think it was also true of manuscripts that as a

collector, the thing that was prized was the book as it looked when it came off the scribes desk, or when it came off the printing press. And if it had pages that had not been cut open, that was extra, what you wanted is the thing that came off the printing press and just went into a trunk and then sat there for the next 600 years. Now, there's been a turn in scholarship and collecting both public and private to be interested precisely in the ways that books were used. So, scholarship now again, like Kathryn Rudy, looking at these stains, but also other folks who are really interested in how were people reading these books, which you can also tell for example, by looking at marginalia and the notes that people took in books or by thinking about provenance, which is figuring out what are the hands that a book has passed through and what are the stories that we can tell this way?

Cassie Cloutier 31:24

After Erin completed her W. Dean Eastman Undergraduate residency at the MHS in the spring of 2023, we sat down with her to ask what it was like to lead an episode of the podcast, and to closely examine some of the oldest items in the MHS collection.

Erin Olding 31:45

I would say that, being the creative force behind this episode, I felt like I had a lot of freedom to dictate where the episode went. In some ways, that was a bit daunting because I had never done something like that before. But in other ways, and once I got into the groove of things, it was very fulfilling because I was able to, in my interviews with Anne and Peter and Agnieszka, talk about something that fascinated me and learn about something that fascinated me, which I think was the most fulfilling thing is learning more about medieval life, medieval daily life. Medieval history is my primary area of interest. And I also got to look at two of the medieval books in the Ellis Hall Reading Room at the MHS library. And while it was a bit intimidating at first handling, what are essentially artifacts, with the centuries old texts, it was still really fascinating, gently turning each page and seeing these beautiful, illuminated illustrations, and handling something and connecting with something that is so old. And yet with the MHS housing these items, people have an opportunity to look at them and study them and connect with history. So that was a really fulfilling experience. I will say that the fact that the MHS exists as an organization, giving the general public

and researchers and professors and anyone who has a desire to study history, the opportunity to do so, in a professional or a personal context is just a great thing in general. And it's something that I think more people should look into taking a visit and sitting down and looking at least one thing in the reading room because the MHS exists to give people the opportunity to connect with history and I think that's pretty important.

Erin Olding 34:08

[Outro music fades in] Thank you for joining me with this fascinating look at the medieval books in the MHS' archives. Together with Anne Bentley, Peter Drummey and Agnieszka Rec, we learned how everything from pages to paints were made. We also learned how both medieval and modern people acquired, read and interpreted these books. I spent my previous fall and spring semesters working at the MHS as a library assistant. When I wasn't assisting researchers at the circulation desk or retrieving items in the stacks. I had the opportunity to work on this episode of The Object of History. Discussing intriguing historical topics with the interviewees was an enriching learning experience.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:50

To look at some of the manuscripts discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast.

Cassie Cloutier 35:17

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