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*Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections*

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Jessica Brantley

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*Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections*. Exhibition at the Houghton Library, Harvard University (12 September–10 December 2016); McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College (12 September–11 December 2016); and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (22 September 2016–16 January 2017). Curated by Jeffrey F. Hamburger, William P. Stoneman, Anne-Marie Eze, Lisa Fagin Davis, and Nancy Netzer.

Jeffrey F. Hamburger, William P. Stoneman, Anne-Marie Eze, Lisa Fagin Davis, and Nancy Netzer, eds. *Beyond Words: Illuminated Manuscripts in Boston Collections*. Boston: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College, 2016. \$85. ISBN: 978-189-28-5026-3.

JESSICA BRANTLEY  
Yale University

IT IS THE TASK of an art reviewer to supply the words that describe mute objects. But the announced topic of the exhibition recently on view at three venues in Boston and commemorated in an extensive eponymous catalog makes this task unusually difficult. *Beyond Words* was an exceptionally rich and comprehensive gathering of illuminated manuscripts from numerous museums and libraries, tracing landmarks in the development of early books from the seventh century to the sixteenth. Moreover, the exhibition showcased a number of significant objects that have remained relatively unknown to most scholars. Hailed as “the largest exhibition of medieval manuscripts and early printed books ever held in North America” (p. 11), this event marked a significant moment for manuscript studies both in the world of medieval scholarship and also in the broader public sphere. If the pleasures of *Beyond Words* are not exactly inexpressible—and I will do my best to describe them here—its achievements nonetheless exceed easy summary.

*Beyond Words* was the first exhibition to assemble the illuminated manuscripts held in Boston as a group, highlighting resources that might otherwise be overlooked because they are dispersed among the many institutions in the area. Unusually, the exhibition itself was spread over three

proximate venues: Harvard University's Houghton Library, Boston College's McMullen Museum of Art, and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Everywhere the project showed the triumph of a collaborative spirit over considerable logistical challenge, for not only did nineteen local institutions lend materials, but eighty-three scholars contributed to writing the entries for the catalog. Occasionally the many hands at work produced repetitions visible to the few who would read the catalog straight through (multiple explanations of Carolingian minuscule, for example, in entries 15 and 16). Cross-references among entries—which do appear helpfully elsewhere—might have allowed the contributors to avoid such duplication. Nonetheless, both exhibition and catalog are a testament to years of successful cooperation among individuals and institutions, and an inspiring example of the rich fruit that collaboration in the humanities can bear.

Each venue of the exhibition took up a different topic, and although each could have stood alone, they also worked together to tell a developing story. The first part, focusing on *Manuscripts for Church and Cloister* (Houghton), included those manuscripts made by the Church for itself, more from the early Middle Ages than from later periods. The second part, *Manuscripts for Pleasure and Piety* (McMullen), was the largest and most extensive, ranging widely among books for lay readers: devotional books, but also classical and chivalric ones, as well as professional volumes for the practice of law and medicine. Finally, *Italian Humanist Books* (Gardner) offered later volumes from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with a narrower geographical focus. This final collection emphasized humanist interests in content and form, often imitating the aesthetics of the classics, or the Carolingian Renaissance, even as it navigated the transition from manuscript to printed books. The three sections of the exhibition were explicitly divided by audience (religious, lay, and humanist), but overlaid on this division was an additional, more implicit, division: a chronology that moved from the early Middle Ages through the late medieval centuries to the advent of Italian humanism and the printing press. Although the symmetry between audiences and periods is not perfect, the congruence is familiar, and it provides a smooth way to organize a mass of material usefully.

The Houghton part of the show opened with a wonderful set of chained books, suggesting the ways in which institutional ownership both restricted

and yet ensured access to these volumes in their original settings. On display here were also multiple kinds of early scripts, a fascinating series of author portraits, including the earliest known Byzantine manuscript to include the Evangelist symbols (Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ 215), and a single-sheet “poster” showing a diagram of the seven deadly sins linked to other sets of sevens (or septenaries) (Harvard University, Houghton Library MS 584). One of the most striking objects was a twelfth-century manuscript of Gilbert de la Porrée’s *Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul* (Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ 277). The *Commentary* itself requires a complex textual layout, but the really compelling aspect of the book is a piece of bibliographic technology added in the fifteenth century, a bookmark more sophisticated and precise than any a modern reader commonly encounters. This bookmark is a strip of vellum attached to the spine of the book, provided with a wheel that can move freely up and down. A reader puts the strip in the opening where he has stopped reading, and moves the wheel vertically to indicate the last line read. To provide even more nuanced information, the reader can turn the wheel, which is marked with Roman numerals I–IV, to indicate which of the four columns of the opening (two on each page) he was last reading. The bookmark thus quite precisely positions the reader both vertically and horizontally on the grid of the opening, and shows that the opening itself (verso and recto) is the important unit of organization, rather than the single page. This bookmark along with all of the other objects included throughout the exhibition provide more than just examples of how medieval books were made; they also provide a conspectus of what people did with them, a window into medieval reading practices.

The second part of *Beyond Words*, at Boston College, was the largest and the most comprehensive of the three locations, and it, too, began with a consideration of how manuscripts are made and the variety of shapes and forms in which readers encountered them. The objects on display here included an unusual partially glossed New Testament in the long, thin shape of a holster book (Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ 37), as well as many interesting pattern-books (e.g., Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ 220) and artist’s models (e.g., Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, 1954.127.A, B) that show the makers of medieval

manuscripts at work. This part of the exhibition focused on books for lay readers, broadly understood to include not only items such as personal prayer books and classical texts and chivalric manuals, but also (oddly) corporate indulgences and missals, as well as forgeries passed off as medieval in the twentieth century. The history of collecting was also in the foreground here, for the modern provenance of some of the items is as interesting as their medieval origins. A small and beautiful cutting from a Bible reading *Et factum est*, for example, has a long history leading from Spain to Nazi Germany to, finally, Brandeis University (Brandeis University, Robert D. Farber University Archives & Special Collections, Manus. 31). Even more revealing is the history of the Beauvais missal (now, in part, Boston Public Library, MSS pb Med. 110.1 and 110.2; Harvard University, Houghton Library MS Typ 956; and Wellesley College, Margaret Clapp Library, Special Collections, MS 33)—once ruthlessly cut up to maximize a bookseller's profit, but now the subject of a digital project to restore its coherence, at least in a virtual space.

The primary genre of late medieval reading was the book of hours, and *Beyond Words* accordingly included more books of hours than any other single genre of book. Among the most memorable items in the McMullen display were the unbound Bourdichon Hours (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 6.T.1), allowing viewers a chance rarely afforded to those who see manuscripts in an exhibition: the chance to interact with multiple pages of a complex work of book art, which usually lie inert in a case. This book of hours was spread throughout several cases, allowing modern viewers to imagine the experience of early readers able to compare, for example, the varying architectural frames surrounding its images and delimiting their spaces. Also notable were the amazingly modern and yet medieval "windows" opened by the De Buz Hours (Harvard University, Houghton MS Richardson 42) onto multiple views of the Virgin and infant Christ painted by the Rohan Master: the expressive juxtapositions of the medieval page show a human infant just learning to walk, who is also a divine infant adored by his earthly parent, as well as a mother cradling an infant whose posture reminds us also of his deposition from the cross. Other objects kin to books of hours deserve mention, too, from the related genre of the psalter to the devotional picture books that similarly structure prayer around

visual experience (e.g., the leaves from Simon Bening's rosary-psalter [Boston Public Library, MS pb Med. 35], or the Italian devotional picture book of the lives of Christ and the Virgin [Boston Public Library, MS q Med. 85]). On the more secular side, several large rolls showed how formats outside of the codex were used to convey genealogies and histories, with important events marked out and their significance explained.

The final section of the exhibition, in the 2012 Renzo Piano wing of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, offered a different experience from the others in some ways, both topical and institutional. Drawing on the art collections of the museum, one room was set up as a scholar's library, including furniture, sculpture, and paintings that might have accompanied the owner's perusal of his humanist books. Another room recreated Michelangelo's *Biblioteca medicea laurenziana* on large screens in order to suggest other physical environments in which Renaissance reading might have been enjoyed. The humanist books on display ranged in subject from the classics to Dante to geographical works, and they exhibited a characteristic humanist look, including the white vine scrolls and open, clear, scripts inspired by Carolingian books. Nonetheless, a number of large choir books (with associated audio files) juxtaposed with a number of small prayer books gave a sense of the continuing variety and intensity of Renaissance devotion. The sometimes surprising connections between the old devotion and the new learning can be emblemized by the 1500 Aldine edition of the *Letters* of St. Catherine of Siena (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.c.3.23), which includes the first use of italic type precisely for the words *iesu dolce iesu amore* (on an open book) and *iesu* (on a flaming heart). In this small example, but also throughout the exhibition, *Beyond Words* showed the essential connections between words and their visual forms, and how important it is to move past the narrowly textual in order to fully appreciate the cultural meaning of a book.

All three exhibition venues offered short, informative podcasts by the curators. (But just as an entrance ticket was required at the Gardner Museum, the audio guide there was available for purchase. At the university locations, the podcasts were freely available by smartphone.) The interactive screens provided at Houghton and McMullen were also very welcome, especially where the interest was (for example) the changing details of scripts. Occa-

sionally the installation of items high on the wall made them difficult to examine, and the images in the catalog are unfortunately small for this kind of detail.

Like the most successful exhibitions, *Beyond Words* operated equally well on two levels. It provided an introduction to medieval manuscripts and their history to those who are unfamiliar with them, and it demonstrated that the Boston collections are rich and comprehensive enough to be able to mount a general show of that kind. It also, however, performed a service to scholars, because it opened a door to research possibilities in Boston libraries, and focuses attention on some of the highlights of local collections in ways that would be impossible otherwise, increasing access through knowledge. What has kept these books hidden from both scholarly and general view is their dispersal in multiple collections, but now that dispersal has become a strength, for *Beyond Words* drew on the resources of many institutions and the expertise of many people to provide a truly remarkable opportunity for manuscript studies. Thanks to its associated catalog, those who were unable to attend the exhibition can still participate in and learn from this monumental project.