Collecting Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts Today

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Despite a noticeable surge of interest in medieval and renaissance manuscripts in the past twenty years, perhaps particularly since World War II, most people who are interested in and acquainted with this corner of the book world agree that manuscripts, or at the very least some kinds of them, are today and always have been neglected in the marketplace. Disregarding entirely that type of book collector, well known to dealers, who is heard to say that he really ought to have “one or two representative manuscripts to round out his collection,” it must be acknowledged that the total world supply of collectors of manuscripts at any given moment always seems very small, frighteningly so to the dealer. The scale on which Sir Thomas Phillipps collected manuscripts a century ago, despite his disagreeable habit of failing to pay his bills (whereby he brought to ruin more than one important bookseller), despite his extremely bad manners and contentiousness, and despite what many considered his ignorance—the mere scale is proof positive that he could and did have things his own way. Is the market for such things really so different today? Let us look briefly at this microcosm of medieval and renaissance manuscripts, and let us arbitrarily agree that we mean manuscripts produced before 1600 A.D., although much of what can be said about them holds true for somewhat later productions, too.

Book collectors (and dealers) appear to fall into well defined categories when it comes to manuscripts. There are those who detest manuscripts quite frankly and outspokenly, who do not understand them and do not pretend to, who would not give them house room. There are others who, once infected by the as yet undescribed microbe or unfiltered virus associated with manuscripts, can hardly think seriously of anything else. These two sub-species of bookman are

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seldom found together and seldom have anything at all to say to one
another when, usually by mistake, they do happen to meet. There is
doubtless a third type, perhaps happier than either of the other twain,
who seems able to enjoy and comprehend both the printed word and
the written word.

Manuscripts, even those which are mere copies of other manu-
scripts, have special qualities which set them apart from printed
books. It probably takes a dexterous compositor not so very much
longer to set up a substantial text in type than it does a dexterous
scribe to copy the same text. The result of the compositor’s labors is
a sort of negative from which a large number of positives may be
produced. On the other hand, the scribe’s labors always produce just
one positive. The scribe who is willing to labor for weeks or months
to produce his single positive must have quite compelling reasons.
But the force behind the printing of a text is surely less strong; if one
can sell only a certain specified number of printed positives, the enter-
prise is profitable, and the cost of producing the single printed positive
is almost certain to be much lower than that of the single written posi-
tive. The manuscript, therefore, is likely to have been a valuable
object to somebody in the time of writing. These qualities of unique-
ness and of “original value” in manuscripts have always been prized
to some extent, but they are rather definitely more highly valued today
than they were a few decades or a century ago. There are, of course,
a number of special types of materials like letters, diaries, registers,
accounts, lectures, much poetry, etc, which are ordinarily found pre-
served only in manuscript form. If one is interested in material of this
kind he must usually seek it out in manuscripts.

Richly prepared and richly decorated manuscripts have always
had a special appeal, but there have been many disparities in this
area. It is usually said that fine illustrated manuscripts fetch “high”
prices, and yet if one really does measure their prices against those
of paintings contemporary with them, manuscripts almost always ap-
ppear to be available at relatively modest figures. Of course, it is per-
fectly true that almost any panel or canvas painting is likely to be
much larger than almost any illuminated page from a book. Paintings
may therefore hang on walls of institutions or parlors and command
wider attention than miniature paintings from books. Still, it is quite
certain that one may still have a manuscript book containing a number
of very fine pictures of considerable antiquity for a fraction of the
cost of a single panel painting which may not be of very great
merit or which may have suffered heavy damage. This is an important point which does not seem to be generally enough recognized. Most medieval wall and panel paintings have in fact suffered much in the course of time, and a very high proportion of them are very heavily repainted so that not very much of the original may still be seen; on the contrary, a very high proportion of illustrated manuscripts of the same age survive in virtually unblemished condition. The pictures in manuscripts (the technique of painting them is almost identical with that employed for the panels) preserve their original brilliance and integrity where, lamentably, larger works seldom do.

Just as manuscripts may preserve texts which we cannot find in printed form, so do they preserve in considerable number types of paintings which either do not exist at all or barely exist in separate wall paintings. Again to emphasize this fact, it may be interesting to point to some figures which are in any case widely known. In December 1959 the thirteenth century English Apocalypse from the Dyson Perrins Collection was sold for about $182,000; it contains eighty-two miniatures, two each on forty-one leaves. Although such computations are not entirely fair, it is a fact that each leaf cost the purchaser about $4,500 and each picture half that sum. Now, one really cannot have an English panel painting of the thirteenth century, nor a drawing, no matter what one is willing to pay, for such artifacts do not exist as merchandise. Were one such panel to appear miraculously for sale, it seems extremely likely that it would fetch a higher price than the Dyson Perrins Apocalypse with its eighty-two pictures. And so, although the price of the Apocalypse amounted to a great sum of money, it is perhaps not truly dear at the price.

Examples like this one could quite readily be multiplied, and there are further disparities of different kinds in the relationship of cost to value for illuminated manuscripts. It is still possible, perhaps even quite easy and not very expensive, to acquire manuscripts which admirably illustrate styles in art as well as paleography from the twelfth century forward. Really outstanding examples with very many or very large pictures are, of course, likely to be extremely costly, but just below the rank of these very costly objects, there exist considerable numbers of fine examples at modest prices. Several recent catalogs of manuscripts offered for sale clearly demonstrate this fact.

In Cambridge, Philip Hofer has formed an important and very interesting collection of manuscripts, different in scope from that at the University of Pennsylvania or of T. E. Marston in New Haven,
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both of which will be discussed on the following pages. Hofer’s manuscripts reflect his interest in calligraphy and illumination through a long stretch of time, but characteristically also they include some highly interesting texts and illustrate this collector’s admirable interest in format of the book and bindings (the latter generally neglected in this country). In 1955 Harvard held an exhibition (in the Fogg Art Museum and the Houghton Library) primarily of Hofer’s gleanings; both the exhibition and the catalog, *Illuminated & Calligraphic Manuscripts*, have done much to concentrate interest on medieval and renaissance manuscripts. They also bear out the contention that this microcosm of manuscripts is a rich one, teeming with variety. On another continent, Martin Bodmer has assembled in Geneva a private library of extraordinary richness which includes many manuscripts, some of such great antiquity and importance that one scarcely believes such things could have been available, especially in the market of quite recent years.

So far, little has been said about the texts of manuscripts. In the heyday of Sir Thomas Phillipps’ collecting activities a century ago there was not very strong competition for interesting manuscript texts, unless of extremely early date or richly illustrated, with the possible exception of texts in the English language or of great importance to the study of English history. Gradually during the last century very much more importance has been attached to the texts of manuscripts, and there has been a marked spurt of interest in this connection in very recent years. Much of this increase in interest is clearly due to the definition of the role of the institution in collecting manuscripts, as well as to a growing awareness among private collectors. Many American institutions, for example, have rich libraries of printed books but very few illuminated manuscripts; their curators often think of illuminated manuscripts as “art objects” or paintings thinly disguised as books and are rather reluctant to enter late into an expensive market which will not yield substantial rewards in terms of publishable materials. These institutions like to have manuscript picture-books, as almost anyone would, but they do not ordinarily expend budgeted funds for their acquisition; in other words, they hope that somebody will give them a fair sample. On the other hand, not a great many art galleries will purchase illuminated manuscripts, because their curators tend to think of these as “books.” Sometimes, therefore, the illuminated manuscript falls between two stools in the world of the educational institution.
Text manuscripts are, however, a different story entirely. Many American institutions have been quite avidly acquiring manuscripts which are interesting primarily for their contents, rather than for their beauty. Such purchases are easy enough to justify because they provide excellent fodder for the hordes of graduate students who must write each year numberless papers and dissertations; also, publication of these materials draws attention in scholarly circles at least to the holdings of the institution. Dramatic examples (although not medieval ones) are the current publications of Boswell, Walpole, and Franklin materials.

There is growing interest in medieval and renaissance text manuscripts, and several strong collections have been built up in the United States in quite recent times. In New Haven Marston has assembled a remarkable collection of humanistic manuscripts, (in addition to his collection of incunabula, which he discusses in the following chapter) comprising medieval and renaissance copies of classical texts (mostly Latin with some Greek). He now has copies of nearly every important surviving classical Latin text, all of them bought within the past twenty years. In addition he has a large number of very interesting medieval texts, most of them in copies contemporary with the time of the original composition of these texts. Marston has paid attention to the history of his texts, has sought to have copies which represent the best text traditions, and in some cases has more than one version of a text. Although some of his manuscripts have been costly ones, numbers of them have been bought at very modest prices, and he now has a better humanistic library than virtually any humanist possessed during the renaissance. Having nearly exhausted the possibilities in this area, Marston more recently turned to medieval texts, with the result that he now has a better medieval library of manuscripts than perhaps the majority of medieval monastic libraries could boast. Almost incidentally, but with considerable acuity, he has in these processes acquired some remarkable manuscripts which have gone unrecognized. There is for example a lovely little book with Latin translations from Greek authors (mostly unpublished) which turned out to be from the library of Bernardo and Pietro Bembo and emanated no doubt from the scriptorium of Bartolomeo San Vito. Another manuscript is probably at least partly in the hand of the famous humanist Guarino da Varona, and it fits the description of a manuscript which figures in a typically rancorous exchange of letters between Guarino and Poggio. Other by-products
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of this interest in texts are very many excellent examples of illumination from the twelfth to the fifteenth century and a splendid run of paleographic material of the same period.

On the other hand, the University of Pennsylvania has concentrated on text manuscripts of even wider variety; the criteria employed, if the writer does not do the worthy Pennsylvania staff an injustice, have been that the manuscripts acquired be of scholarly value, preferably unpublished, and cheap. Operating on a necessarily limited budget, Pennsylvania has done marvels and acquired wonders in a relatively short space of years. They have managed to get quite a large number, for example, of medieval and renaissance manuscripts in vernacular languages, and this class of text has perhaps been the most neglected of all. There are, of course, comparatively much fewer vernacular texts than Latin ones extant.

Yet it must be said that there are discoveries aplenty; I have found, for example, manuscripts: localizing two of the most famous troubadours at an important court during a period when we knew nothing of them (thirteenth century); containing poems of Petrarch and his contemporaries, demonstrably written in Petrarch’s lifetime (not after 1370); by a hitherto unknown relative of Dante, expelled with the great poet from Florence in 1301, recounting in moving terms his struggle to make a new life for himself (early fourteenth century); containing a staggering mass of fourteenth century French lyric poetry, half of it unknown, including the only complete texts of the first Valentine’s Day poems; and others with important medieval or renaissance scientific, magical, and literary texts which are either unknown or barely known. My learned colleagues in the rare book business have of course brought to light materials just as, if not much more, intriguing. Curiously, we often find it very difficult to sell these discoveries, but this annoying factor does not rob us of the pride and pleasure we feel in having found the extraordinary.

Why do so many disparities exist in the prices paid for and the attention given to early manuscripts? Probably the explanation lies in the comparative difficulty of reading manuscripts and the fact that one can’t consult bibliographies, nor even palaeographical works in many cases, which pinpoint them. If one is offered, let us say, the first printed edition of Virgil, it is a quite simple matter to decide whether the book offered is what is purports to be; it is easy enough to collate it, its state of preservation is readily determinable, and one may read a good deal of literature about this very book. If, on the
other hand, one is offered a manuscript of Virgil, the matter is not so simple. Is it complete? In order to determine its completeness, the manuscript must be collated, the various works of the author must be identified to find out how many of them are present, and one must make some efforts to find out if the text of the manuscript is a good one, carefully transcribed, or a dreadful one hastily transcribed, perhaps from a poor source. General state of preservation is not difficult to determine, but the manuscript will have other qualities worthy of attention. Is it written on vellum of fine quality? Does it have fine illuminated initials, mediocre ones, or none at all? Is it a manuscript of noble size, or is it smallish and mean? What is its date? If it is a manuscript written in a humanistic hand, undated, it may be considered important to attempt to determine whether the manuscript precedes the earliest printed editions; and this process is by no means easy. One must frankly admit that the operations described above require rather more skill than consultation of a bibliography to find out if one has got the right book with the right number of leaves.

The difficulties are multiplied, naturally, when one is confronted with a manuscript containing a text which is not identified. One must, of course, read enough of the manuscript to obtain evidence of what it is. Then begins a search, often long and complicated, to discover if the text is well known, less well known, or apparently not known at all. In this area of the unknown quantity in manuscripts there are without any doubt still very exciting discoveries to be made. It takes time, it is often laborious, and one very frequently ends with the feeling that the truth has almost been found out, but that full revelation of the secrets of a manuscript are somehow beyond reach, just around a corner one cannot turn.

One must admit that the price of the Dyson Perrins Apocalypse, or indeed of several other important manuscripts sold in recent years, amount to big money. They represent very large investments on the part of dealers (whose risk is great), private collectors, or institutions. In fact, it is clear that the money factor is impressive enough to have commanded a good deal of attention. An audience of millions doubtless stared agape when H. P. Kraus appeared on the television show, "I've Got a Secret" with the Apocalypse and a guard. On a more prestigious level, perhaps, and one devoted rather specifically to big money affairs, valuable illuminated manuscripts and American collectors of them recently received dramatic treatment in Fortune Magazine, which devoted a cover and a color-illustrated feature article
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to the subject. Widespread publicity of these kinds might possibly account for the constantly increasing interest in single illuminated leaves, a class of merchandise once quite plentiful and usually cheap, but now very scarce and often very dear if the quality is good.

And so, the variety of material available, if one is willing to look, to ferret out, is really quite extraordinary. The fun is in the "uniqueness" of manuscripts, in contrast to the "sameness" of printed books. The manuscripts-chaser is perhaps the personality who is unable to resist the charms of the unknown (surely he also has a large measure of the bargain-hunter buried in his bosom); by contrast, he who pursues the printed book seems to want the pleasures of the known, the implicitly guaranteed, the tested and measured quantity and quality. The gulf between these types is doubtless as vast as it is unexplainable; but since those addicted to manuscripts are still comparatively few, although waxing in number, they regularly acquire extremely interesting manuscripts at modest prices in a market which many people claim is both dear and exhausted. That they well recognize their good fortune is demonstrated by a veteran collector of manuscripts who said to me recently, "Why does anyone collect printed books?" Why indeed?