Fragmentology

A Journal for the Study of Medieval Manuscript Fragments

Fragmentology is an international, peer-reviewed Open Access journal, dedicated to publishing scholarly articles and reviews concerning medieval manuscript fragments. *Fragmentology* welcomes submissions, both articles and research notes, on any aspect pertaining to Latin and Greek manuscript fragments in the Middle Ages.

Founded in 2018 as part of *Fragmentarium*, an international research project at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF), and the Zeno-Karl-Schindler Foundation, Fragmentology is published by the University of Fribourg and controlled by the Editorial Board in service to the scholarly community. Authors of articles, research notes, and reviews published in *Fragmentology* retain copyright over their works and have agreed to publish them in open access under a Creative Commons Attribution license; images may be subject to other licenses. Submissions are free, and *Fragmentology* does not require payment or membership from authors or institutions.

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Fragmentology is published annually at the University of Fribourg. For further information, inquiries may be addressed to *fragmentarium@unifr.ch*.

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Funded by:

FNSNF
Fonds national suisse
Schweizerischer Nationalfonds
Fondo nazionale svizzero
Swiss National Science Foundation

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ZENO KARL SCHINDLER - Stiftung

Volume IV, 2021

Indices

Review

Peter Kidd, *The McCarthy Collection, Volume II: Spanish, English, Flemish & Central European Miniatures*, London: Ad Illissum 2019, 248 pp., 150+ colour illustrations, ISBN 97819121681 32.

Peter Kidd, *The McCarthy Collection, Volume III: French Miniatures*, London: Ad Illissum 2021, 336 pp., 350 colour illustrations, ISBN 97819121681 87.

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Not all printed catalogues of illuminated manuscript fragments are created equal. Though the genre may seem straightforward and formulaic, it is actually subject to great variation not only in terms of production values, colour fidelity, and layout, but also—more importantly—in terms of scholarly conception, rigour, completeness and exactitude. The two final volumes of the Bob McCarthy collection stand out in this regard. They are among the most accurate, systematic, and careful examples of their kind ever produced. The collection they document is equally extraordinary, consisting of Spanish, English, Flemish, and Central European material brought together in volume 2 and French material examined in volume 3. The former includes some 97 items over 63 entries, and the latter some 190 over 96 entries (multiple leaves or fragments from the same parent volume are grouped together). The last volume also includes 9 additional entries for items omitted from the first volume of the series, which was dedicated to Italian and Byzantine material.

Within each of these three volumes, geographical patterns reveal differing histories of dispersal and collecting. The Italian material in the first volume primarily consisted of material purposely excised for the collector usually quite early on, especially "cuttings" and

single-sheets extracted from service books.[1] The Spanish, English, Flemish, and Middle-European material from the second volume, on the whole less sought-after by post-Napoleonic collectors, contains a significant proportion of irregularly cut fragments unglued from later bindings. While the catalogue author takes great pains to establish provenance of items that have circulated previously in the trade, it is a shame that such orphan fragments, often unmoored quite recently owing to their growing commercial value, arrive at the market with no conceivable way of being reconnected to their host volume. Finally, among the French material recorded in volume 3, and owing to a special emphasis of the collector expressed in the foreword, there is a preponderance of sets of leaves from small-format Bibles produced in Northern France. That most of these can be linked to other leaves in public and private collections shows that there are in fact a relatively limited number of late medieval books that have fallen under the knife in recent decades, though the practice of biblioclasm is still, unfortunately, ongoing.

In terms of the sheer artistic quality of individual items, this ensemble may not rival the famous collections of illuminated material composed a century ago or more. At that time, more dazzling specimens were routinely available on the market. However, the McCarthy collection is probably unparalleled among present-day private collections in terms of breadth and depth. As a whole, it provides a remarkable survey of Western European manuscript illumination of the twelfth to early fifteenth centuries (with a few excursions earlier and later). The goal of the present review is not to summarize or highlight this wonderful panorama; rather, it is to acknowledge the care and sophistication of the publication itself.

The author of these two volumes, an independent scholar and consultant to auctioneers and private collectors, has become one of the field's foremost practitioners of fragmentology, to use a neologism that he himself has openly questioned.[2] Publicly, he is the author of the Medieval Manuscripts Provenance blog, which provides a longstanding and regular feed of discoveries made through dogged

1 See my review in *Fragmentology* 3 (2020), 155–59.

2 https://mssprovenance.blogspot.com/2018/07/the-use-of-word-fragments.html

scrutiny of digitized collections, items coming up for auction, and newly digitized catalogues from the past three centuries of the book trade.[3] Like this website, the current volumes brim with new and authoritative identifications of sister leaves and chains of provenance for dozens of manuscript leaves, cuttings, and recuperated fragments, here encompassed under the convenient but inadequate subtitle for the volumes, "miniatures." As I often tell students, the ability to virtually re-stitch these *folia fugitiva* is not magic; it is the result of patient work, organizational acumen, inquisitiveness, networking, and good memory. Nor is it merely a demonstration of scholarly prowess: Peter Kidd's discoveries, like those of any good fragmentologist, lay the groundwork for better understandings of broader artistic and social currents. Tracing the sequence of custody of medieval works of art is not merely an exercise in posthumous aristocratic house-calls (though this is often part of it). In best-case scenarios, it can lead us to an orphaned work of art's place of origin that is otherwise lost.

The author's Note on the Catalogue repeated at the outset of each volume consists of a thorough, well-reasoned account of the rationale behind each entry's discrete sections: numbering; headings; attributions in the headings; physical description; dimensions; decoration and text; parent volume and sister leaves; provenance; commentary; bibliography; and references to online sources. It reads like a manifesto of best practices in cataloguing and describing, while also acknowledging the affordances of a print volume. This short but valuable section enunciates many principles that are rarely voiced by catalogers, and can even be in conflict in multi-author publications. Most importantly, the introduction broaches the key distinction between relaying information as it exists and deducing conclusions thereupon. This is the difference between noting the presence of a bookplate and asserting ownership by the individual represented. Such a distinction is a key epistemological point for any study of the historical past, and writers must constantly balance conveyance and inference, based on the particular context. Iconographies, for instance, are rarely labeled, but in most cases a scene's

3 https://mssprovenance.blogspot.com/

conventional title and the sacred subject it represents are clear, and can thus be inferred without issue.

An exemplary aspect of the author's method is his citation practice for web resources. Recognizing the often-unwieldy URLs that point to specific items on museum or library websites, the author has used the TinyURL abbreviation service to produce custom, short, and meaningful aliases for use in the footnote text. This solves one of the vexing issues of retrofitting electronic references to print. The other problem, the rapid, almost universal expiration of URLs over time, even when the content is still available elsewhere on an institution's website, is deftly if laboriously solved by the author: where possible, he has saved copies of websites to the Archive.org repository, which provides as certain a means as is currently possible to record a snapshot of a web resource.

Interestingly, the author offers no discrete discussion of condition in the catalogue entries. No explicit reason is given, but given the overall emphasis on unity, utility, and verifiability, this may be due to the avoidance of inherently subjective language. There is certainly a well-trodden and glib language of condition qualifiers redolent of dealer and auction-catalogue speak that scholarly writers should seek to avoid, but there are also more precise means of indicating flaws in the parchment, signs of use, and patterns of abrasion or incision. The reliance on digital images, which the author freely admits, also calls for a certain amount of caution in describing condition. Similarly, the author urges caution when it comes to the stated dimensions of items, as he often has been forced to rely upon legacy information which may not be trustworthy. Better tools for scaling and sizing digital photographs may one day assist in solving this problem.

In line with the emphasis on objectivity that pervades the catalogue is the limitation of the commentary section for each entry. This is in contrast to the first volume of the series, written by Gaudenz Freuler, which includes extensive discussion of stylistic arguments and frequent references to—and illustrations of—works of art in other media. The contrast between these approaches is a reflection of differing norms for different regional traditions of scholarship, but also a reflection of the more permeable medial boundaries and

better rates of survival for Italian art. The author of the volumes presently under review makes clear that the purpose of his discursive brevity is to avoid subjective opinion and speculation about style and geographical localization, as many attempts at attribution expressed by previous scholars have either not withstood the test of time, or have been repeated uncritically in subsequent catalogues. For the volume on French material, the introduction (pp. 9–13) makes plain what the anti-model is: Robert Branner's posthumous 1977 survey of manuscript illumination in the era of Louis IX, well-known for its opacity and problematic stylistic groupings, and sadly not yet succeeded by a more reliable study.[4] Nevertheless, we might counter by using the connoisseur Federico Zeri's (admittedly Italocentric) argument that even an attribution that one day proves faulty is a contribution of sorts, as it sets up a baseline for others to either confirm or deny. The author also evinces a healthy degree of skepticism about dating, noting that chronologies for these schools of manuscript illumination are notoriously fluid. Supposedly archaic tendencies have a longer life in areas removed from so-called "metropolitan" centres, while the circulation of model-books and artisans across Europe can short-circuit expected patterns of artistic change.

Finally, the plenitude of useful scholarly apparatuses that accompany each volume should be noted. Often unsung, systematic indices have maintained their usefulness even in the age of Google Books searchability. While the first volume included indices of current whereabouts, subject, artists, places, and people, volumes 2 and 3 add substantial alphabetical lists of iconographies, identified texts, and prior provenance. In the third volume, the index of current whereabouts even includes very useful subsections of sister leaves in named private collections, unnamed private collections, and of unknown whereabouts. Of course, the situation for items not held by institutions can evolve rapidly. But one example is the private collection in Grimsby, UK, cited in both volumes; this was that of Roger Martin (d. 2020), the bulk of which was sold at a posthumous auction shortly after the appearance of the final volume of

4 Robert Branner, *Manuscript Painting in Paris during the Reign of Saint Louis: A Study of Styles*, Berkeley 1977.

the McCarthy catalogue.[5] The endpages of volume 3 also include addenda and corrigenda for the previous volumes, rather extensive for volume 1 but admirably short (and consisting mostly of additional information) for volume 2.

Overall, these final two volumes of the McCarthy Collection catalogue of miniatures are a model of the genre. They are every part the equal of the wonderful collection they represent.

5 *The Roger Martin Collection of Western Manuscripts and Miniatures, Bloomsbury Auctions*, London, 6 July 2021.