Illuminated Manuscripts

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The word “manuscript” can be literally translated as “written by hand.” Books that were written or transcribed by hand were produced between the fifth and fifteenth centuries (dates determined by the limits of bibliographic technology). The earliest manuscripts developed with the
transition from the scroll to the rectangular book form around the fifth century C.E. The decline of handwritten books occurred with the development of movable type and the subsequent growth of printing, around the 1450s, which coincided historically with the end of the medieval period. The phrase “illuminated manuscript” originally referred to a manuscript decorated with initial letters, borders, or miniature illustration in gold or silver. In modern usage, the term has come to mean any illustrated manuscript.

Maritime subjects and images existed throughout the span of manuscript production, though the specific topics were dependent upon the nature of the illuminated work in which the images were found. During the first centuries of manuscript production, books were created by and for religious groups in monasteries, convents, and churches. Scriptoria (the rooms, primarily in monasteries, where such work was carried out) produced vast numbers of books between 650 and 900 C.E. These manuscripts often related biblical or religious topics in the context of daily life; as water was a key source of both transportation and food, early manuscripts were replete with maritime symbols and imagery. Noah’s ark, Jonah and the whale, and the disciples as fishermen were popular topics that included images of ships or small craft. The sixth-century Ashburnham Pentateuch portrays the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. The Hitda Codex (1025) and the Salzburg Pericope manuscript (c. 1040) both depict Christ on the Sea of Galilee in a dragon-headed ship reminiscent of the Viking drekar, or longship. A twelfth-century missal from Reims, France, provides details of Jonah and the whale, as well as images of Christ and Jonah.

Some religious works depicted the history of saints and the Virgin Mary. The history of Saint Cuthbert of Lindisfarne is decorated with images of the saint returning in a small skiff from his self-imposed exile on the island of Farne. Gautier de Coincy wrote La vie et miracles de Notre Dame, (c. 1350–1400), which is illustrated with images of the miracles of the Virgin Mary, including those of an emperor’s wife being rescued by the Virgin while at sea.

Until the thirteenth century, manuscripts were often produced by members of religious orders. After that time books began to also be produced by professionals, who were hired to keep up with the growing demand for books. With the advent of universities in the 1200s, subjects expanded exponentially, as many of the classical texts were revisited or revised to be included in the new scholarly settings. There was also an increase in books produced strictly for trade, including books of poetry and personal prayer books such as books of hours. Images of ships and sailing, as well as maritime history, were often included. A collection of poetry by Christine de Pisan (1410) includes illustrations from the Epitre d’Othea: Heracles and Jason being threatened by Laomedon of Troy, Jean de Waverin’s Chroniques d’Angleterre (1470), dedicated to the exiled Edward IV of England, includes images of military interest, including the camp of Brutus on the river Loire.

Histories were also filled with images of maritime importance. The History of Outremer, written by William of Tyre, documents the exploits of Crusaders in the...
eleventh through thirteenth centuries. Outremer manuscripts created at Saint Jean d'Acre from 1275 to 1291 contain images of the Crusaders as they sailed to Tyre and Brindisi or attacked cities in Acre and Nicaea. The voyages of Emperor Frederick II and Louis IX, as well as the late eleventh-century exploits of Bohemond, a leader in the First Crusade, grace the pages of this extensive manuscript. The scribes at Saint Jean D'Acre also produced L'histoire universelle and Les fai tes des Romains, in which maritime images were abundant; images of the Roman general Pompey's decapitation, of Peleus and Jason on the Argo, and even of Noah and the Ark were part of these historical missives.

While the list of historical manuscripts is too lengthy to include here, some books stand out for their maritime imagery. Les grandes chronicques de France (Burgundy, late fifteenth century), possibly illustrated by Simon Marmion (c. 1425–1489), offers images of France's royal history: the coronation of Charlemagne, which shows Pépin's siege of Venice in the background; Louis IX during the Seventh Crusade; and the departure of Louis IX on his Eighth Crusade in 1270. This last image portrays Louis IX as he departs from church, his ships preparing to leave for Tunis. These illustrations are beautifully detailed and provide information on royal ships, the nature of warfare, even the types of provisions that might have been included on the voyages. Also of value is an unpublished manuscript by the Italian lawyer Caton Sacco written in the 1400s: Semideus, liber tertius: De re militari provides excellent detail on the nature of war, including images of a sea battle between two distinct types of ships and a river battle in which Greek fire and other incendiaries are catapulted toward another ship.

More specific to the maritime community were volumes that outlined specific sailing directions or provided details of naval expeditions. Le Canarien describes a journey to the Canary Islands by Gadifer de La Salle and Jean de Béthencourt as seen by two chaplains on board. A fifteenth-century Italian manuscript provides sailing instructions for Angelo Gradenigo, the captain of a four-galley expedition to Beirut. A much later world maritime atlas, Portolano di Battista Agnese (1546), postdates the traditional manuscript period but includes hand-drawn maps and beautifully illustrated allegorical paintings of Neptune's chest and Jason's journey to capture the Golden Fleece.

The creation of handmade books during the medieval period began in the fifth century with manuscripts of a predominantly religious nature. Through time, the range and scope of these illuminated works grew to include history, poetry, and even military strategy. Though not always the main theme of a work, maritime subjects and images were prevalent throughout the medieval period, when both transportation and commerce were dependent upon the sea. Medieval history, poetry, and culture were woven with images of fisherman, sailors, and crusaders as they traversed the waters, and those images were included in the legacy left by the medieval masters of illuminated manuscripts.

[See also Literature and Religion.]

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