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<http://www.wsj.com/articles/beyond-words-illuminated-manuscripts-in-boston-collections-review-a-trove-of-beautiful-books-1473804715>

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'Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections' Review: A Trove of Beautiful Books

In the era of disembodied texts on Kindles, it's easy to forget that books used to be created entirely by hand.



Detail from the Noyon Missal (French, 1225-50) depicting Pope Gregory the Great. PHOTO: HOUGHTON LIBRARY, HARVARD UNIVERSITY

By **BARRYMORE LAURENCE SCHERER**

Sept. 13, 2016 6:11 p.m. ET

Boston

Trinity Church here is one of America's great architectural landmarks. But currently there's another trinity in town, the integrated three-venue collaboration of Harvard University's Houghton Library, Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. All three institutions are showing parts of the extraordinary new exhibition "Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections." Featuring over 250 superlative pieces, it is the largest exhibition of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and early printed books ever presented in North America.

It was conceived in 2000 by Jeffrey F. Hamburger (now professor of German art and culture at Harvard), who with William P. Stoneman (now the Houghton's curator of early books and manuscripts) examined virtually every medieval manuscript in greater Boston. Thereafter they invited manuscript scholars Lisa Fagin Davis, executive director of the Medieval Academy of America; Anne-Marie Eze, then associate curator of the collection at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum; and McMullen Museum director Nancy Netzer to

Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections

Manuscripts From Church & Cloister

Houghton Library

Through Dec. 10

Manuscripts for Pleasure & Piety

McMullen Museum of Art

Through Dec. 11

Italian Renaissance Books

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Through Jan. 16, 2017

join them as exhibition co-curators and co-editors of the catalog.

Escorting me through the Houghton portion before its opening, Mr. Hamburger explained that “the illuminations throughout the exhibition constitute what is probably the most significant body of medieval and Renaissance painting in North America that remains unknown or at least unfamiliar to a broader public and even to most scholars.”

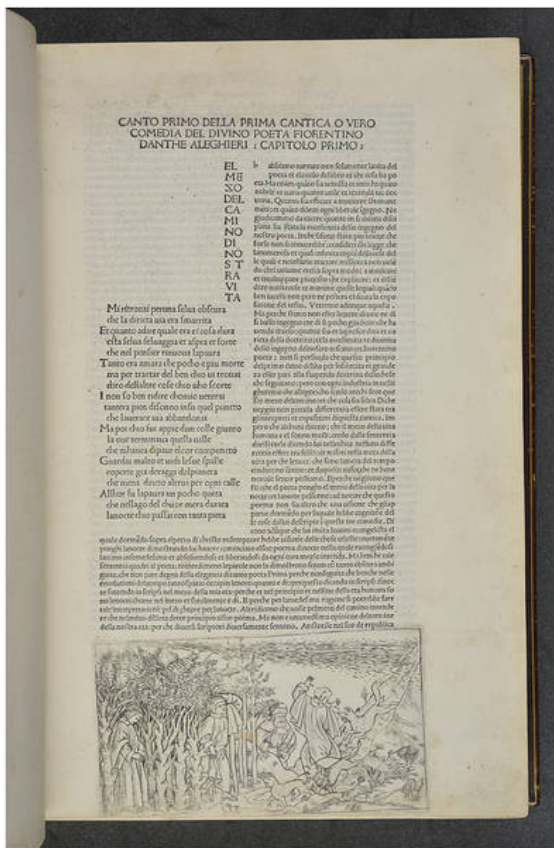
Disembodied texts on Kindles and other devices can make us forget books as physical entities, let alone as works of art. But the manuscripts in “Beyond Words” predate by centuries the mass printing we take for granted. They exemplify an age when every book was created entirely by hand, every page laboriously cut and stretched from preserved calf or sheep skins, every surface hand smoothed with pumice, every word exquisitely inscribed with a quill pen and handmade ink, and the calligraphy magnificently decorated with painted imagery, ornamental borders and elaborate initial letters often heightened with gold leaf. Every work in this show, whether sacred or secular, was laboriously—reverently—created as a unique artwork glorifying the acquisition of knowledge.



Detail from Christine de Pizan's 'Book of the Three Virtues for the Instruction of Ladies' which shows the author herself reading to women. PHOTO: BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Several leaves from the dismembered Noyon Missal (French, 1225-50) are stunners. The figures in the initial letters include a portrait of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), to whom the development of Gregorian chant—notated on the pages—is traditionally attributed. He is painted against a burnished gold ground, his classical drapery suggesting the illuminator’s knowledge of traditional portraiture of ancient poets and philosophers.

At the McMullen, over 150 “Manuscripts for Pleasure & Piety” provide a noble inauguration of the museum’s new quarters in the former cardinals’ residence. The galleries are divided into instructive sections, beginning with how manuscripts were actually made. On display are magnificent Bibles, psalters, Books of Hours, medical and legal treatises, and literature, including a beguiling illuminated 15th-century French translation of Boccaccio’s “Decameron.” An illumination in Christine de Pizan’s “Book of the Three Virtues for the Instruction of Ladies” (c. 1405)—the first women’s conduct manual by a woman—shows the author herself reading to women whose dress reveals their various social stations, democratically implying that such instruction is for all women, regardless of class. Manuscript scrolls literally unfurl vast historical timelines, the most astounding being the 34-foot-long French “Chronique Anonyme Universelle” (c. 1470s), a wonderfully illustrated history of the world from the Creation to the 15th century.



Page from the copy of Dante's 'Divine Comedy' in the collection of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. PHOTO: ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

The Gardner focuses on “Italian Renaissance Books,” treasures of princely libraries. Here are dazzling illuminated copies of musical, sacred and Classical texts. The manuscripts are complemented by superb incunabula—pre-16th-century printed books. These include Isabella Stewart Gardner’s copy of the first Florentine edition (1481) of Dante’s “Divine Comedy,” commissioned at the behest of Lorenzo (“the Magnificent”) de’ Medici, and illustrated with engravings by Sandro Botticelli. Gardner began acquiring Renaissance books in the 1880s, before she started to collect Renaissance paintings. Her Dante was the first copy of this edition to enter an American collection. And though it’s uncertain whether Botticelli’s engravings specifically inspired her to collect art, her first purchase, in 1894, was “The Tragedy of Lucretia” (1499-1500), the first Botticelli in America.

Linking all three venues, the resplendent exhibition catalog is beautifully written and illustrated. Yet it conveys only an approximation of the glory. To visit “Beyond Words” in its entirety—slowly and contemplatively over several days—offers a matchless experience for any lover of books, art, music, and the faith and intellectual curiosity that were the foundation of medieval and Renaissance humanism.

Mr. Scherer writes about music and the fine arts for the Journal.

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