

# A Medley of Medieval

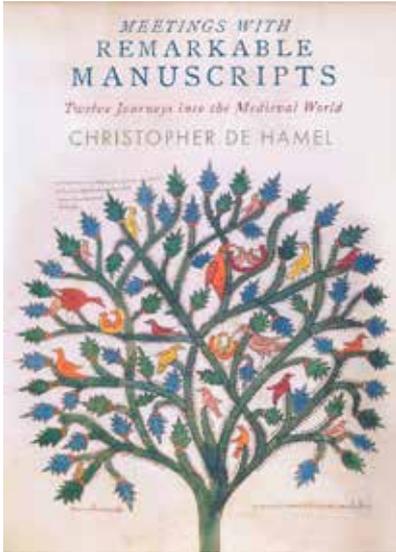
WILLIAM BUTTS

**DE HAMEL, Christopher.** *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World.* New York: Penguin Press, 2017. Small 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 632pp. Color illustrations. **\$45.00.**

**DE HAMEL, Christopher.** *The Medieval World at Our Fingertips: Manuscripts Illuminations from the Collection of Sandra Hindman.* London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2018. 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 264pp. Color illustrations. **EUR 75.**

**PANAYOTOVA, Stella, and RICCIARDI, Paola (editors).** *Manuscripts in the Making: Art & Science – Volume One.* London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2017. 4to. Hardbound, dust jacket. 254pp. Color illustrations. **EUR 135.**

Much as I've enjoyed reviewing the handful of titles involving medieval manuscripts that have appeared in this column over the past couple decades, I'm well aware they're not everybody's spot o' tea. They appeal to lovers of the ancient and arcane, and are often filled with strings of collation formulas, discussion of illustration techniques, rubrication methods and other exotic esoterica. The study of them has a technical language all its own. It's



normal for thousand-year-old manuscripts to have convoluted histories and provenance as long as your arm. It helps if you're a medievalist or at least a hardcore wannabe. Likely the largest pie slice of new books on medieval manuscripts sell to university libraries, a mere sliver to individuals.

Christopher de Hamel's *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is a rare exception, like Umberto

Ecco's 1980 medieval novel *The Name of the Rose* – a rock star in a field that doesn't normally generate rock stars. *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is the closest thing to a runaway bestseller that a tome about medieval manuscripts has ever attained. "This is a book about visiting important medieval manuscripts and what they tell us and why they matter," states de Hamel in a wonderfully stage-setting introduction. As enjoyable and informative as these nine pages are in explaining how he proposes to take us on an intellectual guided tour of a dozen choice medieval volumes, those opening eighteen words say it all beautifully. From that refreshingly straightforward opener, de Hamel's readable style and contagious enthusiasm infuse this book and grab the reader, engaging him in a way that makes *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* a surprisingly hard to put down page-turner. For as long as de Hamel's been doing this, he still comes across like a kid in a candy store – an articulate, expert and above all *learned* kid, for sure, but an excited youngster filled with wonder nonetheless. That's quite a feat.

The book's biographical blurb on the author, by the way, engages in no publisher's puffery. "Christopher de Hamel is perhaps the best-known writer on medieval manuscripts in the world," it notes with classic British reserve. "In the course of a long career at Sotheby's, he catalogued more illuminated manuscripts than any other person alive, and very possibly more than any one individual has ever done." Trust me: this is not hyperbole, jacket fluff, but simple statement of fact. It's unusual if I read about a new book release in the medieval manuscript world that does *not* have de Hamel's name connected with it in some fashion – if not author or editor, then contributor, consultant or heavily acknowledged resource.

De Hamel chooses to address these twelve volumes chronologically, beginning with the Gospels of Saint Augustine of the late sixth century (at Corpus Christi College in Cambridge) and concluding with the Spinola Hours of circa 1515-20 (at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles). "Join me in a bit of self-indulgent namedropping," he invites by way of justifying his selections.

Among these titans I have tried to choose a representative range of different kinds of medieval book, not all Gospels and Books of Hours but also texts of astronomy, biblical commentaries, music, literature and Renaissance politics. We could also have opted for liturgy, medicine, law, history, romance, heraldry, philosophy, travel, or many other subjects widely covered in manuscripts of the Middle Ages. I have singled out volumes which seemed to me characteristic of each century, from the sixth to the sixteenth. They all tell us something about their times and the societies which made them.

The most celebrated medieval manuscript in existence is among these, of course. How could you *not* include in *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* the late eighth century Book of Kells, the one illuminated manuscript that everybody in the world has at least heard of? Or the famed but not household-name-famous fourteenth century Hours of Jeanne de Navarre? Most of the remaining ten I know of and have read about, but while each may be a big deal within scholarly realms they are not on the public's radar.

*Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* defies easy categorization. Sure, the books always take center stage, but part of the unique charm is that the story of these astonishing books is narrated within a context that brings in travel, art history and appreciation, church history, iconography, provenance research, bookbinding and calligraphy and illustration techniques, even personal anecdotes.... the list could go on. De Hamel explores whatever paths may shed further light in any way on the manuscript in question; the results are invariably instructive and entertaining.

Take the oldest volume covered here, the breathtaking Gospels of Saint Augustine housed at Corpus Christ College's Parker Library, where de Hamel himself was formerly librarian. Thousand-plus year old books never have straightforward histories, and this 1,500-year-old beauty ("probably the oldest non-archaeological artefact of any kind to have survived in England") is no exception. De Hamel artfully untangles the complexities of its known history, the intricate evidence of its manufacture, its ownership string. Impressive bit of biblio-sleuthing, this – but what readers may most remember is "how Pope Benedict XVI and the Archbishop of Canterbury both bowed down before me, on live television, in front of the high altar of Westminster Abbey...." During the pope's 2010 visit it was de Hamel accorded the honor of presenting the Gospels of Saint Augustine for veneration at a special service. "My primary worry was not to slip over on the deceptively smooth medieval stone steps down from the high altar and back again," he recalls. "Tripping up, which I am capable of doing at the best

of times, would have made spectacular television but would have been bad for the manuscript....”

What’s perhaps most enlivening about *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is that de Hamel isn’t simply relaying accepted doctrine about these manuscripts. Good scholar that he is, he doesn’t gloss over this data either. He seems to view each item with a fresh eye, merely using what’s already known as a jumping off point. He offers opinions and theories, he analyzes and compares, which lends an exciting air of discovery to these ancient volumes about which you might think nothing remained to be discovered.

Take the early thirteenth century *Carmina Burana*, which de Hamel describes as “by far the finest and most extensive surviving anthology of medieval lyrical verse and song... one of the national treasures of Germany.” It’s a collection of mostly-Latin melodies ranging from holy music to love songs to randy drinking tunes (and perhaps this reviewer’s favorite volume in this book). Its famous “Wheel of Fortune” illumination is “probably the most widely reproduced image of Fortuna in all of medieval art” – yet de Hamel argues persuasively that this seated figure is not the Roman goddess of fortune and luck but rather a male complete with five o’clock shadow! Likely Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor, and goes on to identify what he believes to be the exact source of this likeness: Frederick II’s great seal. The misleading “O Fortuna” poem beneath this illumination he proclaims “a later addition anyway.” He then posits that the odd squeezing of illuminations into inadequate spaces left by the scribes leaves one conclusion:

The only explanation is that the pictures, like many of those songs added into blank spaces and lower margins, were ongoing refinements not originally intended when the copying was begun or present in the manuscript’s exemplar. The significance of this is that the manuscript was not

a routine duplicate of a similar and comprehensive illustrated exemplar, but was an evolving work-in-progress which the scribes were adapting and upgrading as they went along. This, in short, is the original anthology, and not a copy.

Intriguing? Certainly. But the *only* explanation? Could this not be the result of simply miscalculation on the scribe's part? Or that the scribe's vision of the illuminations yet to come differed from the illuminator's intention? This non-medievalist reviewer respectfully counters that there are other plausible scenarios. In discussing another volume, de Hamel himself notes that "the clear separation of the crafts of scribe and artist did not really become the norm until the eleventh or twelfth century." It could well be that in the first half of the thirteenth century, the Carmina Burana scribe and artist weren't consulting one another.

Other discoveries remind us that these are not static texts, not just dry, dusty tomes from which nothing new can be deduced. We see why de Hamel insists on examining manuscripts in person in lieu of high-quality facsimiles or digital images when he studies the Leiden Aratea, a ninth-century poem on astronomy, in the Netherlands. "By the middle of the afternoon," he writes, "the rain had stopped in Leiden and the sun came out. For a few minutes, before a librarian dutifully lowered the Venetian blinds, the manuscript was lying in direct and raking sunlight" – I shuddered and cringed – but here was de Hamel's point:

At that moment I suddenly noticed something not visible in any reproduction. It was similar to the way that aerial photography at dawn or dusk can reveal archaeological indentations in a historical site invisible from the ground. In the bright light it was clear that the outlines of many pictures has been impressed unnaturally deep into the parchment pages.... The outlines (only) of the

compositions have clearly been carefully and firmly redrawn with a blunt instrument or stylus, impressing the designs through the parchment and doubtless onto some other sheet inserted underneath.... These transferred designs could then become pattern sheets for making further reproductions of the pictures.

Sometimes it appears that de Hamel is noting interesting lines of enquiry for future research – if not eureka discoveries, at least items that pique his interest worth exploring. Thus in analyzing margin additions in the circa 700 Codex Amiatinus in Florence, “the oldest surviving entire manuscript of the Vulgate... still the principal witness for establishing the text of the Latin Bible” and which only in 1887 was realized to have been brought from northeast England, de Hamel makes a thrilling little find: What may be the handwriting of Bede himself, the eighth century English Benedictine monk better known as Bede the Venerable. It could hardly be shorter – simply the prefix “non” – but sure enough on folio 15r, second column, seventeenth line from the bottom in Genesis 8:7, this textual correction has been inked in by a later reader. De Hamel wisely doesn’t proclaim this a discovery, though, concluding, “Is this an autograph word in the hand of Bede? It is certainly quite possible.” De Hamel’s evidence is too hairy to get into here, but I’ve got to admit it’s compelling; when it comes to textual analysis he’s no slouch.

De Hamel also doesn’t refrain from calling a spade a spade and expressing views some would consider heretical. Examining the Virgin and Child illumination in the venerated Book of Kells, “one of the most recognizable images in Irish art,” he doesn’t hesitate to call it “dreadfully ugly.” He elaborates,

Mary’s head is far too big for her body, and she has huge staring red-lined eyes and a long nose which

looks as though it is dripping downwards, and a tiny mouth. Her pendulous breasts are visible through her purple tunic, and her little legs stick out sideways like a child's drawing. The baby, seen in profile, is grotesque and unadorable, with wild red hair like seaweed, protruding upturned nose and chin. . . . The child has two left feet.

By the way, why de Hamel doesn't also note that Mary has two *right* feet I don't know. He doesn't hold back in criticizing the illustrations in this holy of holies ("they are confusing and difficult to decipher. Human forms are primitive, even crude. There is too much decoration. The eye has nowhere to settle."). But he gushes over the calligraphy, calling it "far finer and more exquisite than I ever expected. . . flawless in its regularity and utter control. One can only marvel over the penmanship. . ."

Penguin Press outdid itself with *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. Illustrations are plentiful and superb. They include not only full-page images of the front cover and multiple leaves from each volume, but also closeups, images of other relevant manuscripts, historical portraits of persons associated with each manuscript, even photographs of the libraries or museums in which they are housed. In a publishing atmosphere in which even large volumes often feel surprisingly light and flimsy – cheap paper, cheap materials -- *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is sturdy and solid, heavy as a large paving stone. This is a book meant to last – not as long as the half-a-millennium to millennium-and-a-half old volumes it describes, but certainly far longer than the e-book version also available.

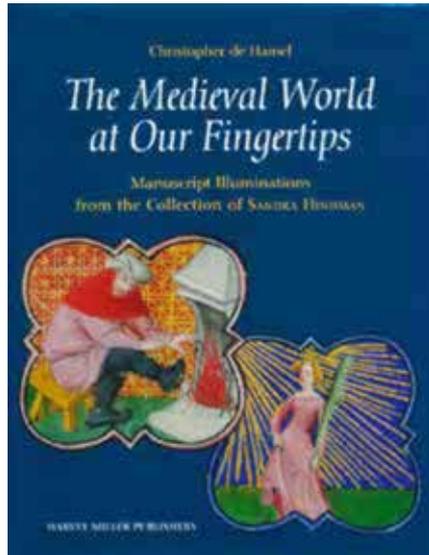
If you've never experienced a guided tour through a book before, brace yourself for *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*. If any book requires a guided tour to understand and appreciate what's going on, it's a medieval manuscript. If anyone is qualified to lead that tour it's de Hamel, whose style is deft and light at times, as when he describes a miniscule man peeking out from behind a

rubricated capital letter as “like a bather caught changing behind a towel on the beach” (Book of Kells) or an image of Adam and Eve as “bright pink like newly arrived English holidaymakers on Spanish beaches” (Morgan Beatus). Other times he comes across as appropriately scholarly and erudite.

As you take this guided tour, expect to pick up a healthy bit of medieval history and antiquarian book lore. Most of us recall learning in history class about the Norman conquest of Britain in 1066 and how it altered life in England. But from de Hamel we learn how it affected book production as well: “We see this renewed activity reflected dramatically in the numbers of surviving manuscripts. From the previous five centuries of Christianity and monastic endeavor in the British Isles... even fragments of manuscripts are rare. For the period of sixty-four years between the Conquest and 1130, however, almost a thousand extant books are recorded. From then to the end of the twelfth century, there are too many for anyone to have attempted to count.” Some of the later books he addresses show this transition, with increased book production and increased literacy, “when literacy was passing out of the monopoly of the monasteries... into luxurious and purchasable artefacts for the laity...” And one of the many book lore factoids that astonished me is that “above or beside every miniature and illuminated initial... are tiny sewing-holes” showing that “little protective textile curtains... were stitched onto the pages.” I had no idea that medieval manuscripts of long experience could separate English parchment from Italian parchment and that of other countries. “Many non-specialists in manuscripts may doubt what I am about to say,” he offers, “but if I had not known that the Codex Amiatinus was English, I might have suspected this simply from its feel and especially the smell of the pages... there is a curious warm leathery smell to English parchment, unlike the sharper, cooler scent of Italian skins...” Who’d have thought it is all I can reply – a refrain I found myself thinking repeatedly throughout this book.

*Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is a tour de force that anyone reading their first book about medieval manuscripts can enjoy as thoroughly as medieval specialists for whom this is usual fare. Not that this is light reading, mind you; it's certainly not reading meant for the bathtub or the beach (to borrow de Hamel's favorite image). The title itself suggests the adjective most appropriate if too obvious to sum it up, but I'm equally pleased that this book gave me a true feel for the fine mind of the person who created it. *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* is a meeting with a memorable medievalist.

While *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* lets you marvel over medieval manuscripts throughout Europe (o.k., New York's Morgan Library and Museum and Los Angeles' J. Paul Getty Museum snuck in there), this next takes you to my neck of the woods: Chicago. And while the subjects of *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* tend to be weighty tomes some of which require muscle to heft, the subjects of *The Medieval World at Our Fingertips* will move if you breathe too hard and their combined weight may be measured in ounces. They are cuttings, which means just what it sounds like. Just as misguided autograph collectors of yore used to clip signatures from letters and documents (by all means snip that lovely Ben Franklin signature off that page full of annoying writing!), so too admirers of medieval manuscript illumination used to liberate



vellum leaves containing miniature paintings and historiated initials from medieval volumes or simply snip out portions of pages bearing these medieval masterpieces, often blaming marauding French soldiers under Napoleon for the mutilation.

Once more we're under the tutelage of – you guessed it – Christopher de Hamel. In *The Medieval World at Our Fingertips: Manuscripts Illuminations from the Collection of Sandra Hindman*, de Hamel takes the occasion of an important donation to one of the world's great art museums to expound upon one of the most delightful of specialized niches in the medieval manuscript world. These diminutive works of art are anything but in artistic merit and significance, as de Hamel's essay accompanying each manuscript illumination demonstrates.

If you think about places associated with medieval manuscripts, Paris may come to mind, or Chartres, Cambridge, Dublin, Canterbury, Wurms, dozens of other venerable European cities. Later a couple of stray American cities may pop up, then Chicago, the City of the Big Shoulders – and illuminated manuscripts? Yes, the Art Institute of Chicago actually houses a formidable collection – in his foreword director James Rondeau modestly calls “small but remarkable.” Chicago also happens to be home of Sandra Hindman, former Northwestern University art history professor and a leading American dealer in medieval manuscripts. Her firm Les Enluminures showcases her specialty in a gallery there as well as in New York and Paris.

Noted illuminated manuscript scholar James H. Marrow (who Hindman remarks “has perhaps launched more exhibitions of medieval manuscripts than any other living scholar”) kicks things off with a brief but enlightening “Introduction: The Appreciation of Manuscript Illumination.” Illuminated manuscripts represent a significant specialty within medieval manuscript studies, and no one provides some context better than Marrow. “The illuminated manuscript cuttings presented in this catalogue,” he writes, “from the private collection of Sandra Hindman, consisting of twenty-nine

single items, are a timely and fitting complement to the recently opened Deering Family Galleries of Medieval and Renaissance Art, Arms, and Armor at the Art Institute of Chicago.” He calls attention to the difficulty in bringing them to the public’s attention (“hampered by the relatively small scale of illuminated manuscripts and their customary inaccessibility”) before offering up a mini-crash course on how to approach these petite artworks.

De Hamel’s nineteen essays interpret this handful of illuminations, which were created in Italy, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and England and are presented roughly chronologically, ranging from the late twelfth to the early sixteenth century. The subject matters are as diverse as the age and country of origin. As with *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscript*, de Hamel draws from many disciplines to draw out the history of each illumination, to bring its imagery to life for the reader and bring to life the age in which each was created. First up is a strikingly lovely late twelfth-century historiated initial “P” depicting Saint Paul the Apostle taken from a Bible. What pleases this reviewer most is how much background scholars of de Hamel’s stature and medieval scholarship in general have been able to reconstruct. Their sleuthing approximately dates each cutting – in this case, circa 1180 – and deduces the likely place of creation – likely Auvergne, France – and identifies other illuminations probably by the same artist. De Hamel is particularly adept at placing the artistic style, details of color and other elements within the traditions of the time of its creation. Wonderfully effective are his discussions of other artworks showing similarities -- here including illustrations of a mid-twelfth-century wall painting at Canterbury Cathedral and a thirteenth century sculpted “Head of an Apostle” also in the Art Institute. Not to be overlooked is Matthew J. Westerby’s catalogue at the book’s close, which offers up a detailed physical description of each illumination and other data not found in de Hamel’s essays, such as the provenance of each and “Sister leaves” – other known leaves apparently from the same manuscript and their location if

known. Also not to be neglected is a separate “Bibliographical Notes” section at the close, which succinctly summarizes the major scholarly sources for each chapter.

Multiply this essay about one score and you get the sense of *The Medieval World at Our Fingertips*. Each chapter, a dozen or fewer pages in length, demonstrates a different facet of medieval illumination, a different aspect of medieval life. This volume really does give the impression you’ve got a living slice of medieval life at your fingertips.

*The Medieval World at Our Fingertips* may not have quite as broad a mainstream appeal as *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, but like that crowd-pleaser it, too, manages to blur the line between academic and popular and make hardcore medieval studies exciting and enjoyable to the dedicated lay reader. Few titles in the realm of medieval studies can make that claim. Physically this is a handsome, well-made production, beautifully designed and chock full of mouth-watering illustrations. The Windy City is fortunate to have Sandra Hindman as benefactor and Christopher de Hamel as tour guide.

Anyone with the moxie to have enjoyed these first two semi-popular, semi-scholarly studies will have the grit to give this next Harvey Miller Publishers release a go. The audience for *Manuscripts in the Making: Art & Science – Volume One* is definitely not for the general reader, but autograph enthusiasts are a hardy bunch not likely deterred by chapter titles such as “Technical Analysis of a Byzantine Lectionary from the Ivan Duichev Centre” or “Colours and Pigments in the Miniatures of the Illuminated ‘Book of Job’ at the Monastery of St John the Theologian, Patmos.” (For what it’s worth, Christopher de Hamel does appear more than once in the bibliography. Told you so. The guy gets around.)

Editors Stella Panayotova and Paolo Ricciardi explain the rationale behind *Manuscripts in the Making*, which compiles seventeen out of forty papers presented at a pioneering 2016 conference held

in Cambridge – Volume Two will present the remainder. “Medievalists, early modernists, chemists, physicists, art historians, palaeographers, curators, conservators and heritage scientists share groundbreaking discoveries, propose new methodologies and formulate questions for future, joint research,” they write. “Throughout, the overarching theme is the making of illuminated manuscripts as a highly

creative and experimental endeavor rather than a repetitive, mechanistic procedure – an endeavor defined by artistic vision and carefully wielded power of expression....”

These essays, by conference presenters whose credentials are just as likely to be chemists and scientists as medievalists and art historians, are sometimes intelligible and profitable to amateurs or collectors wanting to step up their game. Other times the more technical essays feature charts and tables of scientific gobbledegook that none but the chemists and physicists among us will truly appreciate. Count me out, but the former variety are evident enough that I find *Manuscripts in the Making* worthwhile for anyone really wanting to better understand the creation of manuscript illuminations, the pigmentation they used and precisely how they painted them. With the caveat that portions of it may just cross your eyes, serious admirers of illuminated manuscripts will enjoy ploughing their way through *Manuscripts in the Making*.

