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The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination 1450-1550 (Art & Design)



Synopsis

This book documents the first comprehensive exhibition of Italian Renaissance illuminations from collections in Europe and the United States. In the century between 1450 and 1550, Italian miniaturists, in collaboration with scribes and bookbinders, produced a series of masterpieces of book illumination which are still too little known and appreciated. Though working on a smaller scale than the great painters and sculptors of the Renaissance, these illuminators created works characterized by unrivaled standards of quality in materials (including frequent use of gold) and design, and by imaginative symbolism and breathtaking creativity. 137 manuscripts, printed books with hand-painted illustrations and single pages are illustrated in full color, ranging from small prayer books to large choir books, and from Greek, Roman, and Italian literature to collections of fables and historical treatises. Many of these volumes were commissioned by powerful wealthy, and discriminating patrons who included members of the ruling Italian families as well as cardinals and popes and many of whom were also prominent bibliophiles. Among other fascinating issues, the mechanics of patronage, patterns of production, and formation of libraries are discussed in three essays and in the catalogue entries - the latter divided into eight thematic sections - written by noted specialists in the history of Renaissance manuscripts and books. And, of course, we are introduced to the artists themselves - their working habits, characteristic styles, and interrelationships.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book features plates and commentary regarding a exhibition of illuminated manuscripts from

Italy that toured the US several years ago. Like most exhibition catalogs, it features essays about the general era as it pertains to the art, descriptions and histories of many of the items in the exhibit, and photographic reproductions of many of the best items in the exhibition. The editorial review pretty accurately describes the bare-bones contents, and so I won't repeat that worthy information here. Italian illumination prior to about 1450 is, in my opinion, lackluster. The French, Flemish, and English were doing a much better job of painting books. However, the examples presented in this book prove just how beautiful Italian illumination could be once the Italians hit their stride. The paintings and illuminations featured in this catalog range from pretty to exquisite to sublimely beautiful. This book has provided me with lots of inspiration in my own work as a modern-day book illuminator, and I highly recommend it to any other artist seeking inspiration in this genre.

The previous reviewer notes that Italian manuscripts in the earlier part of the century were rather lackluster, and I tend to agree, with the addition that the aesthetic was very different from Northern Europe. The glory of France was in the Book of Hours, the pride of England was in the Grand Psalter, and Italy and Spain seemed to revel in the Sumptuous Choirbook. These were meant to be seen at a distance, and possessed a glory of design, rather than detail. They often remain in their original churches or local museums, and do not reproduce as exquisitely as smaller prayerbooks. In the later 15th and 16th centuries, the taste and expense showed greater predilection for private, highly detailed volumes that are almost unbelievably crafted even compared to the glories of Flanders and France. It might be noted that many of these supremely costly volumes had relatively few paintings, frequently only the Frontispieces. That is good from the standpoint of being able to see a lot of different things in one catalog. The workmanship here is magnificent, and emphasized by really good photography. The authors provide copious and scrupulously documented notes and the Introductions provide a nice foundation without reaching too extensive a length. I find the material a bit too rich to digest in large quantities, but adds interest: How many of these books could reasonably be afforded by anyone short of a Medici Prince? The French and Flemish catalogs usually have a range of quality, value, and provenance, but these are all from the top eschelon only. So enjoy the richest of the rich.

A beautiful book, which I will use in my classroom; though I still would have liked more images.

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