



WHAT IS AN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPT?

Questioning What Counts: A Critique of Display,
Collection, and Narrative in the Museum
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Photos from top to bottom:
Glory of the Painted Page Gallery views, Cleveland Museum of Art.
"Canon Tables Fol. 1" from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States. .
"Part of the Qingming Scroll painting", photo from the online exhibition, Copyright to the Field Museum, reproduced for educational use.



INTRODUCTION

The term “illuminated manuscript” likely brings to mind a very specific image of Latin text decorated with brightly colored ink and gold leaf. In other words, the term brings to mind seemingly European objects and art forms. As the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA) explained in their exhibition *The Glory of the Painted Page*, manuscript means “written by hand” and illuminate means “to light up.”

The intent of these pages is to compare how two art museums display illuminated manuscripts and also question what it means to call something an illuminated manuscript and why some objects might be left out of that category by examining the Qingming Scroll at the Field Museum.

In this analysis, I hope to problematize how objects are presented as static by investigating the Canon Tables of the Zeytun Gospels. Specifically, questioning how not recognizing the provenance of an object can freeze it in time.

My purpose here is not to expand the category of the illuminated manuscript to include all written artifacts but rather to consider what it means to categorize cultural objects without considering their similarities with other cultural artifacts across cultures.

As authors Urmila Mohan and Susan Rodgers explain in their article “Classification Schemes Gone Awry,” classification and display can mislead museum-goers. By emphasizing “overly rigid and ahistorical” maps and terminology, viewers can walk away with a simplistic and limited understanding of objects that are actually highly mobile and have been collected across modern borders (Mohan and Rodgers 2021).

By asking readers to consider de-emphasizing geographically charged terminology like “illuminated manuscript,” they might see how museum visitors better understand networks and themes that transcend modern understandings of geography while recognizing the modern lives of these objects.



Glory of the Painted Page Gallery views, Cleveland Museum of Art.



THE GLORY OF THE PAINTED PAGE

The Glory of the Painted Page was an exhibit on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art from November 2010 through April 2011. The purpose of this exhibit is to display “richly embellished works of art” that characterize medieval artistic expression from the fall of the Roman Empire to the advent of typing (CMA 2010).

The exhibition is composed of two small galleries connected by a central room. Full manuscripts and leaves of manuscripts are displayed framed on walls or in glass-covered cases.

Neither the exhibition announcement nor the “Gallery Views” post on the CMA’s website mentions the creation of illuminated manuscripts or related book arts in other parts of the world. In fact, illuminated manuscripts are presented as being almost exclusively created in Europe

A magazine article published by Stephen N. Fliegel, curator of Medieval art at CMA entitled “A Chronicle of Book Arts” explains the importance of illuminated manuscripts to historians to understand the arts and culture of the Middle Ages. In this article, Fliegel plainly states that illuminated manuscripts were made in every country in Europe, with no mention of other regions creating illuminated manuscripts (Fliegel 2010). This restricts the creation of illuminated manuscripts to Europe.

Additionally, the museum’s provided promotional material lays out some parameters for what counts as an illuminated manuscript, including that it they are written on vellum (a type of writing medium made from animal skin) and not paper, handwritten, and embellished with gold and bright colored inks (CMA 2010). The exhibit materials also stress that these manuscripts were produced by the Catholic Church and in Church establishments- like the scriptoria of monasteries (Fliegel 2010).

"Fol. 1r, Genesis" c. 1275–1300 from the Cleveland Museum of Art Collection, Creative Commons.



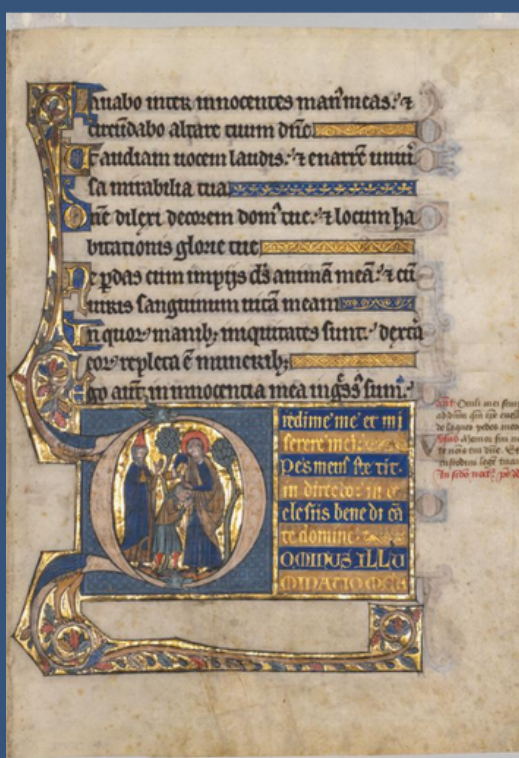
"Miniature Excised from a Psalter: Christ in Majesty with Symbols of the Four Evangelists", c. 1235 from the Cleveland Museum of Art Coll, Creative Commons.



"Frontispiece Miniature from the Manuscript of a Poem by Guillaume Crétin: Debate Between Two Women" From the Cleveland Museum of Art, Creative Commons.



"Single Leaf Excised from a Psalter: Initial D[ominus illuminatio mea] with Samuel Anointing David " c. 1270–1290 from the Cleveland Museum of Art Collection, Creative Commons.



Although the exhibit displayed a varied collection of European illuminated manuscripts, they were only European and made no reference to the fact that similar book arts were practiced around the world. *The Glory of the Painted Page* does a good job of providing an appropriate context for the mentioned region (Europe), but is misleading to viewers because it seems that manuscripts like this were only produced in Europe.

“Virgin and Child with the Archangels Michael and Gabriel- From Ethiopia” about 1480–1520 from the J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



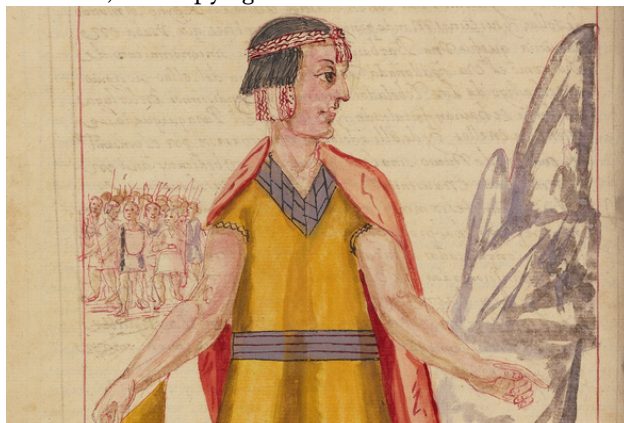
“Gracienne Taking Leave of Her Father the Sultan” 1464 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



“Carpet Page from Qur'an” 9th century from the J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



“Tupac Inca Yupanqui” Part of Historia general del Piru completed in 1616 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States



TRAVERSING THE GLOBE THROUGH ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

Traversing the Globe through Illuminated Manuscripts was an exhibition put together by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles from January 26th through June 26th, 2016 (Keene, 2016). As explained by curator Bryan C. Keene in a blog post on the Getty's website, the intent of the exhibit was to show how the world was conceptualized from the 9th to 17th centuries through images, texts, and objects (Keene, 2016). Keene was inspired to think globally about the museum's collections by an illuminated Ethiopian Gospels book which is pictured above (Keene, 2016).

Physically, the exhibit was split into two galleries connected by a central atrium. The central space held a map graphic that illustrated the geographical spread of the collection.

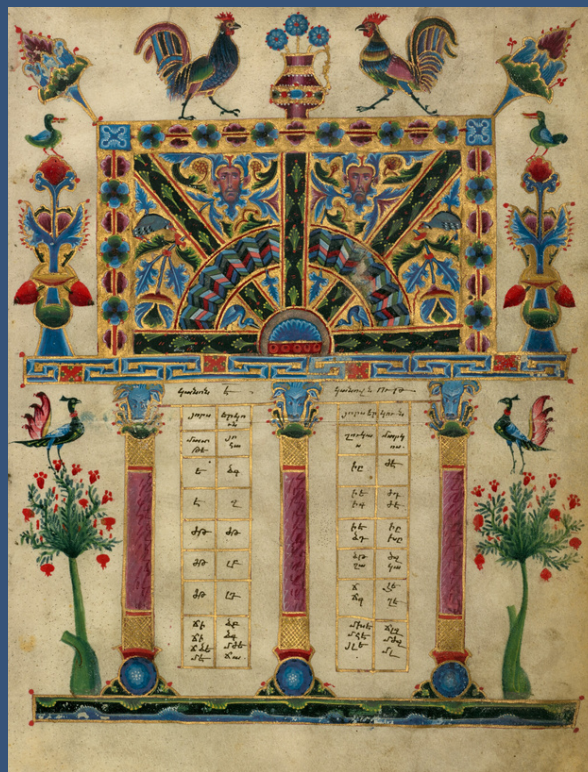
Then, one gallery was organized by geography and the second gallery was organized thematically by religion, trade, and transmission (Trynoski, 2016). The purpose of this division was to establish the geography from which these objects came. And to encourage visitors to expand their understanding of the displayed objects to include networks of interaction beyond modern borders.

Interestingly, the exhibit presented the manuscripts as more dynamic objects by turning the pages of the texts halfway through the run of the exhibition (Getty, 2016) and by including performances of live readings of the texts in their original languages, some of which can still be found on their website (Keene, 2016).

THE ZEYTUN GOSPELS CANON TABLES



“Canon Tables Fol. 1” from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



“Canon Tables Fol. 6” from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.

The above images depict two of the eight folios of the Canon Tables of the Zeytun Gospels, which were removed from the rest of the Zeytun manuscript as a result of the Armenian Genocide (Watenpaugh 2019). The Zeytun Gospels were illuminated in 1256 by artist Toros Roslin and became a revered relic and liturgical object known to perform miracles. The Canon tables themselves functioned as an index, “listing passages that narrate the same events in different Gospels” (Watenpaugh 2019, 3). These pages were stolen from the Zeytun Gospels and traveled to the United States, where they remained in the private collection of a prominent family until the J. Paul Getty Museum purchased them in 1994 (Watenpaugh, 2019).

In 2010, a branch of the Armenian Church filed a lawsuit that demanded the return of the Canon Tables by the Getty Museum (Watenpaugh 2019).

The lawsuit hung on the question of whether the Canon Tables were actually stolen because of events related to the Armenian Genocide or if they were “the rightful property of the Getty”. If the pages were stolen at any point in the past, it would imply that the Getty did not lawfully buy the works in the first place (Watenpaugh 2019, 277).

The lawsuit reached a settlement before the official trial began, in which the church agreed to donate the Canon Tables to the Getty, so that they could be displayed and shared with the public. In return, the Getty changed the provenance of the folios to recognize the “historical ownership” of the pages by the church (Watenpaugh 2019, 283). The striking Canon Tables were a prized possession of the Getty, and have been displayed 11 times since their acquisition. *Traversing the Globe Through Illuminated Manuscripts* was the first exhibition the Tables were included in after the settlement (Boehm 2015).

THE ZEYTUN GOSPELS CANON TABLES



"Canon Tables Fol. 3" from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



"Canon Tables Fol. 4" from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.

Although scholars and the public alike are hopeful that this arrangement will set a precedent for how disputes between religious institutions and museums are settled, not everyone is happy with the settlement. Wishing instead for the missing pages to be reunited with the Zeytun manuscript (Watenpugh 2019).

Overall *Traversing the Globe Through Illuminated Manuscripts* is a well-rounded exhibit that encourages visitors to think thematically about art and historical themes, but it is problematic that no information was included about the change of provenance and the settlement. This effectively freezes the Canon Tables in the time that they were created, severing them from their troubled journey to the Getty and the meaningful role that they now play in Armenian American communities

Entrance to the Cyrus Tang Hall of China, photo from the online exhibition, Copyright to the Field Museum, reproduced for educational use.



THE CYRUS TANG HALL OF CHINA

The Cyrus Tang Hall of China is a permanent exhibit in Chicago's Field Museum that opened in the summer of 2015 consisting of five large galleries and complemented by an online exhibition (Shaw, 2015). As the Field explains, the purpose of the exhibit is to help audiences understand how "there is no one China, how change and continuity define Chinese cultures, and how singular objects can tell a multitude of stories" (Field Museum, 2015).

Unlike the other two exhibits examined in this zine, this exhibition is not in an art museum, and it does not hold illuminated manuscripts. Instead, the exhibit features a Chinese Qingming scroll, which may be considered to be like an illuminated manuscript.

The Qingming scroll is a highlight of the exhibit (and is advertised as such), the 27-foot-long painting, entitled *Along the River during the Qingming Festival*, is a 17th-century rendering of the original 12th-century scroll that has been copied and reworked throughout Chinese history (Field Museum 2015). The scroll depicts an idealized scene of life during the Qingming festival and has been an important object in understanding life in 12th and 17th century China (Field Museum 2015). Only 18 inches of the scroll is able to be viewed at a time. But underneath the painting is an interactive display that allows visitors to scroll through the entire scene (Tepper 2015). This allows the object to maintain some of its dynamic nature, but there is still no mention of the provenance of the scroll.

"Left end of the Qingming Scroll painting", photo from the online exhibition, Copyright to the Field Museum, reproduced for educational use.



THE QINGMING SCROLL

But can the Field's Qingming scroll be considered an illuminated manuscript? What is the benefit of doing so?

First, like illuminated manuscripts, handscroll paintings were only meant to be viewed occasionally (Delbanco 2008). The Zeytun Gospels, for example, were only brought out for special occasions (Watenpauch 2019).

Second, the nature of viewing a handscroll painting is much like viewing a book or manuscript because it is unrolled only a little at a time, meaning only one or two people can look at it (Delbanco 2008). This is in contrast to more "traditional" forms of art like paintings, which are meant to be viewed by an audience.

Third, when handling a handscroll, a person rolls out each small section and re-rolls it as they unroll the next. This means that, like the turning of pages in a manuscript, the viewer is in direct physical contact with the object (Delbanco 2008). For both objects this allows the viewer or reader to interact with the scroll or manuscript at their own pace.

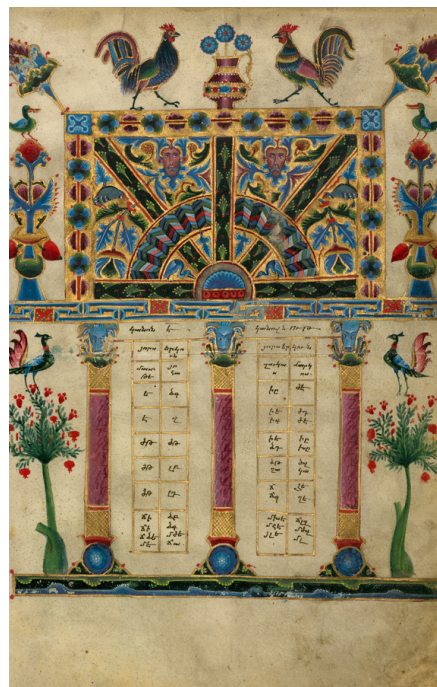
Lastly, handscroll paintings like the Qingming painting are used as insight into how people lived at that time (Field Museum 2015). Glory of the Painted Page curator Stephen N. Fliegel made a similar point, saying that illuminated manuscripts "impart invaluable information about the art, society, culture, and religion of the era" (Fliegel 2010).

By considering the Qingming scroll in the same category as illuminated manuscripts, without disconnecting it from its historical and modern contexts, museum-goers would be able to appreciate the similarity in book arts across modern boundaries.

ANALYSIS



"Frontispiece Miniature from the Manuscript of a Poem by Guillaume Crétin: Debate Between Two Women" From the Cleveland Museum of Art, Creative Commons.



"Canon Tables Fol. 6" from the Zeytun Gospels 1256 from The J. Paul Getty Museum, No Copyright-United States.



"Part of the Qingming Scroll painting", photo from the online exhibition, Copyright to the Field Museum, reproduced for educational use.

By critically viewing each of these exhibits, the productive and unproductive aspects of them all are illuminated. By analyzing them together, a path to a more analytical display type may be possible.

The Cleveland Museum of Art's exhibition, *The Glory of the Painted Page*, is exclusive. The intended takeaway seems to be that illuminated manuscripts are a purely European art. This anchoring of objects in modern political boundaries ties the pages to states and political entities that did not exist when they were created and used. Although important historical context about the production and function of illuminated manuscripts in Europe is provided, the exclusivity is misleading to the viewer. It projects the message that these objects are of the past and will always be of the past.

The Getty's exhibition, *Traversing the Globe Through Illuminated Manuscripts* does a better job of geographically expanding what counts as an illuminated manuscript.

Moreover, by implying the viewer to think thematically the objects are able to be more accurately viewed as they might have been when they were created. The exhibit also does a good job of presenting the books as dynamic by turning the pages halfway through and providing readings of the text in their original languages. However, as seen with the Canon Tables case study, the Getty also fails at displaying the objects in the exhibit as agents in the modern world.

Finally, the Field Museum's *Cyrus Tang Hall of China* differs from the other exhibits discussed because it is in a natural history museum. Like *The Glory of the Painted Page*, this exhibit is anchored in modern political boundaries. By examining the Qingming scroll alongside the display of illuminated manuscripts, I argue that by understanding these similar (but also different) objects under the same category viewers and scholars alike might be able to sever the geographical association of the term "illuminated manuscript" and instead focus on how these objects were used and how they continue to be used.



CONCLUSION

For clarity, I am not arguing for the lumping of objects into large categories based on vague similarities between them. Including historical context alongside displayed objects is crucial to fully understanding the object and not misleading the viewer.

Based on all of this, future exhibitions can better display illuminated manuscripts by recognizing the variety of book arts and related mediums across cultures, breaking down modern political boundaries, and including information about the provenance of objects.

Recognizing the variety of book arts and related mediums, while still providing sufficient context about the origins of objects, allows objects in seemingly different categories to be compared beyond modern political boundaries. Creating exhibits that highlight comparison and objects across “established” categories, like including a handscroll in an exhibition of illuminated manuscripts, encourages visitors to think critically about larger themes.

In turn, this can help break down modern political boundaries, disconnecting the objects from modern conceptions of countries and regions.

Lastly, including information about the provenance of objects reminds the viewer that these objects still exist as important objects today. Talking about the “recent histories” of objects helps them be seen as dynamic rather than static. One way this might be achieved is by providing a pamphlet that included this information. Or the museum can hold information sessions for visitors. There are a number of different ways that this can be talked about.

In short, there will always be ways to improve displays to help museum-goers question what they are seeing and think critically about the past, present, and future.

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