

Medieval Mastery

Book Illumination from Charlemagne
to Charles the Bold | 800-1475

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Miniatures from Charlemagne to Charles the Bold in a Historical-Geographical Perspective

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AN IMAGE OF THE EXHIBITION: SEVEN CENTURIES OF MANUSCRIPT PRODUCTION BETWEEN THE RHINE AND THE NORTH SEA.

Medieval Mastery brings together nearly one hundred manuscripts, each of which ranks among the finest examples of western European book illumination. Together, they span well nearly seven centuries of cultural history. The story begins, symbolically, in the year 800, when Charlemagne is crowned head of a pan-European empire. Charlemagne sees himself as the legitimate successor to the emperors of Rome, and he chooses Constantine as his great example. Under Charlemagne's rule the production of manuscripts revives. The story ends—as symbolically as it began—in 1475, two years before the death of Charles the Bold, when printing comes of age and assumes a number of the manuscript's essential functions.

Throughout the exhibition the visitor follows a clear chronological sequence, divided into four periods, which provides an insight into medieval manuscript production between the Rhine and the North Sea. Artistic centres do not remain permanently fixed in one place, but move with the passage of history from east to west and from south to north. At the same time the social import and the design of manuscripts also changes.

The artistic character of the 'masterly' miniatures provides the focus of the exhibition. The matchless quality of the works and the imagery with which the artists give visual shape to the written content are the first consideration. This is likewise the motivation for the essays and catalogue entries in this book. Colour and line, form and composition play the principal parts in the story. Naturally, the embedding of the actual work of art within its historical and cultural contexts is not omitted. But the atelier's organization and the illuminator's working practices are, like the history of the manuscripts and the iconography of the images, not this exhibition's first concern.

SEVEN CENTURIES IN ONE BOOK

The catalogue comprises two major parts. Part One focuses on the relationship between word and image and on the function of the manuscript within the various strata of medieval society. Part Two expands on the historical-geographical evolution that helps to interpret the constantly changing artistic imagery.

Word and image in context

The word plays an essential role in the medieval manuscript, but it melds with the image in an inimitable way. Both are supported by and nurtured in the manuscript. As Brigitte Dekeyzer's essay demonstrates, each does this in its own way, the image with colour

Eyckian master, Spiritual and worldly power united, miniature, detail, Augustine, *Cité de Dieu*, Southern Netherlands, ca. 1445. - Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, Ms. 9015, fol. 1. (cat. 73)

and line, the word with characters, which in their turn are made up of lines and colours. The image is not only an illustration and identifying mark—see Samuel IJsseling's essay—but the necessary vehicle of the text, the necessary condition for the generation of meaning and memory. Of course the images also frequently appeal to both heart and eye. As Herman Pleij puts it in his essay, "[Images] should intrigue, help, provoke discussion, inspire competition, contain solutions and ultimately also compel admiration and bring about the experience of joy. This makes the medieval miniature a true multimedial mainstay, which not so much replaces or clarifies, but rather challenges the word."

Initially no more than raw material, animal skin is processed into the support and repository of divine, political, poetical, scientific and aesthetic messages. Each in its own way, manuscripts encapsulate fragments of the evolution of human thought, feeling and action. As 'portals', manuscripts act as conduits for both existing and new ideas. Books are the most reliable but at the same time the most dangerous of friends. They might contain things that run subtly or completely counter to prevailing opinions and customs and may, with a few words or sentences, shake the very foundations of the entire social structure. Unsurprisingly therefore, many books end up on the pyre. Usually, however, they are the more or less faithful reflection of convictions which, transcribed, modified or glossed, are handed down the centuries.

Manuscripts function within diverse religious, domestic and political contexts, areas that are explored in the essays of Christopher de Hamel, William Noel and Bert Cardon. In the church and the abbey, the home of the wealthy burgher and the court, manuscripts appeal to new generations. Even in the early Middle Ages collections of books are built in which the need for the structuring of reality and the selection of knowledge plays a crucial role. Consequently, these medieval libraries, tiny though they may be in comparison with those of today, are the pre-eminent expression of man's quest for a coherent worldview. Karen de Coene elaborates further on this theme.

Looking at Books

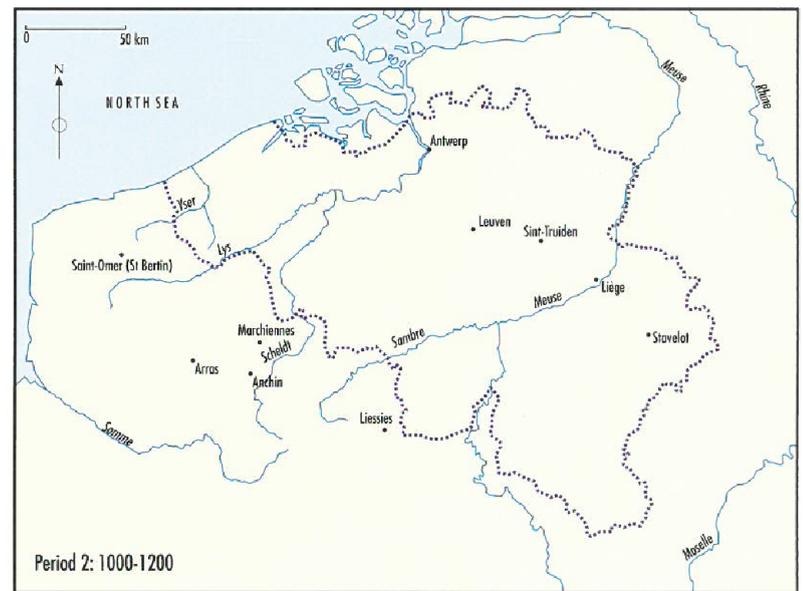
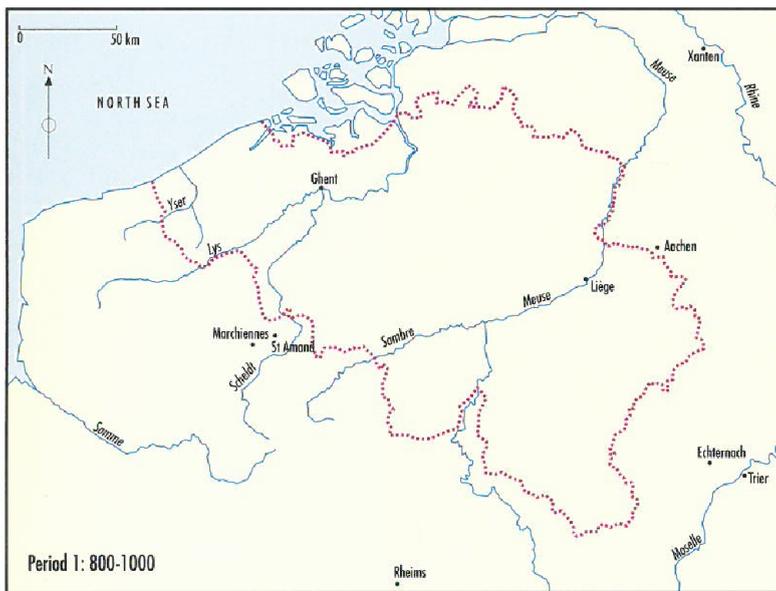
The second part of the catalogue illuminates the formal development of artistic language through the centuries within a historical and geographic context. Four chapters, each followed by a catalogue section with descriptive entries, shape the story and focus respectively on the imperial (Lawrence Nees), monastic (Walter Cahn), elite (Adelaide Bennett), princely

and urban (Dominique Vanwijnsberghe) contexts in which the manuscripts are embedded.

The fall of the Western Roman Empire and the subsequent barbarian invasions are succeeded by a period of transition to a Germanic Europe in which the legacy of antiquity is never completely lost. The idea of the empire continues to survive in the collective memory. In the late eighth century Charlemagne successfully organizes an imperial territory on a European scale. The historical model for that empire he finds in Italy. Aware of the inestimable value of both Roman culture and Christianity he surrounds himself with scholars who have a thorough command of classical knowledge. At the imperial court texts are feverishly collected and, analogous to the *vita activa* of antiquity, the active life in pursuance of the common good is an ideal. The artists of Charlemagne's court develop a new and extremely readable script—known to us as Caroline miniscule—and, like their Roman predecessors, they represent man and space as realistically as possible. Yet the Germanic component is also preserved. The decorative and magical are inherent to imperial art. Words written in gold and silver on purple-dyed parchment have a magical-sacred character. Aachen is the great political centre and the hub of book production. There are also important centres of intellectual culture in other parts of the Frankish empire: Fulda and Lorsch in central Germany, Freising and Augsburg in Bavaria, St Gall in Switzerland, Rheims and Tours in France. A number of smaller abbatial centres like St Bavo in Ghent, and St Bertin and St Vaast in northern France also play a part in this.

Around the year 1000, in the Ottonian period, classical culture, the natural environment and the magical-sacred aesthetic are still preserved. At the same time, fundamental social changes are taking place. Charlemagne's great empire is broken up and subdivided among his heirs according to Germanic laws of inheritance. Political and intellectual centres shift from Aachen to Saxony, the 'kingdom without a capital'. In manuscripts the emperor is increasingly represented as God's sworn and appointed ruler. It is almost as if they are used as political manifestos in which a reduced and waning power surrounds itself with an aura of importance. The Carolingian court school effectively loses its role and monasteries become the main producers of manuscripts.

Around the middle of the eleventh century, in consequence of that trend towards monastic production, illuminated art shifts away from purported earthly reality and focuses on a higher spiritual truth. Natural physical shapes and recognizable spaces give way to

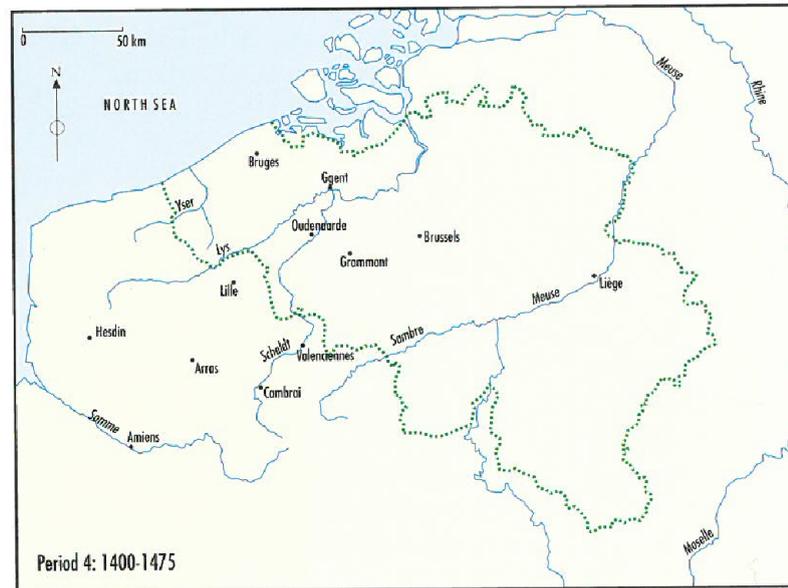
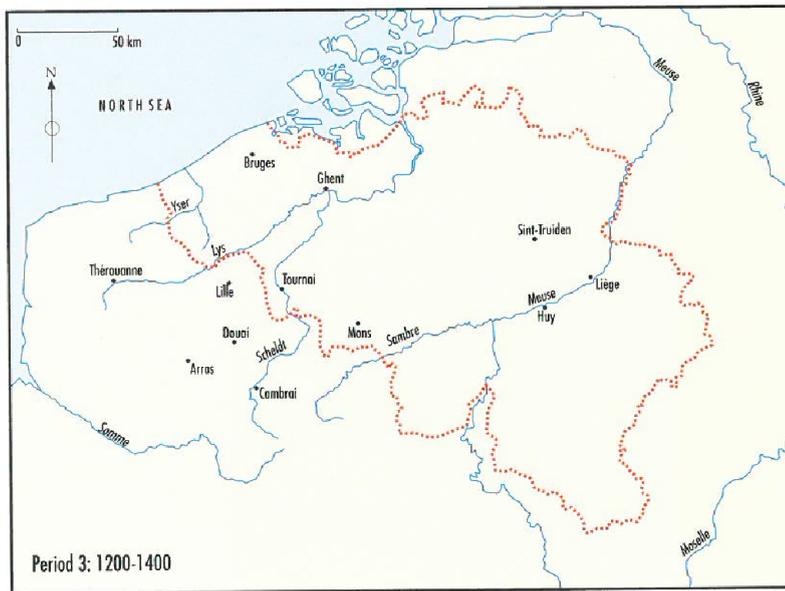


stylized and abstract forms. To the monk-artist, ultimate truth resides not on earth but in heaven. The longing for a spiritual reality dominates the Romanesque period. Artists enrich their palette and introduce new iconographic themes that extend the familiar programmes of the Carolingian and Ottonian periods with sensitivity and nuance. The abbey takes matters into their own hands. Religious culture prevails and history, which hitherto has served an important political function as the justification of Ottonian power and a means by which the deeds of the emperor can be emphasized, is no longer in evidence. Spirituality and the representation of the divine now dominate the page.

But the primacy of the spiritual order, far removed from the political and worldly life, is of relatively short duration. In the middle of the twelfth century, inspired by Abbot Suger of St Denis near Paris among others, the notion of *renovatio imperii*—the restoration of the united Christian empire founded by Emperor Constantine and furthered by Charlemagne—originates. The abbey and the great cathedral schools are still the promoters of intellectual culture, but their impact takes on more mundanely focused aspects. To a certain extent they may even be regarded as the precursors of the universities. The political and economic dynamic is increasingly at odds with the stability and spirituality of the Romanesque period. The contemplative and unchanging life characteristic of the monastic milieu makes way for an urban mentality. *Vita contemplativa* gives way to *vita activa*. Work is no longer a ‘con-

temptible’ activity but the individual’s concrete contribution to the realization of the divine city on earth, the prefiguration of the heavenly city. In the urban context the ‘burgher’ is characterized as a member of a separate group with its own specific concerns and desires. The images in manuscripts take on a more recognizable, worldly character. The content of the image changes, too, and the stock of not strictly religious literature rises. Of course the secular is still permeated with the spiritual, but interest in the active civic life in the town and in the countryside increases. Moreover, it is no longer only the intellectually educated clergy who transcribe texts and illuminate books. The increasing demand for manuscripts calls for an ever more rational production, which in turn enhances their profitability. Thus the profit mentality steals almost unnoticed into the creation of manuscripts.

This dynamic persists into the fourteenth century. But a darker reality begins to emerge. Culture seeks to be courtly and refined, yet this is blatantly at odds with the tragic realities of disease and death. The Hundred Years War exhausts the countries involved and the Black Death reigns over Europe. Art, too, fluctuates between these extremes, focusing on reality without being truly ‘realistic’. The image recreates and elevates reality. From around 1370 in the Southern Netherlands, together with the steady spread of an urban mentality, an art form emerges that focuses more than ever on quotidian reality and depicts the domestic, the caricatural and the macabre. During the Burgundian period, whose heyday is from 1420, this



trend is at its peak and an extremely powerful, naturalistic and yet idealized imagery appears. Among the Southern Netherlandish artists it is not the dark side of existence that triumphs but the glories of urban culture and courtly life. An extreme refinement is evident in fashion, fabrics, materials, colour and gesture. The images and the text establish and envision the wealth of spiritual and financial power. Every form of devotion is enrobed in luxury. Even the less affluent burgher emulates the culture of the courtier and buys similar manuscripts.

In the course of the centuries the written word acquires an ever more prominent place in the social fabric, and book production increases at a rapid rate. Initially, in the Carolingian and Ottonian periods, books are unique objects that circulate primarily at the imperial court. During the Romanesque period the manuscript is intended principally for the clergy: the book is their spiritual and intellectual nourishment and thus important. With the growth of the towns the process of civilization extends to a broader section of the population. By the same token, the quantity and diversity of books also increases. In the Southern Netherlands at the end of the fourteenth century this leads to a veritable mass production, in

which ever more efficient means of production are sought. The manuscripts in this exhibition and the catalogue entries that accompany them reflect this striking increase. From being unique 'islands' they evolve to become qualitatively prominent 'archipelagos'. It is this increasing demand for the written word that gives rise to mechanized production processes and the development of printing.

The world of the medieval manuscript is the kingdom of a small elite of scholars and initiates: the imperial court, the monastic enclaves, the wealthy townsmen and women and the patrons. The exhibition makes frequent, evocative reference to these various spheres of life, their temporal and spatial differences and their specific vision of man and the world. The manuscripts displayed are exclusive, unique and always authentic. Moreover, their numbers visibly increase through the centuries. Powerful metaphors, appropriate to each historical-geographical section, refer not so much to the content of the exhibited works as to the visual language of the miniatures: the illusion of the body (Carolingian and Ottonian); the celestial colour (Romanesque); the ennobled line (Gothic); the suggestion of space (Burgundian). They are keys that unlock the extraordinary world and the intimate privacy of the medieval image.