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NEWS FROM THE GETTY

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GETTY MUSEUM PRESENTS EXHIBITION OF GOTHIC MANUSCRIPTS

Exhibition Features New Acquisitions



The Dragon Pursues the Woman Clothed in the Sun Who Receives the Wings of an Eagle (detail), about 1255–1260. Unknown illuminator. London (probably), England. Tempera colors, gold leaf, colored washes, pen and ink on parchment. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. Ludwig III 1, fol. 21v.

Gothic Grandeur: Manuscript Illumination, 1200–1350

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center
December 13, 2011–May 13, 2012

LOS ANGELES—The term “Gothic” evokes visions of soaring spires, graceful flying buttresses, and sparkling stained glass. It also represents an important style of manuscript illumination that dominated the High Middle Ages in Europe. Drawing primarily from the Getty Museum’s permanent collection, ***Gothic Grandeur: Manuscript Illumination, 1200–1350***, on display December 13, 2011–May 13, 2012, at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center, celebrates the achievements of Gothic manuscript illumination in Europe. The exhibition also spotlights two new acquisitions: the Abbey Bible, considered a pinnacle of Gothic illumination, and a previously unknown German leaf from a superb Apocalypse manuscript.

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"Western Europe in the thirteenth century underwent dramatic social and economic changes, and Gothic manuscripts reflect this through a number of stylistic and narrative innovations," said Elizabeth Morrison, acting senior curator of manuscripts. "The rapid growth of cities and universities created an unprecedented demand for illuminated books across Europe."

Originally coined by Renaissance writers, "Gothic" was a derogatory term applied to the architecture of the period, which they attributed to the Barbarian Goths. Its early negative meaning has given way to a reverence for the early artistic advancements found in the Gothic period. Featuring works from England, France, Germany, and Italy, the exhibition reveals that some of the most beautiful painting from the Middle Ages can be found in Gothic manuscripts.

Elements unique to Gothic illumination include vivid narratives, a sense of naturalism, and the imaginative use of the margins of the page as a field for figural decoration. In the Abbey Bible, figures are imbued with a liveliness and delicacy that enhances the storytelling and brings the pages to life. Some of its abundant marginal illumination is directly related to the biblical text that it accompanies, such as David slaying the giant Goliath, but in other cases, the images stray from a linear narrative, as when a man riding a dragon appears alongside a bearded human head that walks on red-hooved legs. These examples illustrate the growing importance of borders as a space that could be both didactic and engaging to a broad audience.

A recently acquired German manuscript leaf exemplifies the subtle and graceful naturalism seen in Gothic illumination, and also offers rich visualizations of the textual events. Epic imagery inspired by the story of the Apocalypse is shown alongside short commentaries that help readers understand the allegorical and symbolic language in the Book of Revelations. The leaf was once part of a large-scale picture book, examples of which are exceedingly rare and which demonstrate the many ways that Christians of the period were receiving biblical narratives.

The manuscripts on display will give visitors an overview of the era and the types of books produced during that period. Additionally, the exhibition explores the change from a monumental and naturalistic style to an approach characterized by elegantly swaying figures and delicate, attenuated forms by the middle of the fourteenth century.

On February 27, the pages of the manuscripts will be turned to allow visitors to see additional treasures.

Gothic Grandeur: Manuscript Illumination, 1200–1350 is co-curated by Elizabeth Morrison, acting senior curator of manuscripts, and Erene Rafik Morcos, curatorial assistant at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

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