

Danielle Mihram and Melissa L. Miller

USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts

A second polymathic multimodal digital project

The University of Southern California (USC) Libraries' collection of Illuminated Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts, Incunabula, and Rare Books includes 16 unique and invaluable illuminated medieval manuscripts, as well as 12 other medieval manuscripts (with pen-flourished initials or borders) originating in Europe.¹ A substantial number of those manuscripts and rare books were acquired in the early to mid-20th century by Ralph Tyler Flewelling² who joined USC in fall 1917. He became the first director of the School of Philosophy when it was established in 1929 with the completion of the Seeley Wintersmith Mudd Memorial Hall of Philosophy building. That growing collection of books, known as the James Harmon Hoose Library of Philosophy Collection, was cataloged according to the Dewey Decimal Classification. Hoose was the first head of the Philosophy Department, originally housed in the university's administration building. In the latter part of the 20th century, this rare collection was relocated to the Special Collections Department in the Doheny Memorial Library.

The existence, as well as the scope of these unique historical artifacts, has remained largely unknown by our USC community of scholars and students, as well as by researchers nationwide and worldwide, primarily because pre-modern manuscripts frequently require individual paleo-

graphical, codicological, or diplomatic analysis—a level of detail that is not part of either the Dewey or the Library of Congress classifications. Consequently, an array of information has been available elsewhere, often in finding aids that stand apart from the main library catalog, such as handwritten inventories, card files, printed catalogs, and individual institutional records.

As a result of the 2003 publication of *Descriptive cataloging of ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and early modern manuscripts*,³ the “discoverability of our manuscripts began in 2016 when Melinda Hayes (rare books librarian and cataloguer, Special Collections) began a project to physically examine books created before 1601, and to review approximately 2,500 titles in our USC Libraries Special Collections published before 1701.

Showcasing the Hoose Library of Philosophy Collection of Manuscripts and Incunabula thus became possible, and this led, in 2019, to our successful proposal for a Dean's Challenge Grant



Currus pharaonis et exercitum eius proiecit in mare Adiuutor (1201-1300?).

Danielle Mihram is associate dean of the STEM Library and the Health Sciences Libraries, email: dmihram@usc.edu, and Melissa L. Miller is head of the Hoose Library of Philosophy, Humanities librarian, and MMLIS assistant professor in the Marshall School of Business, email: millerm@usc.edu, at the University of Southern California

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(FY 2019–20) and, subsequently, to our creation (in spring 2020) of our Scalar publication, *USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts*,⁴ our second USC Libraries’ librarian-led Digital Humanities (DH) project, which builds upon the successful model of its predecessor, created in 2017. *USC Digital Voltaire*⁵ is a digital multimodal polymathic edition of 31 original autograph letters and four poems written by Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778) between the years 1742 and 1777.⁶

An article about this book’s publication appeared in *C&RL News* in 2017.⁷

Medieval manuscripts as cultural artifacts

Compared to the holdings of other research institutions, the number of our illuminated manuscripts is relatively small. Yet, as is the case for USC Digital Voltaire, we have a second

opportunity to create a digital multimodal critical edition, and our polymathic approach gives us the chance to explore the multiple interdisciplinary dimensions of these manuscripts.

With their unique representation of medieval life and thought, illuminated manuscripts are among the most significant and aesthetically captivating and irreplaceable artifacts (as “time capsules”) to survive from the Middle Ages. Each of these manuscripts was written on either vellum (a fine grade of calf skin) or parchment (goat, or sheep, skin). Each was also carefully handwritten, illustrated, and gilded, requiring a high degree of craftsmanship.

The great majority of medieval manuscripts in the Western world are of religious content so that most manuscript leaves and books surviving today

are bibles, books of hours, antiphonals, missals, and breviaries, as well as Latin writings from before the common era (BCE). Generally, these works are attributed by the style of the script and rubrication (from the Latin *rubrico*, “to color red”), which are quite unique to their time and place of origin, and they can readily be so recognized. Thus, surviving works can be attributed with authority both to a correct city or region, and to their period within a date range of a generation or so.



Book of hours, use of Rome, Northern France, and/or Bruges (between 1460 and 1470).

By reading these texts and looking at their illustrations, we can learn a great deal about the social, spiritual, and cultural conditions of the medieval period. Prayers centered around the cult of the Virgin Mary are examples of moving literary expressions of core human emotions, while the frequency of scribal invocations (within marginalia) to

Saints Sebastian, Apollonia, and Margaret inform us about the “chronic problem of plague, the annoyance of toothache, and the dangers of childbirth.”⁸

USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts

The original goal of the USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts project was to focus on four manuscripts⁹ that offered a variation of complexity, and to digitize them for inclusion in our Digital Library.¹⁰ By using the current technology and tools available, we aimed to determine the initial digitization preferences for each unique manuscript, and then create (in Scalar) a detailed polymathic multimodal *Catalogue Raisonné* for all manuscripts, in order to develop best practices and prototypes. In collaboration with the USC

Dornsife Center for the Premodern World and the USC Dornsife Classics Department, we discussed research and editorial preferences for each of our unique manuscripts, to pave the way for its discovery and its eventual research and learning potential.¹¹

Three goals for the project emerged from these discussions. First, we wanted to both highlight our Special Collections' primary and secondary sources within a specific area, and to continue incorporating such resources into interdisciplinary research and curricular activities. Our second goal was to make available a model of interdisciplinary collaboration, one that provides multiple levels of discovery so as to open new research perspectives on both Medieval Europe and antiquity, as evidenced by our collection of manuscripts that is quite diverse, including both religious and secular manuscripts, dating from the 13th through 15th centuries.

Lastly, we sought to create a community of practice and develop strategic alliances by bringing together scholars and students from different fields in the humanities—including (as a start) faculty and students in disciplines such as history, philosophy, religion, art history, music, classics, manuscript culture, and medieval literature—to reflect upon the role that the medieval period historical sources can play in contemporary humanistic and social sciences debates and engage students in multiple literacies and evolving multimodal forms of expression.

Strategic changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic

In early spring 2020, we were informed that, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, our Digital Library would not be able to work on our project, and access to our Special Collections Department was placed "on hold."

Consequently, our modified course of action was to photograph pages of one of our initially selected manuscripts Cicero's *De officiis*, a manuscript frequently used by Fred Clark of the Classics department in his courses,¹² and select three manuscripts that had been digitized prior to 2019: a leaf from a breviary (*Currus pharaonis et exercitum eius proiecit in mare Adiutor . . .*), with Latin text and music notation¹³ for use by the nuns in the Church of St. Pierre at Langres, France (more specifically, for vespers for the fourth Sunday of Lent), and two books of hours, one

from Bruges¹⁴ and one from Louvain¹⁵ to support the Center for the Premodern World's inaugural lecture series launched in February 2020, as a collaborative initiative between the Libraries and the Center.¹⁶

Looking ahead

As we look forward to resuming the digitization of our manuscripts, our strategic approach includes revealing and documenting each manuscript's particularities and idiosyncrasies, such as original binding, parchment, or vellum; gold and gold leaf; brilliant colors and composition of the illustrations;

the *mise-en-page* (the French expression meaning "putting on the page," i.e., the layout of the page, including text and images); the ductus (the specific handwriting of the scribe), scribal practices; and provenance.

We also hope to explore each manuscript as an archaeological artifact by using technological tools to gradually "excavate" the complex layers that make up each manuscript. We plan to select advanced imaging techniques, including 3-D, RTI (Reflectance Transformation Imaging), hyperspectral and multispectral imaging to analyze, for example, elements in inks, variations depending on preparation and the quality of the vellum or parchment, or to recover erased texts



Book of hours, use of Rome, Northern France and/or Bruges (between 1460 and 1470).

(Palimpsests) that are otherwise illegible and, in some cases, nearly invisible to the naked eye.¹⁷

Such an approach, consonant with the broad range of technical and analytical approaches currently employed by scholars for the scientific analysis of manuscripts, fosters the exploration of innovative approaches to cross-disciplinary research as well as opportunities to forge new collaborations. Our hope is that, as we move forward with our project, a fruitful dialogue and exchange of ideas from experts in different fields will advance the study, care, and preservation of our collections' irreplaceable testimonials of our cultural past.¹⁸

Notes

1. See in our Research Guide, Medieval Studies and Research, the page titled: "Medieval Manuscripts at USC," <https://libguides.usc.edu/MedRenMSSandRareMatStudies/atUSCbyauthor>.

2. Ralph Tyler Flewelling (1871-1960) was an American Idealist philosopher whose writings and teaching established USC as one of the strongholds of Personalism. See Wallace Nethery, Dr. Flewelling, and the *Hoose Library: Life and letters of a man and an institution* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1976).

3. Gregory A. Pass, *Descriptive Cataloging of Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Manuscripts* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2003).

4. Danielle Mihram and Melissa Miller, eds., *USC Illuminated Medieval Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2020), <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/index> (accessed February 10, 2021.) See also our Research Guide, "Medieval Studies and Research," <https://libguides.usc.edu/MedRenMSSandRareMatStudies>, which complements this publication (accessed February 10, 2021).

5. Danielle Mihram et al, *USC Digital Voltaire* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 2017), <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/voltaire/index> (accessed February 10, 2021).

6. All of these letters and poems are part of the Hoose Library of Philosophy Collections.

7. Danielle Mihram, "The University of Southern California Voltaire Letters: A polymathic

multimodal digital project," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 11: 592 (Dec. 2017).

8. See <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/16834/18429>.

9. Digital Library, <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/>.

10. Charles E. Pierce, "Preface," in Roger S. Wieck, *Painted Prayers—The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art* (New York: George Braziller, 1997, p. 7.).

11. Giles of Rome, *Liber sententiarum, cum duobus tabulis* (13th century); Cicero, *De Officiis* (15th century); Petrus de Palude, *Commentary upon Peter Lombard's 'Quatuor libri sententiarum'* (15th century); William of Ockham, *Scriptum aureum inceptoris Willielmi Ockham supra praedicabilia et praedicamenta, with the quodlibets of Walter Burley* (14th century).

12. For a listing of our project team, see: "Project Developers," <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/project-developers>.

13. See "USC's Cicero Digitalandum," by Frederic Clark (USC Classics), response by David Ulin (USC and *LA Times*) DecamerOnline, Day 4—May 20, 2020, <https://dornsife.usc.edu/labs/decameronline/day-four/>.

14. Catholic Church, *Book of hours, use of Rome, Northern France and/or Bruges (1460-1470)*, Special Collections: Z105.5 1460 .C378, Digital Library Link, <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll58/id/48885>.

15. Catholic Church, *Book of hours, use of Netherlands, Groot Begijnhof van Leuven and/or Ghent (between 1445 and 1460)*, Special Collections: Z105.5 1450 .C378, Digital Library Link: <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15799coll58/id/49243/rec/7>.

16. See "An Invited Lecture by Dr. Greg Clark," <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/usc-illuminated-medieval-manuscripts/greg-clark-lecture> (accessed February 10, 2021).

17. See, for example, "The Sinai Palimpsests Project," <http://sinaipalimpsests.org/technologies>.

18. Paola Ricardi, "Manuscripts in the Making: Art and Science," *Heritage Science* 7, article no. 60 (2019), (Open Access) <https://heritagesciencejournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40494-019-0302-x>. **ZZ**