

# Secular Manuscripts

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*The Trial of Martha Stewart*  
Contemporary legal Manuscript page  
Ray Ogar

The words “illuminated manuscript” conjure up images

of richly and painstakingly ornamented pages of parchment devoted to God and, in particular, the Bible. Indeed, the sheer amount of effort, talent, and materials used in the creation of an illuminated manuscript was often understood as a physical

demonstration of the greatness of the Almighty and the power of His Word. However, with the arrival of the High Middle Ages (the late twelfth to the early thirteenth century), the production of illuminated manuscripts ceased to be centered in the realm of the monastery and began to move into secular society. Though the decoration and production of illuminated manuscripts initially focused on the Bible and theological treatises, the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth century saw the rise of secular tomes with subjects geared toward lay students and the aristocracy.

Following the sack of Rome and the massive “barbarian” invasions of the West, the earlier centers of learning and literacy in Europe fell largely into disuse. As Christianity spread, education and study re-emerged, but solely within monastic communities. It was in the monasteries that illuminated manuscripts were first produced and used. However, in the thirteenth century, society changed, and education found an audience outside of the monastery. Previously, only the aristocratic families with great wealth could afford to send their children (usually sons) to monastic schools to be educated. The High Middle Ages began to see a greater distribution of wealth. While economies were still more or less agrarian in nature, international trade was quickly becoming a major contributor to the growth of wealth in major cities. A middle class of merchants, bankers, and other professionals emerged and sought to provide education for their sons. It is at this time of change that Western Europe saw the creation of universities and the spread of educational ideals outside the realm of the monasteries and the Roman Catholic Church<sup>1</sup>.

The founding of large universities such as the University of Paris generated a large market for the production of illuminated manuscripts. Study of theology and of the Bible remained the dominant disciplines at first. Secular subjects, however, such as law, medicine, and the liberal arts, also became important parts of the curriculum<sup>2</sup>. Students of all of these fields needed copies of books, often

written by their own professors, from which to study. The subjects of law and medicine gave the greatest impetus to the creation of secular illuminated manuscripts.

With the formation of the lay universities, the study of law became an important subject for students of the later medieval world. Medieval law did not merely incorporate what modern audiences think of as law today, such as civil and criminal law; but also included Church or canon law. In the sixth century, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian ordered that all civil law, both previously written and unwritten, be compiled into one complete set or code. The Code of Justinian became the basis for all law throughout the High Middle Ages. It was Justinian's law code that would be studied in the medieval university system. Manuscripts of this law code were enormous in size as they incorporated not only the laws themselves, but also commentaries by university professors<sup>3</sup>.

The collection of canon or ecclesiastical laws was just as immense in scope and size. These laws were gathered together in a collection known as the *Decretals*, which were laws written by Catholic popes to be upheld in church courts. Because the Roman Catholic Church changed or added laws with each succeeding pope, the amount of canon law grew continually. The Church expected the universities to teach all of the decrees of previous and current papal officials<sup>4</sup>.

At the medieval University of Bologna, the study of law was the highest priority. Indeed, Bologna became an international center for the study of law, attracting professors and students from around the world. Though ecclesiastical law held sway only over those of the Christian faith or under Christian rule, the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (Roman body of civil law) dominated jurisprudence across the globe much as the Roman Empire had done in centuries past. Because of Bologna's status as the world's preeminent center of law, most illuminated legal manuscripts were produced there, and in Italy in general. The weight of importance given to law ensured that the production of legal

manuscripts would warrant the same devotion, care, and consideration as the production of theological works<sup>5</sup>.

Along with the subject of law, the High Middle Ages saw the development of the study of medicine at the university levels. As in the study of law, textbooks were needed for medical education. Medical textbooks lent themselves easily to illustration due to the necessity of detailed diagrams of anatomy, procedures, instruments, and medications. Like much of medieval knowledge and thought, many medical ideas and practices hailed from Ancient Greek and Roman sources<sup>6</sup>. Ancient medical treatises prized in medieval Europe included Dioscorides' *De materia medica*, Pseudo-Apuleius Platonius' *Herbarium*, and Placitus' *Liber medicinae ex animalibus*. Not all medieval medicine derived from the Ancient Greeks and Romans, however. The Crusades and the Islamic invasions of Western Europe exposed European scholars to the vast wealth of medical knowledge in the Islamic world. Arab intellectuals preserved many classical texts lost to the West during the period of migrations and invasions. Islamic culture also had its own impressive tradition of medical treatises in the works of Avicenna and Averroes<sup>7</sup>.

One form of medical text that found fans in both university and aristocratic settings was the herbal. The herbal was a type of text that catalogued plants in descriptions accompanied by illustrations. Useful to those practicing medicine, the herbal was also highly prized by aristocratic bibliophiles because of the intricate depictions of nature. Because students and book lovers alike sought herbals, a plethora of copies made it to market. Problems with accuracy arose because of the creation of successive copies. Often artists would merely copy what they saw in a previous text without firsthand knowledge of the plants. As a result, many illustrations strayed from the actual botanical sample. Famous examples of herbals include those of Dioscorides and Pseudo-Apuleius mentioned above<sup>8</sup>. A fifteenth-century herbal manuscript is shown in the exhibit.

While students created a vast market for the sale of illuminated manuscripts in a number of secular disciplines, the wealthy aristocracy also constituted a considerable market in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. A typical university student collected books in order to further his own knowledge; however, the aristocrat saw books not only as sources of knowledge, but also as investments and symbols of wealth.<sup>9</sup> Commissioned by the affluent to serve as testaments to their own status, manuscripts created for the aristocracy were typically written either in the vernacular (the local spoken language) or in French, the language considered by many European aristocrats to symbolize wealth and social status best<sup>10</sup>. Though manuscripts created for the higher echelon of society encompassed many subjects, the most sought after were romances, histories, travel or adventures, scientific works (such as the herbals mentioned previously), and the Greek and Roman classics<sup>11</sup>.

One of the most well known of these topics today is the medieval romance. Based upon the ideas of chivalry and courtly love, romances were initially tales spun by traveling minstrels and *troubadours* who entertained aristocratic courts with their recitation of romantic poems and stories. These wandering oral poets, whose stories could be altered over and over again, were replaced by entertainers with written manuscripts, thus ensuring that the story would remain the same with each telling. Possibly the most well known romance of the Middle Ages was the *Roman de la Rose*. This tale of love, morality, and philosophy is thought to have been one of the most widespread and popular stories for approximately three hundred years after its initial introduction. Over three hundred original illuminated manuscripts are still in existence today testifying to the *Roman de la Rose's* popularity in and influence on medieval society<sup>12</sup>.

Many of those who participated in the Crusades had heard heroic tales during their journeys. They felt a special kinship with tales

starring King Arthur and Alexander the Great. Illuminated manuscripts of those stories made it possible to share these tales with family and friends, as well as to impress those around them. Manuscripts about King Arthur and his knights also served as models of behavior and action for young knights and ladies<sup>13</sup>.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (re-presented in the exhibit by a photograph of a page from the famous Ellesmere manuscript) reflects another type of medieval secular literature. Chaucer wrote it as if it were a collection of stories recounted by pilgrims to one another as they went on the pilgrimage route to Santiago da Compostela in the fourteenth century.

The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries of the High Middle Ages saw a shift in education and the creation of manuscripts from the Catholic Church and its monasteries to the aristocracy and the laity. The advent of universities and the spread of education opened the way for the production of secular tomes and treatises. Though the creation of illuminated copies of the Bible and theological works would remain necessary and popular, books devoted to other subjects such as law, medicine, history, and literature became important and prized possessions.

1 Janet Backhouse, *The Illuminated Manuscript* (New York: Phaidon Press, 1979), 8.

2 Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (Hong Kong: Phaidon Press, 2003), 127-8.

3 De Hamel, 138.

4 De Hamel, 138.

5 "Illuminating the Law: Legal Manuscripts at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge," Fitzwilliam Museum <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/intro.htm>

6 Backhouse, 33.

7 "Medical Manuscripts," Glossary, Digital Catalogue of Medieval Manuscripts, The British Library <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/GlossM.asp>.

8 Werner Telesko, *The Wisdom of Nature: The Healing Powers and Symbolism of Plants and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 10-11.

9 Brigitte Buettner, "Profane Illuminations, Secular Illusions: Manuscripts in Late Medieval Courtly Society," *Art Bulletin*, 74/1 (1994): 76.

10 Backhouse, 54.

11 John Harthan, *An Introduction to Illuminated Manuscripts* (Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House, 1983), 13.

12 Pamela Porter, *Courtly Love in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 28-29.

13 De Hamel, 145.