

Mindful Hands. I capolavori miniati della fondazione Giorgio Cini
[Illuminated masterpieces from the Giorgio Cini foundation]

Curated by Alessandro Martoni, Massimo Medica, Federica Toniolo.

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The exhibition showcases a selection of illuminated manuscripts (and fragments from them, at times recomposed in proto-collages) from the collection, which Vittorio Cini bought between 1939 and 1940 from the [Libreria Antiquaria Hoepli](#) founded in Milan in 1881. The art-historical value of the collection has received the insightful attention of several art historians, among them Piero Toesca, and is highlighted in the sections of the exhibition reconstructing the activity of several schools and workshops in the Italian peninsula from the 12th to the 16th century. The exhibition interestingly moves beyond a traditional art historical approach to foreground the history of collecting illuminated manuscripts per se, and, specifically, the practice of dismembering manuscripts and of circulating single pages, and at times only cut-outs of illuminated initials throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While the catalogue essays trace the practice to the best-known previous examples of the Cistercians *Collectarius* from the 10th century, the 13th-14th century *Alphonso Psalter* from the British Library (through the studies of C. de Hamel and L.F. Sandler), or the forms of reuse in the 17th century dictated by practical needs, the curators identify in William Young Ottley (1771-1836), a Royal Academy pupil and later Keeper of the Departments of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, a crucial mediator of the Preraphaelite taste in Great Britain, through the dissemination of fragments from ancient manuscripts that John Ruskin famously admired for the better state of preservation when compared to the frescoes from the same period. Such a practice of dismembering illuminated manuscripts and of recombining them in forms of proto-collage became the norm not only in the traumatic period of the Napoleonic campaigns, due to the widespread looting, but

through the series of edicts, culminating in the one of 1810 for the Kingdom of Italy, suppressing religious orders and professional organizations, thus initiating a new history of the circulation of ancient *codices*. The early and mid-nineteenth century becomes another chapter in the history of what could be done with ancient books, once they entered an international market as commodities that could maximize the profits of antique dealers and collectors when further dismembered in fragmented units. The core collection owned by Cini, which reached him as a complete set, is now seen as assembled also thanks to the work of John Murray, son of the artist and collector Charles Fairfax Murray (1849-1919), who assisted Edward Burne Jones, John Ruskin, Dante Gabriele Rossetti and who also illuminated William Morris' manuscripts. The early history of transnational connoisseurship and book history proves to be, therefore, deeply rooted in aesthetic concerns and interests. The exhibition, with its excellent lighting design, offers a remarkable opportunity to appreciate, in ways that no photograph has so far reproduced, the glimmers that animate these pictures emerging from a golden backdrop steeped in the neoplatonic theology of light of the Byzantine models, which later evolves into a purely formulaic stylistic feature. While the central hall maps the evolution of painterly style in the Italian peninsula by tracking with an almost seismographic precision the impact in the nearby areas of the stylistic impulses propagating from the innovations of Cimabue, Giotto, Simone Martini, the brothers Lorenzetti, the play of light transforms almost alchemically any critical narrative of the evolution of the representation of spatial conventions, rather reinforcing the dazzling ephemeral and liminal status of the illuminated initials in the perusal of these manuscripts. The visual pleasure of these images, often framed in convoluted decorative motives that defy representational logic, is a passing sensation ancillary to the dematerialization that accompanies the reader of the antiphonaries, graduals and psalter-hymnals that contained them. The intricate and blurred synaesthetic experience that these codices inspire is further explored in the room that complements the enlarged reproductions of the illuminations for the *Martirologio die Battuti Neri di Ferrara*, reproduced on the walls in a size comparable to the one of the (now lost) frescoes that probably inspired them, with the remastered Gregorian chants that had been studied in the 1950s and 60s by Father Pellegrino Ermetti, a Benedictin monk in the monastery that hosts the exhibition, former and first professor of prepoliphonic music at the Venice Conservatory, as well as astrophysicist by training and main exorcist of the city Venice.

The repeated format of these illuminated scenes, when seen throughout the long history detailed in the exhibition, constitute an insightful and elaborate gloss to the history of the changing material and social value of the *codex* itself: its uses ranged from ecclesiastic ritual to private devotional practices, and evolved from the original context in sacred liturgy to the secularized one of the records of city archives (for instance the Venetian *mariegole*, but also their appearance university degrees). The commissions varied over the centuries and came originally from members of the clergy and aristocracy (at times as gifts accompanying diplomatic missions) only to justify later the establishment of modern workshops serving a bourgeois readership (the example here is Petrarch's collection of another form of fragmentary compositions, his *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta*). While the exhibition interestingly insists on recuperating the multi sensory dimension of these decorations, the inter-medial synergies foregrounded in the narrative of the exhibition tend to privilege only a dialogue between the art of illumination and the 'high' art of established painterly practice, in order to reaffirm the artistic value of these forms, while excluding—at least in the exhibits—other dominant visual discursive practices deriving from the applied arts that seeped in the history of the style of illumination. These inter medial suggestions resist building genealogies articulating the authorial influence of individual artists, which is the main focus of the narrative of the exhibition. These synergies were amply documented, by contrast, in the recently closed exhibition on *Aldo Manuzio*, which inspired a broader reflection on the transmigration of decorative motifs among several arts, including book making. Lastly, the core collection originally acquired by Cini included also Persian illuminated manuscripts, which are absent in the exhibition, thus presenting a somewhat exclusive focus on an 'italianate' style that indirectly shadows the currents of orientalist fascination that enticed Romantic and Victorian collectors, artists and writers, while also avoiding the established tradition of scholarly debates on the East-West relations in the development of specific styles of painting.

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