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CAPTURING THE MEDIEVAL MASTERPIECE

Only a few people are aware of the clandestine and fascinating world of medieval manuscripts. Although important libraries all over the world offer digitised versions of their handwritten and painted treasures, there is still a kind of reserve – or maybe awe – that prevents art lovers from valiantly diving into the unknown depths of the medieval universe. It is all the more surprising because medieval and Renaissance novels, TV series, video games, and festivals are thriving. People love to dress up with helmets, swords, and hooded cloaks and to speak in contorted syntax.

Still, when ancient books are shown in libraries, museums, or art fairs the beholder's hesitation is tangible. Why is this? Do people fear they have too little knowledge to appreciate these rare and beautiful objects? Do they possibly think that books, written, painted and decorated many centuries ago, are too delicate to touch or even to view. One would be surprised at how enduring and permanent books are. These codices frequently come through the ages to us in excellent condition. They have survived wars, revolutions, and neglect because most are written on vellum, which is more or less indestructible. One would even be amazed how lasting the colours are that were made from pigments of plants, insects, minerals, and metals. Never, when showing a

manuscript to someone who had the privilege of touching such an artefact for the first time, have I witnessed an uncaring or indifferent reaction. These 'comprehensive artworks' which combine beautiful calligraphy with skilful illumination and, often enough, with an exquisite binding, have charisma. Many people who have held and leafed through a manuscript are deeply touched and mesmerized by the experience.

Although manuscripts in the 14th and 15th centuries were mostly produced in mundane workshops rather than in monastic scriptoria (which often erroneously is assumed), the making of books was still a religious act, or a 'practical prayer', so to speak. Religion was omnipresent in medieval life, and people of all social classes were anxious to devote their diurnal tasks to God, Christ, Mary, and the Saints in order to secure their positions in heaven. This profound commitment is palpable in manuscripts. In our daily life, which is determined by haste and competition, by recklessness and superficiality, these handwritten and decorated books somehow remind us of a long lost quality that is also a part of our well-being: humanity and devotedness. I have met a few collectors of contemporary art who also own a considerable selection of medieval manuscripts. One of them once told me that when she shows her



collection to friends and visitors, she often hears the comment: "Your collection is outstanding but what flabbergasted us most were your manuscripts." Many important artists of our time are inspired and deeply influenced by ancient artworks. I even dare to say that a truly engaged and inspired artist has to be concerned with the works of his predecessors.

In the collecting field of Old Master paintings, it has become more and more difficult to find true masterpieces. Altarpieces and paintings had often been destroyed by wars, revolutions, religious fanatics, and iconoclasts. The best remaining, unharmed pieces today are still kept in churches or in public collections. Many panel painters and sculptors, however, have also worked as illuminators of manuscripts: Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Stefan Lochner, Jean Beauneveu, Jean Fouquet, Pietro Perugino – to name only a few. Thus, outstanding artworks of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance are attainable by collecting manuscripts. Throughout history, books have been mostly kept in private libraries and are therefore rarely accessible to potential destroyers. And while

a Book of Hours by Simon Marmion, Simon Bening, or Gerhard David will not take much room in a bookshelf, Jan van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece (more than 5 m wide when open) is not the most suitable size for modern apartments. Moreover, a book often contains more than one delicious painting.

I frequently hear the question: "Are these books difficult to keep in a normal environment? Are they easily harmed by daylight? Do we have to use gloves to touch them? No on all counts! Manuscripts appreciate the same conditions as human beings: air which is not too dry and no excessive exposure to full sunlight. When turning the pages, it is best to have clean and dry hands. Gloves only cause a lack of sensitivity in your fingertips. It is even possible to display a manuscript for a while in a showcase as long as it is not exposed to direct sunlight and will be returned to rest its bookcase every now and then. In this manner, manuscripts have survived for centuries, and they will continue to do so as long as they are treated with love and respect.

The beauty of a manuscript collection is that one single book frequently contains more than one painting. Often it is additionally adorned with lively borders that contain fruits, plants, animals, and bizarre and funny grotesque figures. It thus represents a cycle of images like a little museum. A manuscript is a whole universe, a joy forever. It can be looked at countless times without becoming boring because one will always discover something new.

Are there places where one could encounter and handle these magical objects? Of course, there are libraries and museums all over the world that show books in various exhibitions. There, one may look at one opening (a double-page) in a dimly lit showcase. For those who are seriously interested in discovering and obtaining a manuscript the best course of action is to come to Basel, Switzerland to visit the gallery of Dr Jörn Günther or to visit one of his international art fair exhibitions in Maastricht, London, or New York.

More information is available at:
www.guenther-rarebooks.com.

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