BOOK REVIEW: Four Remarkable Manuscripts from the Middle Ages by Christopher de Hamel (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2018)

Alexandra Kaczenski
Case Western Reserve University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture by an authorized editor of Digital Kenyon: Research, Scholarship, and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact noltj@kenyon.edu.
BOOK REVIEW: *Four Remarkable Manuscripts from the Middle Ages* by Christopher de Hamel (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2018). Fully illustrated, in English, 144 pages, $40

ALEXANDRA KACZENSKI
Case Western Reserve University

A recent catalogue from renowned scholar and art dealer Sandra Hindman’s Les Enluminures gallery, written by the eminent manuscript scholar Christopher de Hamel, bears the title *Four Remarkable Manuscripts from the Middle Ages*. Each manuscript was produced in western Europe and falls into a particular medieval genre: a book of hours, hagiography, bible, and romance. Such a name raises the question: are these manuscripts the surprising and unusual specimens that the title suggests? The answer is, of course, yes.

As Hindman points out in her introduction, the catalogue title is borrowed from de Hamel’s 2016 book *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. The motivation behind this choice is clear: Hindman cleverly sets up the four manuscripts as museum-
quality objects available for purchase and de Hamel—Senior Vice-President of Les Enluminures—as author lends gravitas and authority to the books under consideration. Hindman is transparent that this catalogue represents the objects as both marketable and culturally valuable, while de Hamel provides context for their historical importance. Together they create a spotlight for these understudied and gloriously illuminated codices.

The catalogue is divided into four sections with each part dedicated to one of the four manuscripts. All of these parts follow the same format: tombstone information, a brief essay on the historical interest, codicological information, provenance, and bibliography. There is a useful brevity to the entries—all packed with sufficient scholastic information to entice both buyers and academics. De Hamel carefully provides enough facts to prove that these are historically significant objects, yet he leaves room for future publications by the next generation of scholars. One hopes that should any of these manuscripts end up in a private collection, their owners will graciously allow for academic study or inclusion in exhibitions.

Many excellent high-quality color images are included throughout the catalogue and give readers a sense of the manuscripts’ physicality. Isolated double-page photographic spreads are used to communicate their bookishness, whereas enlarged full-page details show the quality of their illuminations. Additionally, the catalogue
includes extracted marginalia to punctuate the page design.

Such vibrant color illustrations argue for the manuscripts’ potential exhibitability.

**Figure 1** *The Hours of Marie*, fol. 17r, a noblewoman with her daughter kneeling before the Virgin and Child enthroned, Northeastern France, probably Reims, c. 1270-1280, Photo: After Les Enluminures *Four Remarkable Manuscripts*

The first manuscript, *The Hours of Marie*, is a classic Parisian high-Gothic book of hours, a popular personal prayer book for secular practice ([Fig. 1](#)). In this catalogue entry, de Hamel makes the case for a female owner or patron named Marie, whom he suggests might be Queen Marie of Brabant (1254–1322). He points to multiple folios containing gendered language, such as the prayer “famula tua maria” (Your servant Marie) on folio 198v (25, 28). Various miniatures feature women performing devotional acts, while enchanting marginalia depicts them, not only engaged in quotidian tasks, but participating in traditionally masculine activities like
Furthermore, de Hamel argues that multiple illuminations, such as the soldiers on folios 66v-7 as well as a prayer concerning the

Figure 2 The Book of Saints Theuteria and Tosca, fol. 10v, the citizens of Verona praying before the hermitage of Saints Theuteria and Tosca, Italy, Verona, late 13th century, Photo: After Les Enluminures Four Remarkable Manuscripts
crusades on folio 87r, suggest a relationship to the French court. Additional analysis of
The Hours of Marie will be a useful contribution to the study of female patronage and
devotion.

Part two highlights The Book of Saints Theuteria and Tosca, an incredible
manuscript illuminated in late-thirteenth century Verona (Fig. 2). This hagiographic text
captures the lives of two obscure female saints and is the companion book to an
extensively published hagiography of Saint George and Saint Margaret of Antioch
(Verona, Biblioteca Civica, cod.1853). De Hamel suggests that the manuscript might
have originally been intended for use at a shrine dedicated to Theuteria and Tosca, as
the book features two versions of the lives, miracle accounts, liturgies and prayers. The
multiple texts contained in the codex attest to active and public worship of these saints
as well as the necessity to record the content used in that practice. As de Hamel most
compellingly states, “all of these texts are unique and unpublished” (50). Peppered with
charming narrative vignettes, this virtually unknown manuscript warrants a facsimile
and translation.

The third section focuses on The Royal Psalter Group Bible, produced in Paris, c.
1270-1280 (Fig. 3). This is an unusually large single-volume bible with seventy-seven
historiated initials and marginal ornamentation, which seems to be in pristine
condition. De Hamel asserts that it can be stylistically attributed to the Parisian workshop responsible for the Psalter of Saint Louis (Paris, BNF MS.lat.10525) and other manuscripts belonging to French royalty. Apart from the codex’s exceptional quality and the unusual treatment of initials in the epistles of Saint Paul, this is the most traditional of the four manuscripts presented in the catalogue. Although not explicitly
Figure 3 *The Royal Psalter Group Bible*, fol. 256r, the stoning of Jeremiah, Northern France, Paris, c. 1270-1280, Photo: After Les Enluminures *Four Remarkable Manuscripts*
Figure 4 *The Romance of Troy*, fol. 4v, detail: Medea the sorceress, daughter of king Aeëtes, seated on a bench in a gothic room in conversation with Jason, with whom she falls in love, attended by an armed knight, detail, Southern Netherlands, probably Brussels, c. 1450-1460, Photo: After Les Enluminures *Four Remarkable Manuscripts*

mentioned by de Hamel, further study of the various representations of Jews and hybrid marginalia may be particularly poignant for a manuscript that has not been identified in a publication since 1909 (107).
The final catalogue entry features an elaborate Burgundian copy of *The Romance of Troy*. Not only is this manuscript an example of “Prose 1” (the earliest textual adaptation of the story in French), but it is also illuminated by Girart de Roussillon and his workshop, c. 1450-60 (Fig. 4). Although the patron remains unknown, such adventure narratives were beloved by the bibliophilic Burgundian court. De Hamel emphasizes Girart de Roussillon’s courtly employer and the ducal interest in the Trojan narratives, situating the codex within this cultural milieu and sphere of production. Additionally, he lists all other manuscript versions of the text and their current locations in European institutional collections, stressing the rarity of such manuscripts to appear on the market (117). This particular manuscript’s text and illuminations have not received a monographic study, thus making it ripe for inclusion into art historical or literary studies.

*Four Remarkable Manuscripts from the Middle Ages* aptly navigates the fine line between scholastic publication and sales catalogue. De Hamel’s prose is concise and superlative making for a highly enjoyable read. He tempts the reader to discover more about these precious objects and highlights avenues for future research. Although all of the manuscripts are “remarkable” in their own right, a study of *The Book of Saints Theuteria and Tosca* will likely result in the most important scholastic contribution to our field. I eagerly await news of these manuscripts’ new homes. 😁

182