Beyond the Margins

Female Illuminators in Medieval and Renaissance Europe

By

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Preface

This concise volume addresses a significant gap in manuscript studies by offering the first dedicated guide to the work of women illuminators. It examines their contributions from the early Middle Ages through the Renaissance and up to the threshold of the Baroque period. The study also looks at how the practice of manuscript illumination evolved over time, reflecting broader artistic and cultural transformations. Until now, there has been no comprehensive handbook that focuses specifically on the contributions of women to this specialised art form. Despite their notable presence in historical records, female illuminators have often been overlooked in academic research, frequently overshadowed by their male colleagues.

The art of illuminated manuscripts, known for its detailed decorations and paintings (called miniatures),[1] has been acknowledged as one of the most impactful art forms during the medieval and early modern eras.

In its early days, this craft was deeply connected to the *scriptoria* (ecclesiastical workshops found in monasteries and cathedrals) that produced manuscripts for both religious and academic use. These *scriptoria* were typically viewed as male-dominated spaces, with monks acknowledged as the primary scribes and artists. However, historical records indicate that women, especially nuns in convents, significantly contributed to manuscript production, serving as illuminators, scribes, and even designers of intricate decorative features.

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[1] The term miniatures, as used for illustrations in illuminated manuscripts, comes from the Latin word *minium*, which was the name for a bright pigment made from red lead. This pigment was often used in manuscripts to add striking details, such as titles, initials, or decorative elements.
Originally, the word *miniatura* in medieval Latin referred specifically to the act of applying these red decorations. Over time, the meaning broadened to include the detailed illustrations and embellishments found in manuscripts.
Interestingly, the term has nothing to do with the size of the illustrations at first—it's all about the red pigment. But because many of these images were finely detailed and often quite small, the modern sense of "miniature" as something tiny naturally followed.

As the production of manuscripts expanded beyond ecclesiastical centres, the process shifted to urban workshops, where families of artisans collaborated to meet the growing demand for books. In these settings, although women were forbidden from practising the art of illumination (like many other crafts considered exclusively male domains), they often worked alongside their fathers, brothers, and husbands. They took part in activities like preparing pigments, designing elaborate borders, and painting miniatures. Even though their contributions were crucial, women's work in manuscript production was often undervalued even within their own families. It was typically the men who represented the workshop, signed contracts, and received recognition, leaving the women's efforts overshadowed and unacknowledged. This dynamic marginalised women in both historical records and scholarly studies. Exceptions to this norm, which we will explore during this study, include cases where widows took over family workshops. In some instances, these women even chose to remarry fellow illuminators to sustain the business, further highlighting the complex and often uncredited role women played in this craft.

This lack of recognition has created a notable gap in the study of illuminated manuscripts. While male artists have been extensively documented, the contributions of women often remain overlooked, obscured by historical biases and inadequate research. This oversight is all the more striking given the rich and dynamic history of illumination, which has continually evolved alongside shifts in cultural, religious, and artistic contexts. From the intricate sacred imagery of early medieval manuscripts to the more decorative and secular designs of the Renaissance and Baroque eras, the art of illumination reflects the broader transformations of European art and society. Women played an active and meaningful role in shaping this evolution, yet their achievements have rarely been given the recognition they deserve.

This work seeks to go beyond simply listing manuscripts created by women; it aims to contextualise their contributions within wider historical and sociological frameworks. By examining the development of female-led manuscript production from the 8th to the 17th centuries, we

can gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the diversity and importance of these artistic accomplishments.

Designed as a practical resource for university courses in manuscript studies, art history, and gender studies, the book is intended to be accessible to a wide audience, from seasoned scholars to students new to the subject. Recognising that some readers may be unfamiliar with key concepts, it provides clear and straightforward explanations, ensuring an inclusive and engaging introduction to the field.

This guide is presented clearly, ensuring that readers are not overwhelmed by too many images or overly complex details, while also providing a thorough bibliography for those interested in further research. Several years ago, as a complement to the course I taught for the Research Centre for European Philological Tradition on women illuminators, I created a clickable map of Europe highlighting the regions where these artists were active.[2]

This map and the present accompanying course manual clearly show that every nation developed its own tradition of female illuminators, highlighting a rich and neglected artistic heritage throughout the continent. The map depicts the wide geographic range of women's contributions to manuscript illumination, emphasising the cultural diversity in their work, as local styles, materials, and iconographies differed from one region to another.

The intricate Gothic illuminations from France, the unique details found in Germanic works, and the elegant ornamentation of Italian manuscripts all showcase the talent of women artists, highlighting the rich cultural and artistic identities of their respective regions. This European landscape serves as a compelling reminder of how the traditions of each nation influenced and nurtured the art of illumination, illustrating that women's artistic contributions were integral to a larger, vibrant network of creativity during the medieval and Renaissance periods.

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[2] The map is still accessible at the following link: https://www.scribblemaps.com/maps/view/Miniatrici/cbjwP47SOP.

As early as 1993, Luisa Miglio wrote:

> *"se questa sequenza di nomi ed immagini – quasi colofoni dipinti – dà il senso di una ininterrotta continuità, non serve, però, a comprendere il significato della presenza femminile nel mondo del libro manoscritto, a valutare i modi, gli ambienti, l'incidenza, le ragioni di una partecipazione che, seppure continua, si intuisce comunque episodica."*[3]
>
> If this sequence of names and images – almost painted colophons – gives the sense of uninterrupted continuity, it does not serve to understand the significance of the female presence in the world of manuscript books, nor to evaluate the ways, environments, influence, and reasons for participation that, though continuous, is still perceived as episodic.

This volume is divided into three sections, each addressing a key aspect of the evolution of manuscript production and decoration by women, spanning from the early Middle Ages to the Baroque period.

The first section examines manuscript production within monastic *scriptoria* in nunneries and abbeys across Europe. These religious institutions served not only as centres of spiritual devotion but also as hubs of learning and artistic creation, where nuns and lay sisters dedicated themselves to the meticulous craft of manuscript illumination. By analysing the creative output of these communities, this section seeks to uncover artistic practices and behavioural patterns shaped by the spiritual and social frameworks of their respective religious orders.

The rules that governed monastic life, especially those of the Benedictines, Cistercians, and Poor Clares, had a significant impact on artistic production within these communities. The Benedictines and Cistercians, for instance, placed a strong emphasis on humility, obedience, and communal living, often downplaying individual recognition. This

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[3] MIGLIO, L., *A mulieribus conscriptos arbitror: donne e scrittura*, in *Scribi e colofoni: le sottoscrizioni di copisti dalle origini all'avvento della stampa. Atti del Seminario di Erice (23-28 ottobre 1993)*, edited by E. Condello and G. De Gregorio, Spoleto, Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1995, p. 235-266.

mindset encouraged a collective approach to manuscript creation, viewing artistic work as a form of devotion and service rather than a showcase of personal talent or genius. On the other hand, the Poor Clares, who adhered to stricter vows of poverty, often had to work with more limited resources, which influenced their artistic styles and techniques. Nevertheless, these limitations did not hinder their creativity; instead, they led to the development of uniquely simple yet highly inventive illuminations that reflected the spiritual values of their order. The opening chapters explore how the geographical and cultural environment of these convents shaped their manuscript production. For instance, abbeys in regions with strong traditions of craftsmanship and book production, such as Germany or Flanders, often developed distinctive styles in their illuminated manuscripts. The wealth and status of an abbey also influenced the quality and richness of materials, from the pigments in the illuminations to the binding of the manuscripts. This chapter offers an in-depth examination of religious institutions as vital centres of education and artistic creation, where nuns engaged in manuscript illumination that reflected the social and spiritual frameworks of their respective orders.

The strict monastic rules shaped the creative process within convents. Female monastic manuscript production often placed a strong emphasis on humility, resulting in the anonymous contribution of individual artists. The absence of signatures on illuminated manuscripts underscores a collective and devotional approach to art, where the act of creating manuscripts was seen as an expression of faith rather than an assertion of personal identity.

In addition to these communal values, geographical and cultural factors also played a role in shaping the style and quality of manuscripts from various convents.

Moreover, the themes selected by female illuminators were deeply influenced by the devotional lives of their communities. Scenes depicting saints—particularly female saints—as well as religious iconography with personal significance to the nuns, were common motifs. These

thematic choices highlight how, even within restrictive environments, these artists infused their works with profound layers of spiritual meaning and personal resonance.

For example, images of the Virgin Mary and other female figures are often depicted with a nuanced sense of empathy, likely reflecting the nuns' own lived experiences.

By examining these works, the first part explores the technical skills of women illuminators and the ways their communal and religious lives influenced their artistic output. This investigation highlights how female artists, often working within the constraints of monastic life, contributed to the cultural heritage of the medieval period, producing works of both profound artistic and devotional significance.

Through this lens, we aim to uncover not only the meticulous artistry of these women but also how their creative expressions were shaped by their religious commitments and the collective ethos of their communities. This approach reveals how female illuminators navigated the structural and social limitations of monastic frameworks to create works that combine aesthetic beauty with deep spiritual meaning.

The second section focuses on the transition from monastic manuscript production to urban workshops during the later medieval period. This shift happened alongside the rise of universities and an increasing demand for books from a newly emerging bourgeois class. As universities expanded across Europe, particularly in cities such as Paris, Bologna, and Salerno, the need for academic texts drove the growth of urban book-making ateliers. At the same time, a rising number of wealthy merchants and professionals wanted to own beautifully illuminated books for personal use, especially books of hours—private devotional texts aimed at the laity. These books, often lavishly adorned, became symbols of status as well as tools for daily prayer, reflecting both the piety and social ambitions of their owners.

As previously mentioned, in this urban context, women often engaged in family-owned workshops, contributing significantly to different

phases of the manuscript-making process. At the same time, beguinages offered an intermediate space for manuscript production, blending elements of communal religious life with semi-professional artistic practices. These semi-monastic communities provided women with opportunities to engage in manuscript production outside the stricter confines of traditional convents. As a result, both urban workshops and beguinages expanded the scope of women's participation in the evolving art of the book.

Progressing chronologically through the history of book production, the study then transitions to an exploration of secular female artists, whose work often diverges sharply from that of their monastic counterparts. These secular illuminators demonstrate strikingly greater creative freedom, particularly evident in their bolder iconographic choices, which in some cases rival or surpass those of their male peers in audacity and originality. Examples of this can be seen in the work of Bourgot Le Noir, whose provocative depiction of the *Vagina Christi* challenges conventional religious imagery, as well as in the manuscripts of Jeanne de Montbaston, famed for her numerous illuminated versions of the *Roman de la Rose*. Among Montbaston's work, *BNF Fr. 25562* is especially notable for its strikingly unconventional depiction of the *Tree of Phalluses*, an image that has continued to intrigue scholars and stimulate discourse across disciplines.

The contrast between the restrained, devotional art of convent-based female illuminators and the more adventurous, sometimes subversive works produced by secular women illuminators is a central theme of this handbook. This dichotomy highlights how differing social and professional contexts allowed for a wider range of artistic expression among women working outside the confines of monastic life. In secular settings, where commissions were often driven by wealthy patrons or embedded within the literary culture of the time, female illuminators had more opportunities to explore challenging themes and visual motifs, pushing the boundaries of traditional art in ways that addressed issues of gender, sexuality, and power with unique insight.

If, as the saying goes, "the devil [or, in the French expression, *le bon Dieu*] is in the details" it is precisely in those intricate details—sometimes hidden in the margins of the manuscripts—that female illuminators often left their most distinctive marks. Whether through subtle innovations in religious iconography or through daring, marginal illustrations that defied contemporary norms, women in the art of illumination frequently distinguished themselves through the delicate, yet powerful, ways in which they challenged conventions.

By examining both the monastic and secular contributions of female artists, this manual aims to illuminate the full spectrum of their work, offering new insights into the complexities of gender and artistic expression in the medieval and early modern periods.

The third section of the handbook is dedicated to the evolution of the art of illumination, focusing on female figures from the 16th to the 17th centuries. This final section examines the development of manuscript art and decoration during the Baroque period, a time when hand-produced manuscripts coexisted with the growing prevalence of print. Despite the rise of printed books, illuminated manuscripts continued to be created, often as luxury items for affluent patrons or for specific religious commissions. This section explores how women adapted their artistic techniques to meet the changing cultural and aesthetic demands of the period. By tracing the transformation of manuscript decoration during this time, the study highlights the enduring relevance of handcrafted books and the significant contributions of women, even as the art form itself evolved in response to broader societal changes.

With these artists, we witness the emergence of a new form of art and a fresh interpretation of the term *miniature*, which gradually sheds its medieval connotations. Over time *miniature* came to signify not just illuminated manuscript elements, but increasingly, small-scale, detailed works of art.

In this context, these artists also painted diminutive portraits—delicate, meticulously crafted images meant for private enjoyment or as tokens of remembrance. This shift in meaning reflects how miniature art evolved

during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, moving from manuscript decoration to standalone works. The women we explore in this section pioneered this transition, creating exquisite miniature portraits that captured not only the likenesses but the personalities of their subjects, often using a format that allowed for an intimate connection between viewer and artwork.

Introduction

One of the first questions that come to mind when examining a manuscript (or its scattered parts)—whether for expertise, evaluation, appraisal or simply for scholarly interest—is: who was the intended audience for this manuscript?

The choices made by a patron during the production of a manuscript, particularly an illuminated one, are deeply connected to its practical purpose and the relationship formed between the book as a physical object and its intended audience.

This is particularly important in manuscripts produced by women, which were often created solely for the use of other women, providing valuable insights into medieval and Renaissance society and the role and influence of women within it.

While monastic life was frequently a consequence of familial obligations, it also afforded many women (often young widows) an opportunity to escape arranged marriages and unwanted pregnancies. For these women, the convent represented a protected environment where they could devote their creativity to the Rule, particularly through the art of manuscript illumination. These illuminations often bear the influence of traditional female crafts such as embroidery and weaving, as well as local popular iconographic traditions.

Unlike their male counterparts in monastic *scriptoria*, nuns continued to copy manuscripts for personal use well into the post-printing era, highlighting the enduring relevance of handwritten texts in their devotional lives.

While it is true that, by the early 14th century, the practice of book illustration in monastic *scriptoria* was increasingly transferred to secular ateliers, the 15th century witnessed a resurgence of manuscript production in female convents. This revival was largely driven by the so-called "observant reform" movement, which prompted a notable increase in

the transcription of elaborate antiphonaries, graduals, choir and prayer books intended for internal use.

However, the observant reform was not the only ecclesiastical movement to influence the Church across the centuries.

As Glauco Maria Cantarella points out:

> *la formazione culturale del clero sarebbe stata tanto più importante quanto più si fossero volute mettere al riparo le istituzioni ecclesiastiche da derive che sarebbero potute risultare incontrollabili. In questo senso l'afflato spirituale e la formazione culturale erano le due facce di una stessa medaglia, la spiritualità si sarebbe affinata attraverso la cultura, le carriere sarebbero passate attraverso la selezione di un filtro indiscutibile, condivisibile, fondato sui testi sacri e di riconosciuta validità.*[4]

> The cultural education of the clergy would have been all the more important the more it was necessary to shield ecclesiastical institutions from potentially uncontrollable deviations. In this regard, spiritual devotion and cultural education were two sides of the same coin: spirituality would be refined through culture, and careers would advance through an indisputable and shared selection process, based on sacred texts of recognised authority.

The echoes of these calls for a return to original poverty resonated within female abbeys and convents across Europe, where the behaviour of nuns, regardless of the geographic location of their monasteries, exhibited a relatively consistent pattern over the centuries. In their efforts to adapt to evolving liturgical practices and to differentiate themselves from long-established iconographic traditions shaped by male clerics, female communities engaged in the production of illumi-

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[4] CANTARELLA, G. M., *Riforme e Riforma. La storia ecclesiastica del sec. XI*, in *Orientamenti e tematiche della storiografia di Ovidio Capitani: atti del convegno di studio, Bologna, 15 – 17 marzo 2013*, p. 53-68, cited p. 3.

nated manuscripts gradually reinterpreted and personalised both the figurative and chromatic conventions set by their male counterparts.

Religion, politics, art, and female emancipation are thus inextricably intertwined when analysing the history of female manuscript illumination in Europe. The strategies adopted by women to distinguish themselves—often justified by the internal use of these volumes, which permitted a modest yet personalised form of production, free from rigid schematics and sometimes dismissed by critics as 'naïve'—in reality reveal a remarkable degree of political astuteness.

This phenomenon is particularly evident in regions such as the Upper Rhine and Lower Saxony, where a distinctive iconographic style emerged, or in Tuscany during the 11th century. In Lucca, the nuns of Pontetetto, while preparing illuminated codices, made bold iconographic choices that conveyed a clear ideological message. Through their artistic production, they aligned their community with reformist bishops—most notably Anselm II (1073-1086) and Rangerius (1097-1112)—in opposition to the resistant stance of the cathedral's canons.

Scholars are often able to identify books produced in female *scriptoria* based on the figural style of the miniatures, as well as the distinctive material aspects of the manuscripts.

For instance, during the 14th and 15th centuries, in the period characterised by the so-called *devotio moderna*, the practice of decorating manuscripts by adding engravings or initials cut from other codices appears to have been a distinctive feature—one with notably 'practical' implications—in the process of adapting liturgical books in Birgittine convents, both in England and Germany.

Aside from their evident aesthetic and devotional value, convent books also served economic, political, and social functions that extended well beyond the walls of the religious house. Recent studies have begun to draw attention to the multiple networks connecting female religious communities with secular society at all levels.

Suffice it to say that female convents served the secular community not only as schools for educating young women of the patrician classes but also as custodians of documents (wills, deeds, contracts). They functioned as financial institutions for loans and investments, as employers of artisans, as providers of food and alms to the poor, and, finally, as places of retreat in old age.

Christine de Pizan, for example, took refuge in the royal abbey of Poissy after her time at court, where she worked as an author and scribe of exquisite manuscripts.

Women in convents and abbeys frequently benefited from the backing of affluent patrons, thanks to their family ties and unique social positions. As daughters, aunts, or relatives of powerful individuals, these women were able to utilise their connections to obtain financial support and resources. This patronage often reached the religious institutions they belonged to, enabling women in these environments to take on important roles in cultural and artistic endeavours, especially in the creation of manuscripts. Drawing on these connections, they were able to fund collaborations between the city and abbey and manage the production of some of the finest and most costly manuscripts created in Europe. One notable example is the enormous Gradual of St. Katharinental (Thurgau, c. 1312), richly illuminated and now held in Zurich at the Swiss National Museum (inventory no. LM 26117).

Although, according to critics, it seems the nuns may not have completed this spectacular work entirely on their own (perhaps with the exception of transcribing the text), they coordinated its production, secured funding, and hired professional illuminators for the lavish initials.

The smaller initials and images of nuns (sometimes annotated with names), painted in the margins, may have been added to the manuscript by the nuns themselves (fig. 1). In particular, folio 3v features a splendid image that closely recalls the style of the miniatures in the renowned Manesse Codex (fig. 2 and 2a).

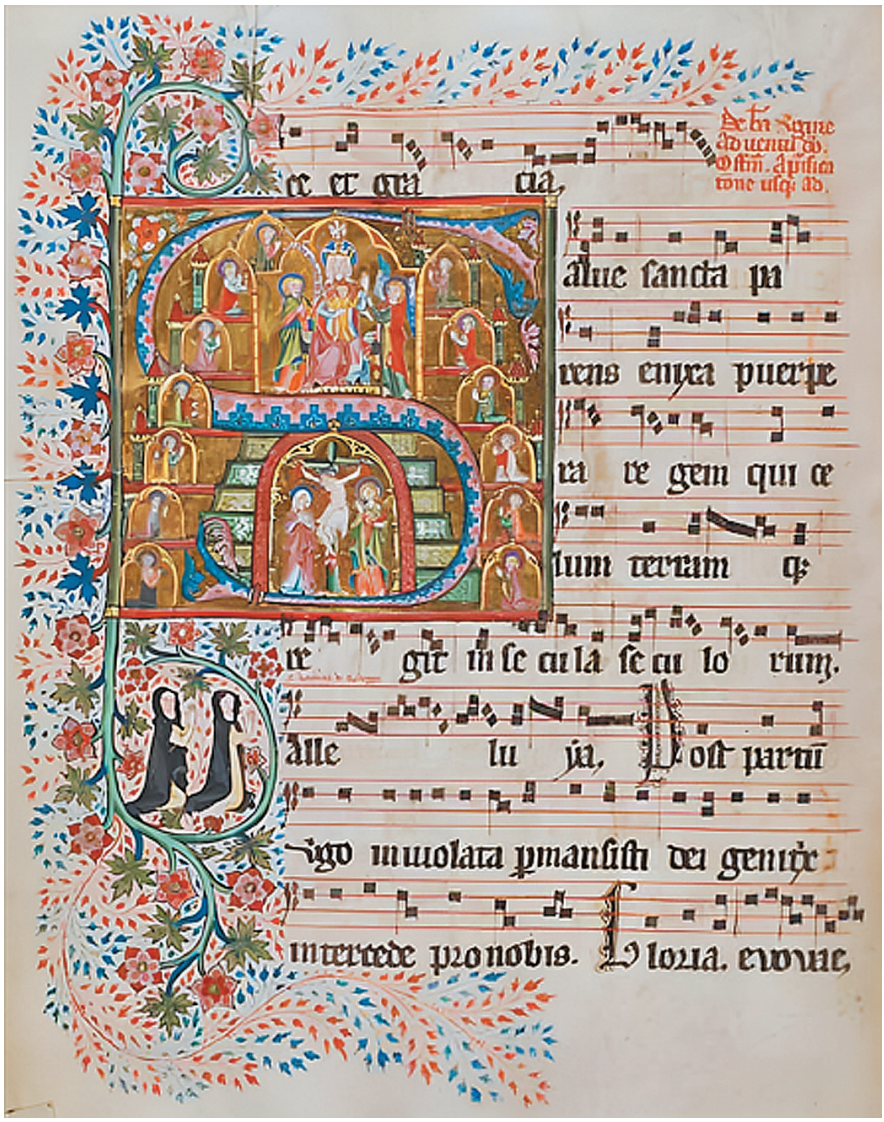

Fig. 1 *Gradual of St. Katharinental, Zurich © Fair use, Swiss National Museum, inv. no. LM 26117, fol. 231v*

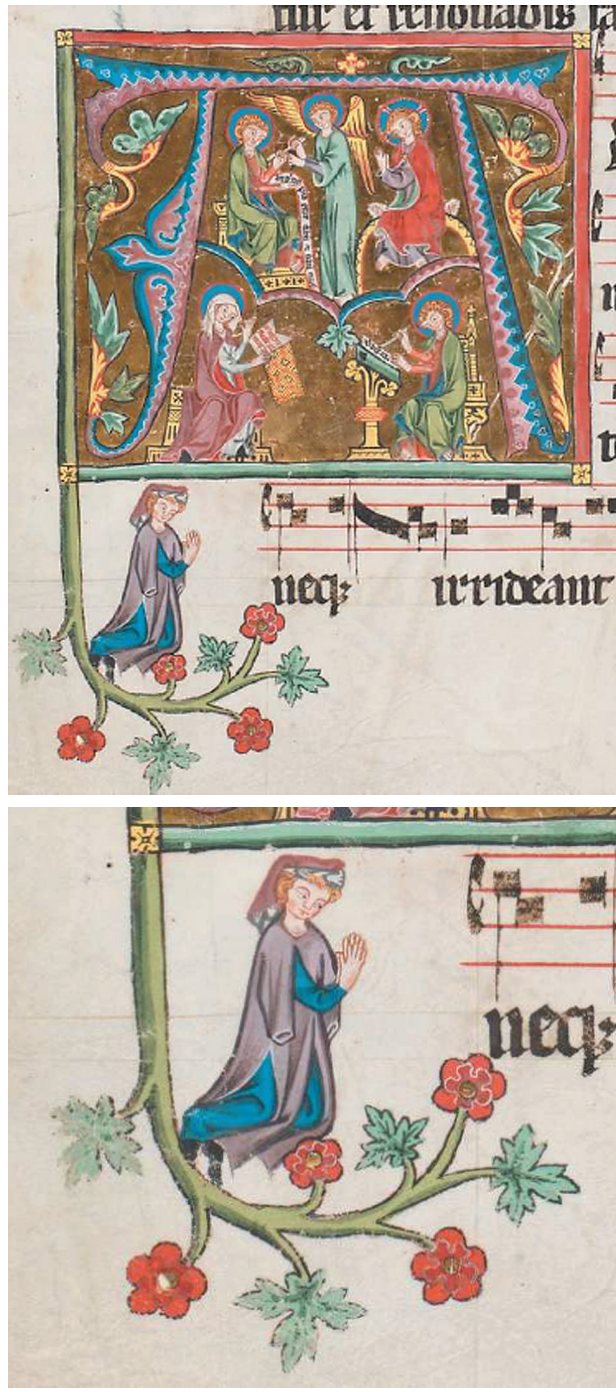

Figure 2 and 2a. *Gradual of St. Katharinental, Zurich © Swiss National Museum, inv. no. LM 26117, fol. 3v, and a detail of the miniature.*

This magnificent Gradual from the Dominican abbey of St. Katharinental is one of the most important Gothic works in Switzerland. Produced around 1312 within the abbey itself, it was likely illuminated by professional artists from the Lake Constance area. It contains over 80 pen-drawn initials, 60 historiated initials, and 5 large initials composed of various historiated medallions. Today, two fragments of the last two initials are known, their medallions having been cut out and sold separately.

Within the floral borders, numerous kneeling Dominican nuns in prayer are depicted, as well as other secular donors (for example, fols. 3v, 18v, 90r, 159v, 161r, etc.). The Gradual remained in use in the abbey until the 19th century; around 1820, it was sold to an antiquarian from Constance, Franz Joseph Aloys Castell (1796-1844). After 1860, it was owned by English collectors, including Sir Charles Dyson Perrins (1864-1958). Upon his death, his library was auctioned by Sotheby's, and the manuscript was acquired by the Swiss Confederation with support from the Gottfried Keller Foundation and the Canton of Thurgau.

In the secular world, many women trained as illuminators, working in family workshops, such as the daughters of the Nuremberg painter Georg Glockendon the Elder (d. 1520) or Jeanne de Montbaston (c. 1353), who illustrated copies of hagiographic texts and manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose* in Paris, alongside her husband Richard.

Christine de Pizan recorded the name of the Parisian illuminator Anastasia, praising her skill in painting the backgrounds of miniatures. Daughters of esteemed painters, such as Konrad Witz and Paolo Uccello, also pursued careers as illuminators. Witz's daughter worked at the abbey of St. Mary Magdalene in Basel in 1454 (Erdin, 1965, p. 80), while Antonia Uccello (1456-1491), whom Vasari mentions, was active at the Carmelite convent in Florence, where documents refer to her as a 'woman painter' (Greer, 1979, p. 15). Sadly, none of her works have been identified to date.

The last great Flemish illuminator, Simon Bening (d. 1561), based in Bruges, trained his daughters in the art of illumination: one went on to become a painter at the court of Edward VI of England, while another became a dealer in paintings, parchments, miniatures, and silk.

Part 1

Women Illuminators Behind Convent Walls

Chapter 1

The Women's Monastery of Chelles (8th century)

Location: Northeastern France (Seine-et-Marne department)

Notre-Dame of Chelles, located near Paris, was an influential religious and cultural centre from the Early Middle Ages, frequently led by abbesses of royal lineage connected to both the Merovingian and Carolingian courts.

In the early 6th century, Chrodechilde, wife of the first baptised Frankish king, Clovis I, established a small convent here. In 658/659, Queen Bathilde expanded the buildings and elevated the convent to an abbey. The first abbess, Bertila, arrived with a group of nuns from Jouarre, a double monastery located about 50 km east of Chelles.

The abbey flourished intellectually during the Carolingian era, particularly when Charlemagne's sister, Gislidis, served first as a nun and later as an abbess (788-810). Her spirited correspondence with the theologian Alcuin of York reveals her deep engagement with the intellectual life of the court and her notable influence upon it. At the request of Gislidis and her niece Rotrud, also a nun at Chelles, Alcuin composed an extensive commentary on the Gospel of John around 800, which he dedicated to both women.

The earliest studies on the *scriptorium* at Chelles were conducted by Bernhard Bischoff,[1] who linked a group of manuscripts to this centre based on his analysis of *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Commentary on the Psalms) by St. Augustine, a three-volume set now housed in Cologne (Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, 63, 65, 67; fig. 3). These manuscripts record the names of the scribes and illuminators (active

[1] BISCHOFF, B., *Die Kölner Nonnenhandschriften und das Skriptorium von Chelles*, in *Mittelalterliche Studien. Ausgewählte Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, I, Stuttgart 1966, pp. 16-34.

under Archbishop Hildebold of Cologne, c. 787-819, Charlemagne's archchaplain), listed in a simple register: Girbalda, Agleberta, Adruhic, Altildis, Gisledrudis, Eusebia, Vera, and Agnes, under the guidance of Charlemagne's sister, Gislidis (d. 810).

The listing of their names likely corresponds to a division of the transcription of *Enarrationes* in the proto-Caroline script, in line with the graphic reforms of the Carolingian Renaissance. Bischoff later demonstrated that this *scriptorium* could also be credited with another series of 9th-century manuscripts, some of which are preserved in St. Gall (Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 435, and Cod. Sang. 240).

Over a span of approximately 120 years, a total of 29 manuscripts can be traced back to this *scriptorium*, all connected by distinctive characteristics in both script and decoration.

Among the manuscripts originating from Notre-Dame of Chelles, the most important for its decorative richness is, according to Bischoff's research, the celebrated *Gelasian Sacramentary* (Rome, Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 316), dated no later than 750. This manuscript stands as the most significant example of Merovingian illumination and is fully available online at: https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Reg.lat.316.

The manuscript includes, at the beginning of each of its three main sections, one decorated page and one page with a large initial. On the decorated pages, a cross is depicted beneath a rounded arch; on the pages with initials, there is a large cross embellished with zoomorphic figures, next to which appears the initial followed by an ornamental script (fig. 4).

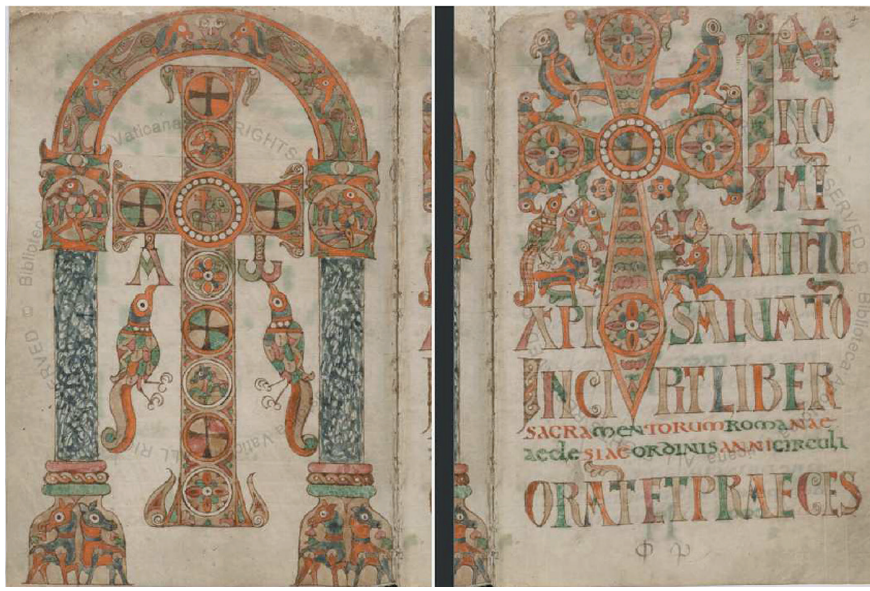

Figure 4 *Gelasian Sacramentary (Rome © Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 316)*

The hypothesis of its production within the prestigious female *scriptorium* relies primarily on the use of a sort of 'trademark' found in the incipits from Chelles, where the same uncial script appears.

From the same period is the manuscript of *De natura rerum* by Isidore of Seville (Paris, BNF, lat. 6413), featuring textual illustrations in the form of diagrams, some of which include figurative decoration. Similarly adorned with ornamental script and initials—albeit with slightly different characteristics—are manuscripts dated from the mid-8th century to the first decade of the 9th century, including Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 126; Douce 176; Autun, Municipal Library, 20; Montpellier, Municipal Library, 3; Paris, BNF, lat. 12240; lat. 12441; and Cologne, Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, 67.

The artistic hallmark of manuscripts created at Chelles, beginning with the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, lies in their intricate decoration, encompassing frontispieces, opening pages, and ornamental initials. Animal-themed designs, especially those featuring fish and birds, are cleverly integrated to shape entire letters or sections of text. This approach extends beyond initials to create whole lines of decorated script.

Floral elements, particularly four-petaled blossoms, lily-like forms, palmettes, and half-palmettes, dominate the plant-inspired decoration, while the geometric designs include recurring patterns such as scales, zig-zag lines, bead-like borders, and interwoven bands. Though these basic forms are typical of Merovingian art, their unique treatment at Chelles gives them a distinctive character specific to this school.

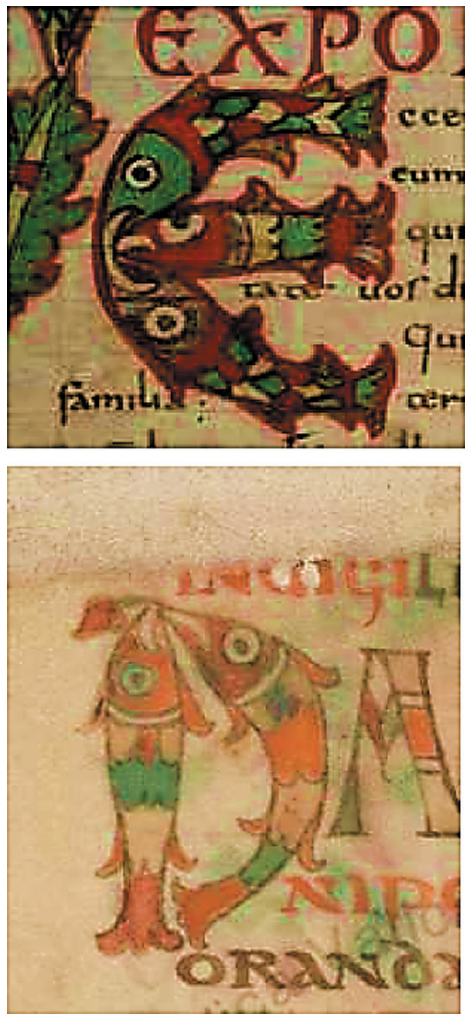

Figure 5 *Comparison between the six-line-high zoomorphic decorative initial "E," composed of three multicoloured fish, in Codex 67, fol. 2v of Cologne, from St. Augustine's Enarrationes in Psalmos (Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek), and the initial "D" in the Gelasian Sacramentary, Rome, Vatican Library, Reg. lat. 316, fol. 4v. Note how, in both manuscripts produced at Chelles, the scaled bodies of the fish terminate in tripartite tails.*

Scholars remain divided on whether the nuns of Chelles operated entirely independently of male oversight, or whether the monastery was exclusively female throughout its history. Unfortunately, as we shall see in later centuries, there is a persistent tendency in scholarship to downplay the contributions of female illuminators to the development of book ornamentation. If it could be definitively established that the nuns of Chelles were free from male influence—evidence for which appears to emerge starting with Abbess Bertila—then the innovative iconographic work by women on a manuscript such as the *Gelasian Sacramentary* could be more convincingly assessed. This manuscript stands as one of the foremost monuments of Merovingian book art in France, containing the oldest and most complete copy of the Roman missal, and is of primary interest to scholars of pre-Caroline palaeography as well as to liturgists and early medieval art historians.

In general, it should be emphasised that, in the Frankish territories, as in the British Isles, an original school of illumination developed, though scholars remain divided on its origins. Various theories have been proposed, including a possible Eastern influence on this style of illumination, known as Merovingian—named after the Merovingian dynasty, which ruled the Frankish kingdoms from 457 to 751 CE—due to its stylistic similarities with later Coptic or Armenian illuminated manuscripts. However, these comparisons are with manuscripts that postdate the earliest Merovingian examples. Unlike what occurred in the British Isles, the 'Merovingian school' did not adopt the indigenous styles of the Burgundian populations who settled in southeastern Gaul before the Franks. In contrast to the Anglo-Irish tradition, Merovingian illumination spread from the southeast to the north, reflecting a synthesis of Late Antique motifs, reinterpreted with aniconic tendencies and Byzantine influences, particularly in the representation of the cross. The movement likely originated at the monastery of Luxeuil, founded in 590 by the Irish monk Saint Columbanus, and gradually expanded towards the Paris region. Here, the nuns of Chelles embraced these iconographic influences, reinterpreting them to create uniquely original forms of ornamentation.

Chelles subsequently influenced the art of illumination at Saint-Denis, with its innovations later adopted in Metz and Laon, covering the area between the Moselle River and Picardy. The stylistic transformations and expansion of Chelles' ornamental repertoire were naturally shaped by exchanges with other schools. From Corbie, for instance, came certain Byzantine-inspired motifs, along with the structure of full-page decorated folios and initialed pages. It is also possible that some motifs were directly imported from Byzantium. The influence of early manuscripts from Tours is particularly evident at Chelles, especially in the naturalistic representations of animals in a late style.

Chapter 2

Book Production in Insular Women's Monasteries

The *Vita Bertilæ*[2] recounts how Bertila, abbess of Jouarre (Meaux) and later of Chelles, sent relics, manuscripts, and teachers to England to assist in founding a new monastery on the island. Based on this information, it has been suggested that the community at Bath may have benefited from this mission, given the presence of a French abbess, Berta, and at least one other French nun, Folcburg, at the monastery.

The insular connections of Jouarre are readily observable in the manuscripts produced at this abbey, which exhibit marked insular characteristics and typically Hiberno-Saxon practices, even in the preparation of the parchment, as seen in the so-called *Gospels of Jouarre* (Ms Diocèse de Meaux no. 28, fig. 6). In my view, this manuscript should be considered in relation to the *Gospels of Margaret of Scotland* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. liturg, fig. 6b).

The connections between Chelles and women's communities in both England and Northern Europe have been explored by Rosamond McKitterick,[3] though she was unable to identify any female *scriptoria* on the island. It remains challenging to determine whether we can speak of distinctly insular female manuscript production, particularly of illuminated codices. Research in this area is difficult, partly due to the Dissolution of the English monasteries in the 16th century, which led to the dispersal and destruction of many medieval artefacts. Additionally—and one might wonder if this is a direct consequence—there exists a scholarly assumption regarding the limited education of English nuns,

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[2] *Vita Bertilæ abbatissæ Calensis*, in *Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum*, Hannover, 1913, VI, pp. 94-109

[3] MCKITTERICK, R., *Nuns' Scriptoria in England and Francia in the Eighth Century* in *Francia* 19, 1992, 1-35.

with the related question of female literacy in the trilingual society of Anglo-Norman England still unresolved.

As a Romance philologist, I must point out that, in truth, during the 12th century, numerous women's monasteries saw nuns engaged in the composition of hagiographic texts, both in Latin and in Insular French (that is, Anglo-Norman). Despite this evidence—consider, for example, authors such as Clémence of Barking, who authored an Anglo-Norman adaptation of the *Passion of Saint Catherine of Alexandria*; the *Vie d'Edouard le Confesseur* by another anonymous nun from Barking; or the *Vie seinte Audree* by the writer now identified as Marie de France—critics remain convinced that nuns on the island faced significant challenges in reading and writing Latin. This supposed limitation would have hindered them in maintaining abbey records or drafting chronicles unless they relied on male chaplains or scribes.

Throughout its long history of over 850 years, Barking Abbey was a major centre for women's education. It has been described in numerous studies as the longest-standing institutional centre of literary culture for women in British history, with a strong literary tradition. In the early medieval period, authors such as Aldhelm of Malmesbury and Goscelin of St Bertin wrote scholarly works in Latin for the nuns of Barking, thereby disproving the theory of limited Latin proficiency among nuns in the kingdom of England. Later, several nuns composed their own works there, in both verse and prose.

I find Jocelyn Wogan-Browne's observation particularly relevant in this context: « the texts of nunnery culture should not be seen as inferior imitations or derivations from Latin, but as the products of a valid vernacular-centred culture in a partly Latin environment ».[4] I am equally convinced that the major English women's monasteries, such as Barking or Shaftesbury, had their own *scriptoria*, a subject that warrants further and more focused investigation.

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[4] Wogan-Browne, J., "Reading is Good Prayer: Recent Research on Female Reading Communities," *Analytical Survey 5*, in *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. V, 2002, pp. 229–297, cited p. 263.

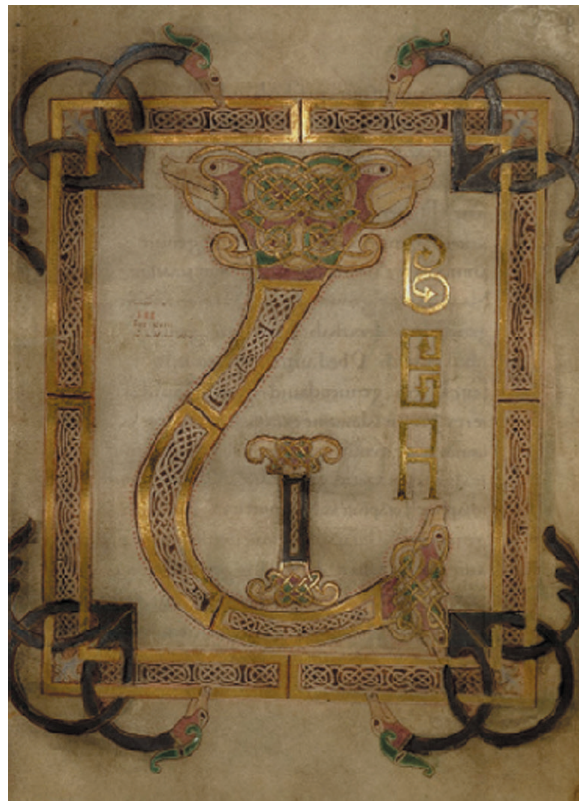

Figure 6 *Ms Diocèse de Meaux n.28 (Fair use © Grand Séminaire de Meaux), fol. 8r.*

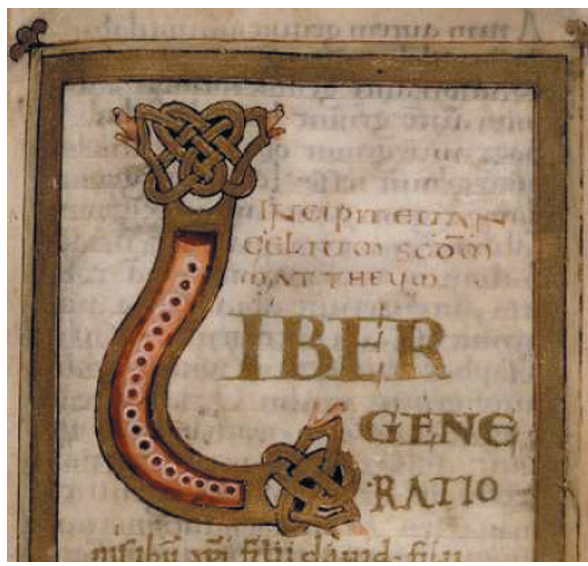

Figure 6 bis. *Oxford © Bodleian Library, MS Lat. liturg. fol. 4r*