

# What is an Illuminated Manuscript?



THE HUNTINGTON  
Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens





## COLLECTIONS IN CONTEXT: ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

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# Using this Resource

This is a reference resource written about illuminated manuscripts and the people who made them. You can read through the resource in its entirety, or you can use the menu to navigate to topics.

This resource can be used independently, or as a part of The Huntington's **Illuminated Manuscripts: Textual and Visual Storytelling** lesson.



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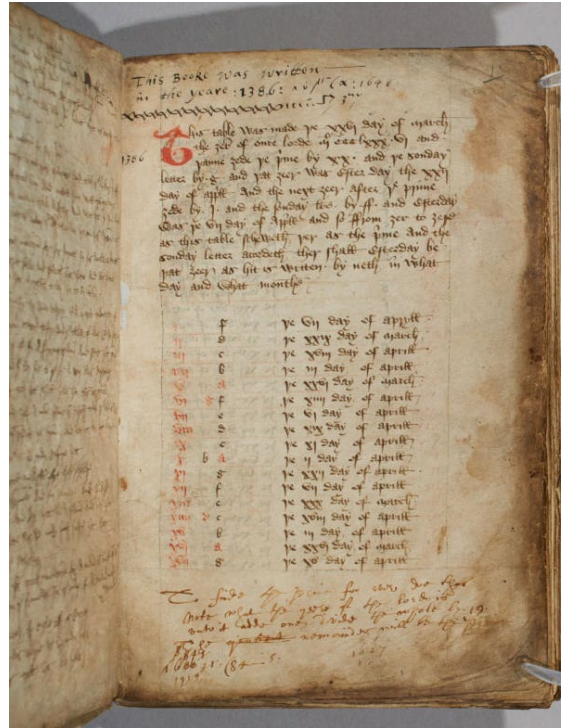
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# Introduction to Manuscripts



Before the printing press was adopted in Europe, all books produced in Europe were manuscripts—documents written by hand. Even after the Europeans began using moveable type, manuscripts remained a popular option.

Some manuscripts were illuminated manuscripts—documents written by hand that include colored illustration. These illuminations change the experience of reading the text.





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# The Makers

In the Middle Ages, books were produced individually. Each book was produced one at a time. Books were an expensive luxury.

Each book was the product of many people's labor. Some of these people include scribes and illuminators. Often, multiple scribes and illuminators collaborated to create a single illuminated manuscript.



Scribes wrote down texts they knew or made copies of other books.



Illuminators drew the pictures and the decorations. Here we see an illuminator has drawn himself in the Manuscript—a self-portrait!

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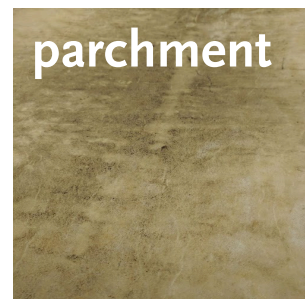
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# The Makers' Toolkits

Scribes and illuminators used natural materials to create illuminated manuscripts.

Each of these materials required work to gather and prepare. In this way, farmers, miners, tanners, merchants, parchment-makers, and other people contributed to the book's production.



*Note: all the raw materials used  
in producing medieval books  
came from the land!*





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# The Illuminator's Artistry



**Decorated Initial:** A decorated first letter. In this “D” we can see a decorative blue and red leaf pattern. These decorations added beauty to the manuscript. They also added luxury—decorated initials were expensive to add!

Some decorated initials tell their own stories. In this 'R' we see Mary and Jesus, two major figures in the Christian religion. By including recognizable figures in the initial, the illuminator enhanced how people experienced the text. ▼



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# The Illuminator's Artistry



**Border:** A decoration surrounding the text. Borders can completely surround the text, or they can surround only a portion. Like initials, borders can tell a story by including recognizable figures.

**Miniature:** An independent illustration (not part of a border or initial). Miniatures can be small, but they can also be large. Sometimes they take up almost the entire page!





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# A Masterpiece Example



One of the most well-known illuminated manuscripts is the Ellesmere Chaucer, owned by The Huntington. It was created in the early 15th century, about 100 years after Geoffrey Chaucer first told his story of *The Canterbury Tales*. We do not know which scribe wrote the text of the manuscript (scholars regularly debate this), but scholars agree the entire manuscript was written by one scribe. Multiple illuminators worked to decorate the manuscript.





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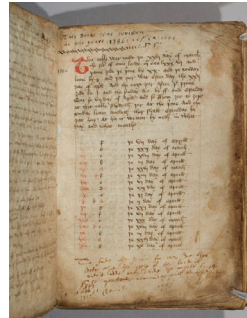
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Didactic Pieces  
Thomas Hoccleve  
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*Book of Hours*,  
use of Paris  
Catholic Church  
1440–1460  
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Decorated letter from  
*Book of Hours*,  
use of Paris  
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Historiated initial of  
the Virgin and Child  
from Dominican  
Breviary  
Catholic Church  
1485–1499  
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Statutes  
Creators  
Unrecorded  
1407–1425  
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*The Canterbury Tales*  
Geoffrey Chaucer  
Illuminator  
Unrecorded  
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“Wife of Bath”  
miniature from *The  
Canterbury Tales*  
Illuminator Unrecorded  
ca. 1400–1410  
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Chaucer miniature  
from *The Canterbury  
Tales*  
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