Illuminating Metalwork: Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts

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edited volume: Illuminating Metalwork: Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts

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Historians of Western medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic art are invited to contribute essays to a volume on the representation of precious metalwork in medieval manuscripts.

The makers of medieval manuscripts frequently placed special emphasis on the depiction of precious-metal objects, both sacred and secular, including chalices, reliquaries, crosses, tableware, and figural sculpture. Artists typically rendered these objects using gold, silver, and metal alloys, “medium-specific” materials that richly and pointedly contrasted with the surrounding color pigments. The visual characteristics of these depicted metal things—lustrous yet flat, almost anti-representational—could dazzle, but perhaps also disorient: they grab the eye while creating a fertile tension between the representation of an object and the presentation of a precious stuff, between the pictorial and the material. A gold-leaf chalice signals its referent both iconically, via its shape, and indexically, via its metal material—a semiotic duality unavailable to the remainder of the painted miniature—and such images might accrue additional complexities when intended to represent known real-world objects.

This volume of essays will take inventory of how manuscript illuminators chose to depict precious metalwork and how these depictions generated meaning. The prominent application of metal leaf is one of the most distinguishing features of medieval manuscript illumination (only those books thus decorated technically merit the designation “illuminated”), and yet, despite its hallmark status, it has rarely served as a central subject of scholarly scrutiny and critique. In addressing both the use of metal leaf and the representation of precious-metal objects (via metallic and non-metallic media alike), Illuminating Metalwork seeks to remedy this lacuna. This volume will enhance traditionally fruitful approaches to medieval manuscript illumination, such as those analyzing text/image dynamics, pictorial mimesis, or public vs. private reception, by considering issues of materiality, preciousness, and presence. By focusing on the representation of precious metalwork, these studies will introduce new paths of inquiry beyond the depiction of actual objects and incorporate analyses of the use and simulation of metallic preciousness more broadly.

We invite essays that represent the full temporal and geographic scope of medieval manuscript painting—from Late Antiquity into the early modern era, from the Latin West to the Byzantine and Islamic East—in order to foster trans-historical and cross-cultural analysis. Possible themes include: chronological/geographical specificities in the representation of metalwork in manuscript illuminations; depictions of precious-metal figural sculpture, including idols; artistic technique and technical analysis (e.g. pigment vs. leaf, and the alloys used therein); the semiotics of metal on parchment; the phenomenology of the encounter; and whether we can speak of “portraits” of particular objects and/or visual “inventories” of specific collections.

Please direct all inquiries and submissions to Joseph Ackley (jackley@barnard.edu) and/or Shannon Wearing (slwearing@gmail.com).

Reference:

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