

Christopher de Hamel, *The Medieval World at our Fingertips. Manuscript Illuminations from the Collection of Sandra Hindman. Introduction by James H. Marrow. Catalogue by Matthew J. Westerby, Turnhout (Brepols) 2018, 264 p., 1 b/w, 200 col. ill. (Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History. Cursor mundi, 27), ISBN 978-1-909400-88-7, EUR 75,00.*

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Alison Stones, New York, NY

This sumptuously produced volume celebrates the exhibition of 29 illuminated leaves, and the donation in 2017 of seven of them (n° 4, 7, 8, 11, 15, 18, 19) to the Art Institute of Chicago by Sandra Hindman. The exhibition and accompanying volume were a collaborative effort, with an introduction by James H. Marrow, an analytical essay on 20 items by Christopher de Hamel, a summary Catalogue by Matthew Westerby, and the participation of many others based at the Art Museum in Chicago and at Hindman's galleries Les Enluminures, based in Chicago with branches in New York and Paris. The collection was amassed over many years by Hindman, who taught at Johns Hopkins University and at Northwestern University before turning to commerce as a dealer in illuminated manuscripts and fragments, while de Hamel was for many years the chief manuscript specialist at Sotheby's, then Keeper at the Parker Library of Corpus Christi College Cambridge before joining Sandra Hindman as Vice-President of Les Enluminures. Commercial interests here join forces with erudition and patronage to produce a fascinating window on the social, cultural, and historical context of a cluster of cuttings from disparate medieval manuscripts.

De Hamel's engaging text situates each catalogue item in its broader framework, citing and reproducing other fragments from the same books and other manuscripts made by the same scribes and illuminators, while eloquently introducing a wide public to the function and use to which the various liturgical and secular texts were put in their respective periods. He draws extensively on the rich medieval and later collections of the Chicago Art Institute for comparative material, for instance the German panel of St Agnes to compare with the »Nonnenarbeit« of the same saint (n° 10), or items in metal and stone, such as the horseman's axe and close helmet, both in Chicago, to compare with the battle attire of the soldier in the miniatures of Christ before Annas (n° 11), or Chicago's Limoges reliquary casket to complement cuttings of saints (n° 3), and textiles depicting the Labours of the Months and Zodiac signs that relate to Hindman's calendar cuttings (n° 6).

De Hamel also draws upon well-known manuscripts or works of art housed elsewhere, referring to the »Très riches heures« to compare with Hindman's calendar cuttings (n° 6) or the opening page of Marco Polo's »View of Venice« which he compares to an English cutting relating the story of Old-Testament Joseph (n° 7). Events that shaped the life of manuscripts, like the Great Storm of Saturday Last (8 August 1846) recorded in the »Illustrated London News«, resulting in the defacement by flood waters of Jarman's manuscript collection, from which comes



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

the leaf of David and Nathan (n° 12). The pastiches made by Caleb Wing, which often passed as medieval originals, are reproduced alongside the relevant item in the catalogue (p. 138). The practice of copying and the transference of pictorial models are featured in discussing the striking Triumph of David by the Berlin Master of Mary of Burgundy (n° 13), while the composition of pigments and techniques of applying gold are mentioned on p. 27, 41.

The production of miniatures as single leaves from early times is discussed in relation to two miniatures now sewn onto a textile-covered backing (n° 16). Another case is the fascinating combination of miniatures and relics (p. 184–185). De Hamel weaves compelling narratives around these cuttings, many of which would scarcely otherwise command attention. He offers an exemplary model of how a single leaf can evoke and prompt penetrating reflections on a far larger cultural milieu. The summary catalogue is a useful complement to the essays as it includes reproductions of the backs of many of the leaves (n° 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 15, 16, 20).

I mention a couple of quibbles: Books of hours were in circulation well before 1300 (p. 76), as attested by New York, Morgan Library and Museum M. 92 (second quarter of the 13th c.); and the categorical statement that translations of the Bible into French were generally luxury manuscripts for the exclusive interest of the upper classes (p. 125) seems questionable to me. Occasionally one would like to know more, for instance about St Pirminius and the 3 scissor-fish (p. 130), printed by Günther Zainer in 1471. A couple of errors, Haganau for Hagenau (p. 131), M. Rowe for N. Rowe (p. 224). Overall the level of production is extremely high: no expense was spared.

For this reviewer the volume raises disquieting issues, unfortunately dissipated by the catalogue's surface glamour. If ethical questions concerning early 19th-century attitudes towards the dismemberment of manuscripts are briefly mentioned on p. 65 and 135, there is no attempt to consider the implications of such practices in more recent times. Let us cite for instance the Amiens/Soissons »Book of Hours« sold at Sotheby's (17.xii.1991, lot 76) and subsequently dismembered, from which the Life of St Margaret part was fortunately acquired intact by the University of Virginia (<https://search.lib.virginia.edu/catalog/u3907469#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-260%2C-208%2C3490%2C4311>, consulted 7 May 2018), but the rest of the book is now scattered to the winds through the sale of individual leaves at Kalamazoo and elsewhere. Occasionally a fragment re-emerging in a sale-room may be recognized and re-acquired by its original owner, such as part of an illuminated leaf torn before 1830 from Bodley Ashmole 828, which found its way home in 2017; or a cutting from a Pontifical made for an archbishop of Narbonne and housed in its cathedral treasury, purchased in 2013 by the Musée d'art et d'histoire de Narbonne, both thanks to the recognition of eagle-eyed scholars.

The words »at our fingertips« in the title of the book are certainly less crass than »within our grasp« or »in our hands« but they surely invite readers to engage directly with, and encourage them to acquire, the remaining 13 leaves owned by Hindman that were not offered to the Art Institute of Chicago and similar items in her collection. This impressive catalogue risks being viewed as a glorified and self-justifying sales pitch for the marketing of individual leaves of dismembered manuscripts, thus fostering the further deformation of precious material witnesses



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

of the past. If no-one were to purchase – or display – single leaves, this regrettable practice might at last come to an end.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris | publiée
par l'Institut historique allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)