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Elizabeth Morrison and Anne D. Hedeman, eds., *Imagining the Past in France: History in Manuscript Painting, 1250-1500*. Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2010. xviii + 366 pp. Map, genealogical tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$80.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-60606-028-5; \$49.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-60606-029-2.

Review by Mark Cruse, Arizona State University

The volume under review is the catalogue produced to accompany an exhibition of the same title held at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles from November 16, 2010 to February 6, 2011. The show assembled some of the greatest treasures of French manuscript production from 1250 to 1500, several of which were loaned for the first time ever, along with manuscripts produced outside of the French kingdom and related objects in a variety of media. However, to say that this exhibition was about French (or Francophone) manuscript history is to undervalue its interest and import, for in this period France was the principal center of luxury book production in Europe, its influence felt far and wide. It is therefore more accurate to say that the works discussed in this catalogue are among the greatest treasures of Western, if not global, book history. That this catalogue is a worthy record and explication of this exhibition is a testament to the efforts of the volume's editors, who were also the show's organizers.

The book opens with a brief introduction by the editors addressing the questions "What is history?" and "What is France?" intercalated with a map of France and genealogical tables of the Capetian and Valois dynasties. There follow five short essays that discuss many of the principal issues related to manuscript production and reception in medieval France and Europe more broadly. The majority of the volume is devoted to the catalogue of works included in the exhibition, which is followed by separate bibliographies for the catalogue entries, textual editions, and references, an index of names and texts, and an index of works of art.

In the first of the five introductory essays, "From Sacred to Secular: The Origins of History Illumination in France," Elizabeth Morrison explains how illuminators in thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century France adapted their craft to the new context of vernacular history manuscripts. Most illuminators in this early phase of vernacular book illustration were trained to illustrate devotional books, particularly Bibles and Psalters. Morrison presents examples of books where the artists' struggles with the complexities of illustrating secular and vernacular texts are especially evident. In one Arthurian manuscript of 1290-1300, the artist started by using historiated initials, as was standard in Bible illumination, but quickly abandoned this scheme for column-wide rectangular miniatures that offered greater compositional possibilities. This progression from initials to in-text miniatures would be echoed throughout vernacular book culture in the period from 1250 to 1350. Other manuscripts show illuminators wrestling with the juxtaposition of illustration to text, with the amount of information to convey in a miniature, and with the representation of sequential episodes. By providing a close look at the material and conceptual terrain within which illuminators operated, Morrison provides a useful reminder that illumination, as a manual process, always involved interpretation and choice and was far from automatic or unreflective.

In the second essay, “Vernacular Literature and the Writing of History in Medieval Francophonia,” Keith Busby provides an overview of the areas in medieval Europe where French was used and of the origins of writing in French. Notable among the topics he addresses are the lack of standardization among the various “Old Frenches” (p. 30), the courtly origins of vernacular literature, the importance to early vernacular writers of creating genealogical and cultural links to ancient Greece and Rome, the fluid understanding of genre among medieval authors and audiences, and Francophonia in England and Italy. Busby cites works not included in the catalogue that, by illustrating the complex history of the French language and the production and reception of French literature beyond the realm of France, provide valuable contextualization for the works that are included. Equally important, his essay challenges the modern definitions of “French,” “France,” and “literature” and enables readers to encounter these manuscripts and texts on their own cultural terms.

The third essay, “The Textualization of the Past in Thirteenth-Century French Historical Writing” by Gabrielle M. Spiegel, addresses the development of vernacular prose historiography in French in the thirteenth century. The texts in question, chronicles of ancient and French history, were among the earliest secular works in prose in any genre in medieval Europe. Spiegel provides a succinct account of why the rise of prose matters and of what it meant to its original audience. Prose works were not just translations or derivations of Latin works but original productions that created a new discursive space independent of versified epics, romances, and histories. These works developed illustration cycles that comment on and augment the meaning of the text by highlighting principal episodes and by presenting past actions as reflections of medieval values and customs, thus imbuing medieval social hierarchy with authority, prestige, and permanence. A non-interventionist and unemotional narratorial voice, combined with a suppression of fantasy and marvel, endowed texts with greater objectivity than quasi-historiographical epics and romances. The culmination of these developments was the composition in the 1270s of the *Grandes chroniques de France*, the chronicle of the French monarchy, in which prose historiography represents royal control not only of the French kingdom but of historical discourse too.

In the fourth essay, “Reading the Evidence in Text and Image: How History was Read in Late Medieval France,” Joyce Coleman discusses the phenomenon of public reading. She observes that although literacy and private reading expanded in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, medieval accounts almost always describe the reading of history as occurring aloud and in public. This prelection (vocalized reading in the presence of others) of exemplary stories of the past showed the ruler sponsoring the reading to be virtuous, and could also shape social behavior by using the past to comment on and interpret the present. Coleman then charts the evolution of the iconography of public reading, which first developed within universities and was appropriated for vernacular texts in the late thirteenth century. By 1350, the imagery had moved away from scholastic models to present readers’ audiences not as seated students but as standing, autonomous, and often secular listeners. King Charles V of France (r. 1364–80) gave further impetus to this iconographic evolution through his many commissions of translations, in whose manuscripts scenes of writing, book presentation, and public reading emphasized *translatio studii et imperii* (the transfer of knowledge and power from antiquity to the present). Until the end of the Middle Ages, images of history-reading and of history manuscripts would highlight the book as the vehicle for connecting past knowledge and virtue to rulers in the present.

In the fifth introductory essay, “Presenting the Past: Visual Translation in Thirteenth- to Fifteenth-Century France,” Anne D. Hedeman explains that visual translation is “the process by which images helped stories set in the past or in a different culture come alive and be current to a medieval reader” (p. 69). One way in which this vivification was achieved was through the citation of other images and texts. The earliest copy of the *Grandes chroniques de France* (ca. 1274) opens with an illustration of the history of Troy that draws on the narrative and iconography of the *Roman de Troie*. The image thus uses the reader’s knowledge of the Troy story to provide a succinct visual “prologue” to the history of the French monarchy. Illuminators could also make the past relevant and engaging through their decisions about the structure of the illustrational program—the distribution and number of images, their scale in

relation to each other, and their relative positioning. Or they could “medievalize”—dress in medieval garb and place in medieval spaces—figures from other ages and lands to convey moral character or to encourage the fresh reading of a classic scene. Hedeman shows that illuminators had many tools for visually complementing and enriching the effects of linguistic translation.

These essays do an admirable job of addressing many of the most important issues surrounding the works in the catalogue and, perhaps of equal value, of giving a sense of why one should care about medieval manuscripts and writing in the first place. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of these essays is their interdisciplinary breadth. Morrison and Hedeman eschew a traditional art historical approach and fully embrace the manifold complexities and cultural meanings of the manuscripts in their exhibition/catalogue. Such interdisciplinary study of manuscripts is not new, but the editors show a unique desire to display the many facets of the social life of manuscripts—not only how they were made and what they contain, but the history of the language in which they were written, the ways in which they were used, the role of patronage, and how medieval society understood history, texts, images, and books themselves. It is clear that these essays were written in light of each other, and their coordination gives a pleasing sense of dialogue and complementary purpose. Readers should also appreciate that these essays contain both well established and current research. This catalogue is very much about how much we may still learn from these manuscripts.

Following the introductory essays is the item catalogue, which is divided into four parts. Part 1, “Dawning of the Vernacular: 1250-1315,” displays the variety of historiographical texts in French in this period by including, among other works, Bibles, ancient histories, a miracle compilation, the French royal chronicle, Arthurian texts, and a saint’s life. Part 2, “Collecting the Past: 1315-1400,” emphasizes the importance of princely patronage for the production of translations and manuscripts. Notable among the entries in this section are manuscripts of the *Bible historiale* and *Grandes chroniques de France* produced for King Charles V himself. Part 3, “Enriching History: 1400-1500,” demonstrates the age of humanism’s continuity and contrast with earlier periods. While illuminated history books for powerful patrons remained common, new texts, new visual formulas, and new patrons transformed the scope, nature, and meaning of the historiographical corpus. Part 4, “Beyond French Manuscripts,” shows the influence of the French historiographical tradition in English, Italian, and Spanish manuscripts, as well as in other media including prints, tapestries, tiles, ivory caskets, an ivory mirror case, a purse, an aquamanile, and enamels. These texts and objects manifest the extent to which “[patrons] across Europe were literally surrounded on all sides by visual narratives that flourished based on the sustained popularity of French history manuscripts” (p. 259).

Each of the catalogue sections is introduced by a brief essay that gives an historical overview of the period and discusses trends in literary production, reading tastes, and patronage. The entries provide iconographic and stylistic analysis of the exhibited page, pages, or object; address relationships between the manuscript or artifact in question and other texts, images, manuscripts, and objects; and discuss the patronage of the manuscript or object when known. There is much to discover here for specialist and non-specialist readers alike. The images are a particularly rich trove for medievalists and those interested in the history of the book and of medieval art. The selection of manuscripts and objects, while focused on France, is commendable for its temporal, geographical, textual, and thematic breadth, not to mention the exceptional quality and rarity of all of these items. Especially instructive are the objects presented in Part 4, which eloquently confirm that just as French manuscripts were dispersed throughout Europe, the stories within them gained an even wider audience through their visual reproduction. The bibliographies—for catalogue entries, textual editions, and references—will be of great value for researchers and for those interested in learning more about particular items or about any number of aspects of medieval civilization.

What criticisms there are of this volume stem more from the wish to have more at an already rich banquet than from real deficiencies. Given that this catalogue and exhibition were prepared for the

general public, it would have been useful to include an introductory essay giving a brief overview of what the manuscript is, as a material object, and of how it came to be the preeminent information technology in Europe for centuries. It is true that many aspects of manuscript production are addressed in the introductory essays and catalogue entries, but the basics of codicology and its history could have been addressed in one place to provide background for these other discussions. Similarly, because the vast majority of manuscripts in the exhibition were made in Paris, it would have been helpful to preview the many references to the city by including an overview of Paris' role in the political, cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of late medieval France. A brief glossary with definitions of the main codicological terms and with short descriptions of frequently discussed medieval texts would also have been helpful. As Busby's introductory essay makes clear, historians of the French language would disagree that the period between 1250 and 1315 witnessed the "dawning of the vernacular," as the title of Part I has it.

The production of catalogues such as this, with their extensive color reproductions and essays by scholars of note, is a matter of course in today's museum world. Yet the regularity with which such volumes appear should not blind us to the complexities of their organization, let alone the efforts involved in preparing the exhibitions that such catalogues commemorate. Here it is worth considering the larger enterprise of which this catalogue is a part. Elizabeth Morrison and Anne D. Hedeman took on a herculean task in organizing this exhibition, which was groundbreaking in several ways. As they note, despite the growing number of exhibitions devoted to illumination or including manuscripts, there have been few focused on secular illumination. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, Morrison and Hedeman secured the loan of manuscripts that had never before left their home countries for an exhibition, thereby providing the U.S. audience a historic opportunity to view some of the most remarkable books extant. Finally, the catalogue and exhibition were complemented by a symposium held at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and a conference held jointly at the Getty Museum and UCLA. These events, which brought together scholars from across the U.S. and Europe, created and renewed contacts among specialists while inviting the public to learn more about both the manuscripts themselves and the discipline of medievalism. All of this activity was the product of creative and increasingly common forms of collaboration, not only between museum professionals and academics, but between public and private institutions. This catalogue commemorates, complements, and exemplifies not simply a museum show, then, but the kinds of cooperation—museum-academy, public-private, and country-to-country—we will need if we hope to preserve cultural patrimony and keep it alive for publics present and future.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

- Elizabeth Morrison and Anne D. Hedeman, "Introduction"
- Elizabeth Morrison, "From Sacred to Secular: The Origins of History Illumination in France"
- Keith Busby, "Vernacular Literature and the Writing of History in Medieval Francophonia"
- Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "The Textualization of the Past in Thirteenth-Century French Historical Writing"
- Joyce Coleman, "Reading the Evidence in Text and Image: How History was Read in Late Medieval France"
- Anne D. Hedeman, "Presenting the Past: Visual Translation in Thirteenth- to Fifteenth-Century France"
- Catalogue, Part 1, "Dawning of the Vernacular: 1250-1315"

Catalogue,	Part	2,	“Collecting	the	Past:	1315-1400”
Catalogue,	Part	3,	“Enriching	History:		1400-1500”
Catalogue, Part 4, “Beyond French Manuscripts”						

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