

HAA Graphic Cabinet presents:

Private and Public Devotion in Medieval Europe

European medieval art is predominantly religious in content and use, ranging from monumental architecture to intimate personal items. These objects were part of daily religious practice, regardless of the economic stature or religious standing of the faithful. The stained glass and various types of illuminated manuscripts displayed here offer a micro-survey of some of these devotional pieces.

Illuminated manuscripts vary greatly in purpose. The large-scale multivolume codices and choir books were used by congregations in public settings, whereas smaller volumes were personalized to meet the needs of individuals and privately used. Book covers were sometimes adorned with jewels and ivory, and everything was written and illustrated by hand. Illustrations were deliberate and intended to aid in and enhance the reader's experience while letters or words on the pages of books were frequently color-coded, and the scale of letters was varied to signify a new story or chapter. These were cues indicating a method of active reading that disappeared after the invention of moveable type and is now lost to the modern reader.

The stained glass fragments, which were originally part of a larger window, would have served as components in a complex narrative program situated in a cathedral or church, visible to all who entered the space to enrich the devotional experience. When viewed out of context it is easy to forget the doubtless large scale of the architecture for which these fragments were constructed, as well as their placement within it. When viewing them, however, one should consider how visible or obscured the details of these illustrated stories would have been.

Though not its only purpose, one aspect of stained glass was to create ambiance. The effect of light shining through colored glass was quintessential in Gothic cathedral architecture. To some effect, this visual phenomenon influenced early manuscript illustrations. The use of gold leaf mimics the light passing through the glass. Even the saturated colors and shapes, such as the medallion and quatrefoil used in manuscript pages, mirror their counterparts in stained glass windows. The artists who worked on these two mediums were closely linked, effectively uniting private and personal devotional practices.