

HIST302

Subunit 5.3.4: “Illuminated Manuscripts”

The written word was a prized commodity before the age of mass print. The act of writing was specialized skill throughout the early middle ages, reserved for those who preserved Christian texts. As a result, much of the writing carried out during the early medieval period occurred in monasteries. Here, in special writing rooms called *scriptoria*, monks produced copies of biblical, liturgical, patristic, and other ecclesiastical texts. Speaking the words as they wrote them, scribes had a high status in their monasteries, and certain monasteries became known for the quality of texts their scribes produced. Acquiring such a reputation was in part due to the labor-intensive act of copying texts by hand, a process that could take a long time. It was also in part due to assembling and binding hand copied sheets into a book. Parchment pages, animal hides that were treated and prepared as a writing surface through a lengthy multistep process, were cut and sown into bindings by hand. The bounded book was then adorned with jewels and enamel and ivory carvings. The pages inside were also adorned. Designs were added to frame the text on the page. Initial letters at the beginning of a page or paragraph were enlarged and decorated, and detailed paintings were added for illustration. Gold leaf was added to the background of these miniature paintings to illuminate the page and illustration. Thus the book through which the prized written word appeared was in itself a work of art.

Illuminated manuscripts of the kind described here first appeared in the fourth century and were more or less a preserve of Irish monasteries until the Carolingian period. During the ninth century, illuminated manuscripts took on increased prominence throughout Western Europe. As part of the reform movement initiated by Charlemagne, Alcuin of York, whom Charlemagne brought to his court to head up his palace school, devised a script to bring more uniformity to widely divergent writing styles. Known as Carolingian miniscule, this script is the basis of modern lower case letters. There was also more attention paid to miniature painting, and schools devoted to the art appeared in monasteries. Initial letters were adorned with foliage and flowers, and scenes relating to the text or everyday life appeared among the pages. So, too, did images of those who commissioned books for private collections or patrons. The audiences of illuminated manuscripts were monastic communities, or, as in the case of patrons, individuals. The books produced were still mainly of a religious nature. During this time period, there was a growth in books of hours, books consisting of prayers to be said at various times throughout the day, for private individuals. However, nonreligious texts were also copied in monasteries. For educational purposes, scribes copied texts of classical poets and orators, such as Livy and Cicero. With the rise of universities, the audience for books increased drastically. Moreover, wealthy individuals began desiring more illuminated manuscripts, which in part represented their wealth, for their private libraries. By the thirteenth century, lay illuminators appeared in Paris and the



production of illuminated manuscripts ceased to be the sole preserve of monasteries. The higher demand for books made production more routine and sometimes resulted in the distribution of the production process, with binding occurring in one place and passages of a text being copied and illustrated separately. It was also during the thirteenth century that paper was being manufactured in Western Europe and was increasingly used in place of parchment. The introduction of movable type in the mid-fifteenth century only slightly slowed manuscript production in the first century of its existence. Many people still preferred hand-copied books and the miniatures inside. In short, the illuminated manuscript retained its value as a work of art and unique reading experience long after the invention of print.

