Hourihane, Colum (ed.)


Colum Hourihane and the Index of Christian Art at Princeton University have done it again: they have produced yet another beautiful volume of scholarly and insightful articles that is lavishly illustrated. Like many of the volumes that have preceded it, *Manuscripta Illuminata* is the published proceedings of a conference organized by the Index of Christian Art. The Index coordinated the conference with the publication of a two-volume catalogue on the Western medieval and Renaissance manuscripts owned by Princeton’s Firestone Library, the first comprehensive catalogue of all the works in the library; that is, this catalogue includes those manuscripts that have not been illuminated as well as those which have been. In his introduction, Hourihane states that the conference’s aim was to “try to advance our understanding of the medieval manuscript” in general, and as such the manuscripts explored in this collection are a very broad representative sampling, ranging as they do from early medieval Ottonian manuscripts to Renaissance library collections.

In addition to the extraordinary variety of objects of study, *Manuscripta Illuminata*’s thirteen essays are written by contributors who range from prominent senior scholars to new voices in the field of art history and the spectrum of research styles and theoretical approaches to the study of an illuminated manuscript successfully displays this inclusive attitude. There are essays which use the manuscript or manuscripts under examination, in the words of senior art historian Henry Mayr-Harting, “to extract a little nectar of cultural/religious history” (as in Mayr-Harting’s and Don C. Skemer’s essays); or to make suggestions about a particular artist or stylistic school (as in Stella Panayotova’s, Elizabeth J. Moodey’s, and Patricia Stirnemann’s contributions). Some articles use their object of study to think about how and why the codices themselves were formed and reformed as physical objects over the centuries (as in Anne Rudloff Stanton’s and Virginia Reinburg’s thoughtful essays); or to discuss what an individual’s selections for inclusion in their library collections or what they chose to pass on through last wills and testaments may tell us about them and their responses to the culture in which they lived (as in Walter Cahn’s, and Richard and Mary Rouse’s contributions). Others use their manuscript to perform more conventional but no less meticulous and insightful investigations of the form and visual programs of individual books (as in Adelaide Bennett’s and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin’s very fine studies). Although all the contributions
are exceptional examples of the different approaches available to an art historian, there are two essays in particular which deserve special attention for the ways in which they not only perform exemplary conventional research in the discipline of art history, but also use their projects to ask stimulating questions about potential unconventional approaches to conducting art historical research.

Marc Michael Epstein’s essay, “Thought Crimes: Implied Ensuing Action in Medieval Manuscripts Made for Jewish Patrons and Audiences” is the first worthy of special notice. In it, Epstein informs us that he has done some more thinking about a project he first researched in 1986. In that first effort, he “contended that the depiction of a hare ... in a situation of dominance should be read politically in the context of this particular work of art”—suggesting that the image, as “an example of self-expression on the part of the Jewish minority”—does not merely mirror and adopt the *topoi* and symbols found in Christian iconography but also “actively appropriates and adapts them.” This description of the previous incarnation of this work from over twenty years ago sounds fascinating in its own right. But how Epstein revisits and revises this work becomes an exemplary model in the advances to be gained by scholars in looking at old projects with new eyes, and the benefits of complicating our interpretations by combining multiple theoretical explorations into one framework. Epstein takes Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood’s explorations of the anachronicity of images in Renaissance and medieval art and combines it with viewer response theory, which “emphasizes the importance ... of readers as active agents who ... complete its meaning through [their] interpretation.” In other words, it is possible for each viewer to essentially imagine the static image in front of them as performing an implied future movement. This allows Epstein’s examination of this hare in a position of dominance in a Jewish manuscript to demonstrate that once an informed viewer notices that the hare’s “ensuing action is implied, it becomes clear that the *status quo* of political and theological meaning may also hint at or imply a potentiality or consequence that remains inchoate when one merely looks at the image frozen in time.” The result is an essay that not only is extraordinary in its examination of this image in its historical, theological, and cultural contexts, but also reminds us that these manuscripts were not merely beautiful, static objects presenting a number of iconic visual moments for use in a stable symbolic field but were “living,” active participants existing within a symbolic field that could be in constant movement and that were dynamically manipulated by the ongoing creative process of their viewers’ intellectual and spiritual lives.

The other contribution that is worthy of special recognition, in this reader’s opinion, is Lucy Freeman Sandler’s “Questions for Homeless Manuscripts: The