GETTY MUSEUM EXHIBITION CELEBRATES THE IMPORTANCE OF TOUCH AND THE HAND IN AN EXHIBITION OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM THE MIDDLE AGES

Touching the Past: The Hand and the Medieval Book

July 7 – September 27, 2015
at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center

LOS ANGELES — Today, rare medieval manuscripts are viewed from a respectful distance in climate-controlled cases, protected from human touch. But, in their day, they were tangible, tactile objects that were handled—reverently, carelessly, perhaps even obsessively—by their owners, and were themselves the culmination of painstaking human craftsmanship.

Touching the Past: The Hand and the Medieval Book, an exhibition drawn largely from the Getty Museum’s remarkable collection of manuscripts, explores the importance of the hand (manus in Latin) in the creation and use of manuscripts that were a part of their readers’ daily lives.

“For good reason, illuminated manuscripts are displayed in museums today as rare works of art, safely shielded from damage or deterioration by museum glass,” explains Timothy Potts, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. “This exhibition highlights how these works—products of many hours of skilled craftsmanship and manual labor—were originally created to be held in the hand, leafed through and enjoyed, just as a well-illustrated book is today. Through these masterpieces from the Museum’s collection and other major loans, visitors to the exhibition will explore how what we now consider works of art once figured in the daily lives of their creators and users in the Middle Ages.”

The word “manuscript” is derived from the Latin phrase meaning "hand written" (manuscripti). When seeing the finished product, it is easy to forget that the parchment pages, inks and pigments used for writing and painting, and the wooden boards, string, and leather straps for binding, were all the result of painstaking, meticulous manual labor. A cooperative enterprise, making a book required many craftsmen. Though the handiwork of an individual is
often difficult to discern, a closer look sometimes reveals the telltale tendencies of an individual scribe or the errors of a particular illuminator.

Once a book was finished, exploring its contents required unfastening clasps, grasping tabs attached to the edges of pages, or lifting protective veils that covered illuminations. Some images were meant to be experienced by the hand as well as the eye, through contact and manipulation. All of these encounters left marks—the build-up of dirt on a page, a scribbled annotation, the loss of pigment where an illumination was appreciatively rubbed. These traces of touch show the many ways that medieval audiences interacted with books. As Kristen Collins, associate curator of manuscripts for the J. Paul Getty Museum, said, “It is easy to forget that these lavishly illuminated pages were once turned, stroked, stitched, and sometimes even sliced by generations before us. This exhibition reveals the myriad ways in which manuscripts demanded this kind of touch and interaction.”

The exhibition includes 26 manuscripts, with important loans from LACMA, the Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, and UCLA and loans from other museum collections, and is divided into three sections. The first considers the role of the hand in the making of manuscripts. The second section explores the physical processes involved in the act of reading. The third section highlights the hand and the importance of gesture in medieval painting. In art of the period, hands were essential devices used by artists to direct the eye of the reader, to tell complex narratives, and to make their pictures speak.

Touching the Past: The Hand and the Medieval Book, is on view July 7–September 27, 2015 at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center. The exhibition is co-curated by Kristen Collins, associate curator of manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum, and Megan McNamee, former graduate intern in the Department of Manuscripts. A full list of related events to be announced.

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