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Imagining the Past in France: 1250-1500

Getty Center Exhibition

The rainbow spectrum was God's covenant with Noah after the flood. Notre Dame's cathedral stain-glass rose windows cast brilliant specs of colored light, illuminating the darkest interiors. So who says the written word can't illuminate the spectrum right off the page? I've always had a passion for illuminated manuscripts because they remind me of stain-glass windows. After my own personal trip to Paris in the summer of 2007, I finally got to experience Notre Dame. When I walked through the cathedral's interiors, even though the place was filled to the brim with tourists and worshippers, I felt some divine presence as I looked up to the rose windows that appeared to hover in mid-air and the multi-colored prism effects illuminated the ceiling like jewels in the rough. I thought at first the only illuminated manuscripts in the world that are still in existence are the Book of Kells, and the Getty Center's own collection of Armenian Gospel books, and other prayer books that are small in comparison, but still glorified the divine in the written word. "Imagining the Past in France" represents a glorification of France's past during the time of the dark ages, from the crusades to the plague, where the secular and biblical stories of heroes, adventures, mythical and historical battles, figures, and events are brought to light in rich and colorful illustrations that illuminate beyond the manuscript pages.

Entering the exhibition, I suddenly found myself back four years ago at the Notre Dame Cathedral. Everywhere I looked, the rooms appeared dark, almost like a castle's dark interior with hidden corridors. Heraldic draperies hung from the ceiling behind each new title section throughout the exhibition in rich, velvet colors of gold, red, blue and purple. Even the walls were painted in dark, royal colors. Especially, the first room called "Narratives" is representative of a possible open nave or a chapel. Above, where normally there'd be an open skylight, they are closed with shutters because the manuscripts, made of animal skin parchment, and other artifacts are light sensitive. The manuscripts are displayed in glass display -cases, some are grouped together while others are isolated. Walking through to the last section "Beyond Manuscripts", that show tapestries, intricate boxes, canvases, and earthenware, the exhibition appears to circle back to the main entrance.

According to curator Elizabeth Morrison, the manuscripts aren't small like devotional books made for private use; on the contrary, she said they were made for "ostentatious display", meaning they're meant to be thoroughly read and looked at on a grander scale, and some are more than two feet tall, and weigh more than fifty pounds. The purpose of the exhibition was to bring to light a period in the time of France where "monarchs and nobles employed artists to paint heroic tales of bygone eras and helped the French understand their present and plan their future by celebrating an epic past." I firmly believe the intended audience is for students, normally bored with history subjects, to see stories of chivalry and adventure, fiction and non-fiction, and for adults and individual philosophers..."he sees the actions of the worthy men that lived in those times, just as though they were present." *Richard of Fournival*

The display strategy appears to illuminate upon a historical, explorative, aesthetic and interactive theme. The artifacts are historical documents, dating back almost seven hundred years, and are exquisitely beautiful. Computer aids help engage visitors with hands to explore the meaning of the manuscripts and their purpose. The exhibition provides a comfortable environment, and I truly believe Morrison specifically had the exhibition set against dark backgrounds to allow the manuscripts as the only source of light to illuminate the darkness. With the low sensitive lights in place, the reflections of rich colors and gold leafing appear as a glowing spectrum guiding the visitors throughout the exhibition. The darkened walls reinforce the idea of France's dark past, and that the intention of the unknown artists' work was to help the French understand the powerful will of man to plan for the future in light of past events.

The installation of the mysterious illuminated manuscripts overall met my expectations. It was a comfortable environment, everything was well kept and clean and in good repair. For my own fanaticism with manuscripts and the illustrated written words, it was engaging and interesting to explore all aspects of the exhibition's purpose. The structure and dark color choices reinforced the "dark" or the hidden past, allowing the manuscripts and other artifacts to do their intended job: illuminate the past with divine power of light, which gave them more meaning and value.

I chose a piece in the last section "Beyond Manuscripts" and part of the "9 Worthies" which refer to nine figures illustrated the most: Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Joshua, David Judas Maccabeus, King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godefroy of Bouillon. It was simply entitled "4 Enamel Plates", which are four plates painted in black enamel for the backgrounds, with the figures of knights in white in the

center of each separate plate. They're displayed in a diamond shape set flat against the wall, and clockwise it reveals Judas Maccabeus, David, Julius Cesar and Joshua, all dressed as knights. The artist was Colin Nonailker, and these were made about the year 1500. Their capes were different colors of blue, white, red, and they were set as equestrian figures, the highest caste of power. Their names are written in Latin around the borders of each plate. This supports the main point that these illuminated manuscripts went beyond the pages onto other artifacts, and these plates were probably made for decorative purposes. Yet they do what they're intended to do: illuminate secular and biblical figures, and represent four of the nine worthies mostly written and illustrated about. The fact that they're painted against a black enamel background on the plate only reinforces their status as powerful, leading men in ancient history who changed the world and became a "light" as heroic model figures to look to in times of darkness.