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## **Cataloging and classification of illuminated manuscripts: intellectual access for the pre-modern manuscript**

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### **Abstract**

Examines literature topics pertaining to the cataloging and classification of illuminated manuscripts. Encompasses the comparison of the modern manuscript and pre-modern manuscript as it considers the application of codes and standards, especially AMREMM (Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Manuscripts), which is intended as a supplement to AACR2 (Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, Second edition). Because manuscripts of the pre-modern era bear much more in common in their bibliographic and physical structures with printed books, standards that have been premised for modern manuscripts need reevaluation. The cataloging record for pre-modern manuscript is examined by deliberating upon the levels of detail and variety of access points, problems in transcription, physical description, and the setting of cataloging policy within an institutional context. The ongoing dilemma between simple and complex cataloging is

considered while posing the argument that illuminations may constitute separate areas of content within themselves.

### **Introduction**

Illuminated manuscripts are beautiful works of art. The cataloging and classification of these pre-modern wonders, however, can be difficult and complicated. AMREMM (Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Manuscripts), a supplement of AACR2 (Anglo-American Cataloging Rules, Second edition), provides some guidance, but because manuscripts of the pre-modern manuscript era bear much more in common in their bibliographic and physical structures with printed books, standards that have been premised for modern manuscripts need reevaluation. Levels of detail and variety of access points, problems in transcription, physical description, and the setting of cataloging policy within an institutional context are all issues that deserve closer consideration. Cataloging of these works is further complicated by an ongoing dilemma between simple and complex cataloging, and an under-appreciation of the need to treat illuminations as separate areas of content within themselves.



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## A brief history of the illuminated manuscript

Descending from the Latin phrase *codex manus scriptus*, the term "manuscript" describes work written by hand. Illumination, from the Latin infinitive *illuminare*, "to enlighten or illuminate," signifies the embellishment and decoration of a manuscript with luminous colors, especially gold and silver. Illuminated manuscripts belong to the category of pre-modern manuscripts, generally manuscripts produced before the seventeenth century. With the advent of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, the need for the inimitable expertise of illumination dwindled in the industrial exercise of mass production, although illuminators continued to practice their art to a limited extent after the introduction of print and a handful of experts continue the tradition today.

## Modern versus pre-modern manuscripts

Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Manuscripts, created by Gregory A. Pass (2003) outlines the inherent contextual

differences between modern and pre-modern literary manuscripts. While modern manuscripts such as an author's rough draft or a copy of a work to be treated in print, for example, are valued "in the evidence they offer of the creative process, both literary and physical," (p. xi) they are not themselves valued as the literary end of that process of production. In contrast, during the pre-modern manuscript era all books took the form of manuscripts and were the final result of literary production. Illuminated manuscripts have been passed down to us in forms that consist of fragments, loose leaves, rolls, and codices. Although their forms of survival vary, these manuscripts were not rough drafts as modern manuscripts are today, but finished products. Pre-modern manuscripts bear much more in common in their bibliographic and physical structures with printed books than with modern manuscripts, and APPM (Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts) and AACR2 discuss manuscripts in the modern sense.

Stalker and Dooley (1992) outline the assumptions that figured prominently in the revision of the DCRB (Descriptive Cataloging and Rare Books): "A rare book cataloging code should be driven by the characteristics of early printed books i.e., books of the hand-press period" (p. 9). Even so, they describe the atmosphere surrounding the cataloging practice as a climate of "widespread interest in simplifying cataloging practice in the direction of more limited description and fewer formalized access points" (p. 7). Lundy and Hollis (2004) discuss the growing backlogs of uncataloged collections and unprocessed materials in special collections departments. They include lost intellectual access in a list of obstacles presented by collections not cataloged or only partially cataloged (p. 466-475). This loss of access is particularly relevant to illuminated manuscripts, which require complex cataloging.



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## The challenges of pre-modern manuscript cataloging

The literature pertaining to the subject of cataloging rare book materials touches on a common dilemma: the pressure to provide complex bibliographic control of rare book materials is not matched by sufficient time, staff, and budget. Demand for bibliographic records produced quickly and cheaply, coupled with a trend toward more limited description and fewer access points, makes adequate access to the intellectual content of illuminated manuscripts an increasingly hopeless goal.

The cataloging codes do not always distinguish the contextual differences inherent in modern literary manuscripts and pre-modern literary manuscripts or books of the hand-press era. To complicate matters further, illuminated manuscripts contain dual properties of both text and illumination, requiring that much more be accounted for in their bibliographic control. While they share much in common with printed books, they also possess features intrinsic to art, and their bibliographic records must take into account the details appropriate to codicology and paleography.

## AMREMM rules for cataloging illuminated manuscripts

AMREMM (2003) accounts for two levels of detail in the description of manuscripts: summary and detailed description (p. 5). Both levels share basic sets of elements that differ in depth of treatment in the notes--with emphasis on the content note--and in the amount of the required added entry access. Summary description is intended primarily for ready access to the works contained in a manuscript, while providing only an essential account of the item's physical features. For the purposes of illuminated manuscripts, the cataloger must rely on the level of detailed description, which permits fuller notice to textual, paleographical, codicological, artistic, and other physical features inherent in the manuscript. In addition, a detailed description differs primarily by the transcription of the sequence of opening rubric, incipit, explicit, and closing rubric of the work(s) contained in an item.

There remain important differences between the transcription of graphic (written) and typographic (printed) texts. Traditional principles of cataloging printed texts require a transcription as accurate as possible to that which is found on the chief source of information. Because of a wide variety of irregular spellings, punctuation, capitalization, and the use of abbreviation in particular, pre-modern manuscripts create difficulty in this regard and transcription may therefore require editorial interpretation. Some pre-modern letterforms will be transcribed to their early modern equivalents, but language-specific characters, such as the Anglo-Saxon and will be maintained (Pass, 2003, OF.2. Letter Forms). In essence, the conventions of AMREMM aim to provide readable transcriptions that remain true to the typographic representation of graphic letterforms.

In the process of transcription, abbreviations are especially common in illuminated manuscripts (Pass, 2003, OF.8. Abbreviations). They saved space and effort in writing and they allowed for more ornamentation. Abbreviations fall into three categories: suspensions, in which the end of a word is abbreviated, signaled by the use of a horizontal bar or other graphic symbol; contradictions, in which some other part of the word is abbreviated with the use of a graphic symbol; and abbreviated symbols, which are used in place of entire words and are often derived from the tachygraphic (shorthand) systems of Antiquity. All three types of abbreviations might be present in the same manuscript and a manuscript containing these abbreviations is not necessarily considered an illuminated manuscript; nonetheless, illuminated manuscripts do frequently bear graphic symbols.



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## Challenges describing illuminations

Although AMREMM gives specific instructions for pre-modern manuscripts, including sections that might be applicable to illuminated manuscripts, these instructions remain vague. An example from the Physical Description section states:

5C2, Illustrative matter Describe any illustrations, illuminations, calendars, canon tables, genealogical tables, diagrams, etc. as ill. in all cases, unless maps are present For purposes of recording information in this area, simple pen flourished initials, line fillers, decorated catchwords, etc. are not considered illustrative or illumination. Describe these features in a note for decoration if desired. Provide details appropriate to the level of cataloging on illustration, illumination, maps, etc. in a note for decoration (see 7B10). (Pass, 2003).

In terms of detailed description, these instructions leave much to be desired in many instances of illumination. For example, illuminations often bear no connection to the text. Might they then be considered separate areas of content within themselves? In other instances—such as bestiary, a form which enjoyed popularity during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—animals and fantastic creatures and imagery, often imbued with Christian symbolism or moral lessons, support the core text. Sometimes the illuminated matter serves to emphasize and illustrate a point in the text through these illuminations, but sometimes, especially in a bas-de-page, (frequently found in gothic illumination for instance), the images may or may not refer to the text at all. How can the codes account for these images, or must they be omitted? Surprisingly the literature at large is generally silent concerning the relevance of the illuminated content. Most likely, the issue is suffocated in the advocacy for the summary or less detailed level of description. Stalker and Dooley (1992)—willing to fight for a revision of the DCRB that fully considers the characteristics of early printed books, in a climate favoring

simplification, wanted to maintain an equilibrium between the detailed and the simple: "Simplification and effectiveness coincide nicely in the context of rare book cataloging, and we believe that the progress has been achieved toward the goal of making rare book cataloging both more effective and affordable" (p. 7). Certainly, the issues lurking in the illuminated images of rare book rooms should have toppled this attitude of "let's make everyone happy," with implications of anything but effectiveness, simplicity, or affordability in the cataloging world.

## The German Model

Germany offers a competing model more inline with the realities of illuminated manuscript cataloging. There, a stronger commitment of resources to adequate cataloging of illuminated manuscripts has produced striking results. During the twentieth century, German libraries invested considerable effort in cataloging medieval manuscripts. This devotion emerged in the aftermath of World War II, when many German collections were dispersed, removed to secure storage, or destroyed during the course of military action. Wagner (2004) discusses how these circumstances, along with the soaring scholarly interest in medieval studies, helped to form the DFG (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft), a funding program for manuscript cataloging projects in Germany (p. 38-41). DFG enables a national framework of guidelines and standards that have, as Wagner points out, "contributed substantially to Germany's reputation as a country with excellent resources for medievalists" (p. 41).

The Richtlinien, a series of recommendations which developed into a more prescriptive cataloging manual under the umbrella of the DFG. In spite of its flexibility, it sets out specific guidelines for specific manuscripts, such as illuminated manuscripts, early modern manuscripts, manuscripts of polyphonic music. Recently,

new forms for accessing their descriptions are being made available to catalogers around the world, (Wagner, 2004). The Richtlinien is responsible for over 200 printed catalogs ranging from Aachen to Zwickau and plans are in progress to make these catalogs available online. Wagner warns, however, that online technology "has required a much more rigid application of common standards, as the points of divergence between individual practices become increasingly obvious and can potentially prevent information that does not conform to the standard from being accessible" (Wagner, 2004, p. 43).

## Conclusion

Pass says this in the guidelines for the AMREMM:

An experienced manuscript cataloger will find a great deal more information to incorporate into a manuscript description than can be addressed even in specialized rules as these, or than may be appropriate for inclusion in a library catalog. Every manuscript is unique and there are certain to be instances when directions given here will not suffice (p. 2)<sup>1</sup>.

The DCRM (B) (2005) echoes this warning: "Rare materials may not conform to the assumptions of standard production practices that lie behind general cataloging rules" (p. 9). The purposes of such guidelines and the literature surrounding such discussions of these codes may only provide frameworks from which a cataloging description may be constructed. For illuminated manuscripts, for which uniqueness is apparent, the interpretive role of the cataloger is vast indeed. The literature continues to grasp at the controversy surrounding the call for simplified bibliographic records and more immediate access, versus the need for the kind of detailed-level description required for items containing content challenging to represent. It is impossible--and

unnecessary perhaps--to formulate standards truly adequate for the great diversity of pre-modern manuscripts. Their uniqueness will predictably entail a variation of interpretations based on the contents of collections from institution to institution. Current guidelines attempt to serve both ends, that of simplified and complex cataloging, but without adequate resources and dedication, no set of rules will ever meet the challenge.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A more detailed explanation of the definition for "illumination" can be found in Brown (1994, p. 69). *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Michelle Brown. (1994) pg. 69. The ambiguity of the term can be evidenced by a stricter definition, as acknowledged in De Hamel (1997): "The term strictly means with decoration that includes metallic gold or silver, which reflect and sparkle when they catch the light... 'illuminated manuscripts' for all European medieval books is a convenient and evocative one, if not absolutely accurate" (Introduction, 11). In this essay, the term is used in its general sense to refer to those manuscripts that are embellished with decoration and color.

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## Author's Bio

Meredith E. Torre is a Master's candidate of the School of Library and Information Science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Her primary interests lie in rare book librarianship and the history of books, printing, and paper and book conservation. She recently served at the preservation lab at Memorial library and currently serves as a student librarian in acquisitions and book conservation at Wendt Library.