Collecting Early Manuscripts at Harvard

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One of the highlights of 1983 in Cambridge was a very rich exhibition in the Houghton Library entitled "Late Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts, 1350-1525." The exhibition was of 50 choice illuminated manuscripts. The catalogue, written by Roger S. Wieck of the Library's Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, describes all 203 of the College Library's illuminated manuscripts of that particular period. Together, the exhibition and catalogue form a significant American contribution to the study of European art, and they make this an appropriate time to ask how and why these objects and others like them found their way to this particular corner of New England.

Harvard College owns millions of manuscripts. They occupy almost five miles of shelving in the Houghton Library and in the large manuscript stack in the Pusey Library that can only be approached through Houghton. There are individual item numbers on more manuscripts in Houghton than there are books in the Widener Library, and they embrace all periods and most languages. The Indie and Syriac holdings are strong; the American and English literary manuscripts are famous. At the heart of it all are about 1,250 European manuscripts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, that is, all of the College's manuscripts written before the year 1600, excluding manuscripts in exotic languages or papyri or pottery shards. These early manuscripts constitute possibly the largest and certainly one of the most useful collections of its kind in this country. Some of them are beautiful. All of them are intensely informative in a variety of ways. Looking back over the history of the collections one can see that there has also been a variety of reasons for acquiring them. I shall touch on some of these changing styles and purposes of collecting.

1 Roger S. Wieck, Late Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts, 1350-1525, in the Houghton Library (Cambridge, 1983). Some of these observations formed the Introduction to that catalogue. This paper is based on remarks addressed to members of the Radcliffe Club of Boston at the Houghton Library on 30 April 1983.
As far as the priority of American collections is concerned, Yale beats us easily. Elihu Yale himself gave his college a Speculum Humanae Salvationis in 1714, and in 1777 a Book of Hours rescued from the desolation of Morrisania, New York, came to New Haven. Both manuscripts are still there. But although our first early manuscripts came somewhat later, their arrival was part of an occasion that meant a good deal to American intellectual life. I am referring to the trip of three Harvard men, George Ticknor, Edward Everett, and Joseph Green Cogswell, to Göttingen University in the years 1815 to 1817, probably the first visitation of this kind ever made. Among the results of this trip were Ticknor’s acquaintance with Byron and Chateaubriand and more importantly Cogswell’s friendship with Goethe, which resulted in Goethe’s great gift of books to Harvard. Then there was the purchase for the Harvard Library of the books of C. D. Ebeling of Hamburg, a purchase that placed us, apparently forever, among the leading libraries of America; the organization by Cogswell of the Astor Collection in New York according to Continental European principles; and the similar organization by Ticknor of the Boston Public Library. Another benefit was Everett’s excursion to Constantinople and his return home in 1819 with six Greek manuscripts and one Latin manuscript. The following year, four years after Lord Elgin had completed his gift to the English nation, Everett addressed the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in the following way:

We may excuse the severity with which those Greeks, who feel for the literary degradation of their native country, speak of the removal of such manuscripts from the convents and schools in Greece, where they are still preserved. But it cannot of course be doubted that the cause of literature at large authorizes the European traveller to avail himself of the ignorance and insensibility of the Greek priests and monks, and to induce them to sell those manuscripts which can only become generally useful, by being taken from their present places of deposit, and brought to regions where they will be collated and made known to the world.


The Greek manuscripts in question were two Gospels; a twelfth
century Psalter with one fine illumination; an early Bible fragment
written in a large and fine uncial with gold capitals, possibly tenth
century; the chronicle of Michael Glycas; and the Discourses of
Gregory Nazianzenus, thought by Everett to be thirteenth century
but certainly earlier. 5

After this strong beginning, for about seventy-five years almost
nothing further happened. Three or four Latin manuscripts were
presented between 1820 and 1895, a fourteenth-century Aristotelian
manuscript, and a very fine twelfth-century Life of Anselm from an
English monastery. 6 This was received in 1845. In those days the
chief Librarian was responsible for such things and John Langdon
Sibley himself answered one scholarly query about the contents and
age of the manuscript. Giving the latter as fifteenth century he added:
"These remarks . . . I make with much diffidence. There are but few
old manuscripts in the country, not enough by themselves, even if
a person could compare them all, to enable him to become so well
versed in their peculiarities as to determine . . . the ages of such
literary monuments." 7 This was the situation in 1845.

The Library first became actively involved at a Phillipps sale in
London in June 1896. The unexpectedly high prices of the 1895 sales
gave way suddenly, and the bookselling firm Quaritch, having been
extensively for the British Museum, Cambridge, Oxford, and the
Leipzig bookseller Harrassowitz, still were in possession of a "rough
list" of very cheap manuscripts bought in for stock. It must have
taken some imagination to offer this list to Harvard, but Harvard bit
unexpectedly and purchased six classical texts: Juvenal, Cornelius
Nepos, Plautus (a fifteenth-century paper manuscript in a beautiful
hand), Ovid, Tibullus, and a heavily glossed Priscian of the late
eleventh or early twelfth century. 8 These were the first early manu-
scripts ever purchased by the College, and they must have been
acquired for some reason in addition to favorable prices. (Inciden-
tally, the Priscian had fetched £7 at the Phillipps sale, which was
extremely cheap even for that time.) To each manuscript, a paper

5 MS Gr 7 (2v.), 1MS Gr 12, MS Gr 3, IMS Gr 6, MS Gr 4, and IMS Gr 8.
6 IMS Lat 38, and MS Lat 27.
7 J. L. Sibley to Nathaniel G. Snelling. December 1845, Houghton Library, Autograph
file.
8 Quaritch, Rough list 164. MS Lat 40, MS Lat 41, MS Lat 43, IMS Lat 42, MS Lat
46, and MS Lat 48.
Gospel Lectionary, 10th century. Part of Edward Everett's gift in 1819.
note was affixed stating: “This manuscript is bought with the concurrence of the Classical Department and it may be allowed to go into the hands of any instructor in that department for purposes of investigation or instruction in the classroom.” The note is signed by the Librarian, Justin Winsor, with a rubber stamp. Although it suggests to the modern mind some financial aid from the Classics Department, in fact the purchase was made with the Charles Minot fund, which was entirely controlled by the Library. I suspect that Professor Morris Hicky Morgan, who later gave the Persius collection, may have been the concurring classicist since his own autograph cataloguing is still attached to one of these manuscripts.9 In any case, some of the new spirit must also have come from Archibald Cary Coolidge who had already emerged as the great acquiring influence in the College.10 Winsor died that same year, to be replaced by William Coolidge Lane, but early manuscripts had at last been placed on the menu, and great deeds were in the offing.

To go back a little, in 1874 the Library received twenty-six early manuscripts as part of the bequest of Charles Summer.11 One of these, a Book of Hours with miniatures by the painter called the Master of the Burgundian Prelates, was in this year’s exhibition. With this exception, the manuscripts were routine liturgical books, patents of nobility, and the like, acquired while Summer was living abroad recuperating from his beating on the Senate floor; and in fact Summer’s collecting in all areas left much to be desired. But it may not be long before our knowledge of European bookmaking in the Middle Ages will have advanced sufficiently so that these unpretentious local productions will start to tell us things about which they are, at the moment, silent. We can, for example, measure prickings and bounding lines in a manuscript, but having done this we most often now have no framework in which to place the new information. When a sufficient body of such facts has been accumulated, such measurements will help to localize and date manuscripts—and manuscripts regarded as unworthy now will begin to look better.

9 MS Lat 44.
10 William Bentinck-Smith, Building a Great Library, the Coolidge Years at Harvard (Cambridge, 1976).
This MS. is bought with the concurrence of the Classical Department and it may be allowed to go into the hands of any instructor in that department for purposes of investigation or instruction in the class room.

John Bostock

First opening of MS. Lot 44. Priscian. Grammaton.
In 1899, the College acquired the library of Count Paul Riant relating mainly to the Crusades and the Latin East, and with it came 173 manuscripts, of which 56 were written before 1600. Most of these 56 are undorned text manuscripts of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, many are Sammelhandschriften, or tract volumes, the elements of which have still not been adequately listed or identified.

The twentieth century has been the time of the great American collectors, a varied and often maligned group. In 1905, the founder of modern palaeography, Ludwig Traube, lectured in Munich on the manuscript repositories of the world. About America, he had the following to say:

Perhaps there are still only a few Latin manuscripts over there, but even now as the Americans are starting good collections of European sculpture they are beginning with manuscripts as well. . . . For example Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts has some Latin manuscripts and the Hamilton Gospels belong to Thomas Irwin of Oswego, New York . . . But I would be sorry if one result of my own lectures would be that they acquired still more. . . .

Traube’s displeasure at American collecting is easy to understand. Because photoreproduction of manuscripts was then still cumbersome and expensive, a manuscript that went to America was effectively lost to European scholarship. As far as Europe was concerned, it was lost to scholarship. In the very next year, however, Montague Rhodes James published his description of the manuscripts in the Pierpont Morgan Library, and the secret of American activity was out.

At Harvard this activity was already multifarious. Everett collected manuscripts in order that acts of original scholarship might take place. Justin Winsor wanted to enrich the courses in the classics. Charles Eliot Norton, who sold the College eighteen early manuscripts in 1905, apparently had both considerations in mind. With Morgan’s Persius collection and W. J. Copinger’s Imitatio Christi Library, the specialist collection, a form long known to collectors

12 L. de Gérinon and L. Polain, Catalogue de la bibliothèque du feu m. le comte Riant (Paris, 1899), Deuxième partie, I, XLVI-LVIII.
13 Ludwig Traube, Vorlesungen und Abhandlungen (Munich, 1909), I, 119-120. Taken from Traube’s last lectures in 1905.
15 W. A. Copinger, Handlist of what is Believed to be the Largest Collection in the World of Editions of “The Imitation” of Thomas a Kempis (Manchester, 1905).
of printed books, appears on the manuscript scene, and with the weaknesses one would expect: the Persius manuscripts are late and insignificant and the Imitatio Christi manuscripts almost all come from the same German charters where they apparently were mass produced. You cannot collect manuscripts in the same way you collect printed books.\(^{16}\) Collecting rare books involves responding to market opportunities, and it is correspondingly a less active undertaking than ordinary library acquisitions. Collecting early manuscripts carries this principle of passivity to an extreme. Waiting for a chance to acquire a particular text is apt to lead to disappointment.

It is worth pointing out that the greatest of European collectors or at least formers of collections—men like Sir Thomas Bodley, who gave Oxford its great library, or Napoleon, who secularized France’s monasteries, or the Jesuits who formed the Clermont Library out of manuscripts stolen from Benedictine houses—were engaged in something that resembles rough housekeeping more than systematic pursuit and acquisition. In New England we have no old abbeys to suppress, and early books and manuscripts have been brought here one by one. Every archivist knows that documents assembled randomly by historical accident produce collections that are richer and more interesting than manuscript collections assembled piece by piece, and this negatively characterizes all American manuscript collections when these are compared with European collections. But given this single flaw, the accomplishment has been considerable.

This accomplishment has been characterized by a new reason for collecting, or rather a new accent in collecting, and it is a problematic one: the desire to accumulate treasures. In a certain sense, viewing manuscripts as treasures is surely as old as writing. The greatest private collector of manuscripts in history was Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872). At one time Sir Thomas had over 30,000 manuscripts in his house Middle Hill, and he was generous with them. In 1849, the Abbé Pitra visited him and left the following account:

At the end of a day, when we felt that we should have been making our apologies, we were invited by the baronet to an entertainment which he described as “a

\(^{16}\) In fairness to Morgan, it might be mentioned that he seems not to have placed manuscripts very high in his collecting interests. Two of his Persius manuscripts, MS Lat 136 and MS Lat 137 were given to him as Christmas presents in 1901 and 1904 by the great collector of fish books, Daniel R. Fearing.

Sir Thomas Phillipps inspects a 10th century manuscript of Horace now at Harvard. Photograph, the gift of Harrison Horblit '33.
dessert of manuscripts”. At the hour when an English table is spread with wine, fruit and rare dishes, we found displayed before our eyes a choice treat of the most precious manuscripts of Middlehill, and we were able, at will, to pass them from one to the other until all hours of the night. Thus we spent what we might call soirées of Sirmond, of Mabillon, of Meermam; vigils of Saint-Martin, Saint-Maximin, of Saint-Vaast; nights Merovingian and Lombardic.18

Even though he compares manuscripts with things to eat, the Abbé is peculiarly ungraphic in approach. He does not say that margins are wide and the vellum fresh or “uterine.” Bindings are not mentioned. Above all, there is not a word about illuminations. Sir Thomas had illuminations, but for the Abbé the edibility resided in the old hands and in association with the Merovingian and Lombardic past.

A glance at any modern bookseller’s description of an early manuscript suffices to show how greatly attitudes have changed. There is an unmistakable shift in emphasis from text to condition, from script to decoration, from historical context to the physical attributes of the object described. This goes along with an enormous increase in price. At the same time collections are being set up across the country that seem to have no scholarly or antiquarian function at all. And so on. These are almost standard observations about modern times.

On the other hand, the interest in manuscripts as possessible, physical objects has resulted in remarkable collections of manuscripts as bearers of art. Surely no manuscript collection in the world is as dense with great paintings as that in the Morgan Library in New York. There has been an enormous increase in “connoisseurship” among collectors. Furthermore it is hard to resist the thought that concern for the physical aspects of manuscripts by modern collectors goes in some way together with the strong interest of recent medieval scholars in the physical structure of manuscripts.

As this interest in “beautiful manuscripts” grew during the first half of our century, librarians found that they were answerable to two fairly distinct constituencies: the traditional one of scholars who wished to increase knowledge and publish texts and the increasingly important private collectors who tended to care first about the manuscripts themselves and secondly about their value to scholarship. Since these private collectors were continually enriching the public

collections as well as their own, it is no surprise that librarians formed
close alliances with them. When, in 1945, the inheritors of Sir
Thomas Phillipps offered to sell the 12,000 manuscripts remaining
in that baronet’s library to Harvard for £110,000, the Houghton
Library’s Librarian, W. A. Jackson, found himself directly between
the values of these two constituencies.

This story has been told before, at length and accurately by A. N. L.
Munby, and it has become traditional among librarians to blame
the College’s failure to meet this opportunity on the fact that William
Jackson was on an extended trip to South America at the time and
was unable to press the matter. This is only partly true. In fact, the
Library had a second chance the following year, although the terms
were a little less favorable. In June 1946, Jackson went to London to
see the collection, and he carried specific instructions from his supe-
riors: before the College would consent to buy he must be able to say
that the collection “was of great scholarly import and not that they
were beautiful manuscripts, i.e. that a large part of the collection
were to be items that could be published by Harvard scholars or
other scholars working here.” For a variety of reasons Jackson found
that he could not state that the great part of this collection was
unpublished, and so the chance was lost to acquire a collection that
would have placed this library on a par with the great European
libraries in the field of early manuscripts. No second chance is likely
to occur.

Now the world has had a better look at these Phillipps manuscripts
well described in a long series of Sotheby’s catalogues. They have
fetched many millions and they have proved to be of an almost
inexhaustible scholarly interest, textual, historical, codicological, and
artistic. I am convinced that what was operating here was scholarly
distrust of the bookman’s passion for the beautiful manuscript. Of
course, in no case will this distrust prove to be unjustified.

Be this as it may, the Houghton Library opened its doors in 1942,
and in the years that followed, two gifted private collectors have
fought for us in the marketplace and have given us treasures not
dreamed of by their predecessors. William King Richardson was a
Harvard “Summa” and an Oxford “Double first” in classics, and he

19 A. N. L. Munby, The Dispersal of the Phillipps Library, Phillipps Studies, 5 (Cambridge,
1960), pp. 102-106.
20 Ibid., p. 105
was called the Duke of Balliol because he was elegant. An international lawyer, he purchased early editions of the classics and good bindings. He also collected early manuscripts. Two aspects of his collecting stand out: the manuscripts are all in excellent condition, and they were all contained in one cabinet in his library. Richardson was not strictly speaking a "cabinet collector" of the type of Sir Sydney Cockerell, to name one example. These are collectors who have a particular bookshelf or cabinet in mind beyond which their collections are not allowed to extend. Once the shelf is full, the collection cannot be added to without subtracting something to make room for it, and in this way the quality of the collection gradually goes up. Although Richardson did not as a rule sell off manuscripts in this way, the cabinet of fifty-six manuscripts that resulted is highly selective. There is a collection of Augustine's works written at Bury St. Edmunds in the beginning of the twelfth century with an intact monastic binding complete with tabs, the only tabs in the Harvard University Library, and docketing in the celebrated hand of Henry Kirkstede, the patron saint of manuscript cataloguers.21 There is a Sallust written for Pietro Bembo in the italic script of Bartolommeo San Vito. San Vito's hand has long been regarded as the finest of the Humanist period, and it has been speculated that his writing formed the model for Aldus Manutius's first italic type.22 But above all, there are illuminations: by the Rohan Master, the Luçon Master, the Boucicaut Master, and the Master of the Harvard Hannibal.23 Amid all this visual beauty are several illuminated manuscripts—particularly a Psalter with a Wycliffite commentary and a translation of the Decameron into French by Premierfait—that have considerable textual interest as well. Richardson's own accessions books are kept in the Librarian's office at Houghton, and they provide a remarkable record of a collector of taste in the first half of our century.

The principal hero of the heroic period, of course, is Philip Hofer. The decisive year was 1938 when Keyes Metcalf, Director of the University Library, called him and W. A. Jackson to Cambridge to

21 MS. Richardson 26. Richard R. Reuss, "Bosanias Buriensis and the Author of the Catalogus scriptorum ecclesiae," Speculum, 41 (1966), 471-499. Since this was written, Philip Hofer has given Harvard a twelfth-century Epistolae sancti Pauli, which has not only tabs but an intact medieval bookmark (MS Typ 277).


23 For these and the other illuminated manuscripts cited, see R. S. Wierck's catalogue (note 1).
become “the most formidable combination in the annals of librarianship.” A new library was built in the midst of an astonishing period of growth, and it was the first library to house a department whose stated function is to consider the book as an artifact with a history at once intellectual, social, and aesthetic. Philip Hofer originated this idea and founded the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts. It should not be inferred, however, that he created a collection only of medieval miniatures. He collected Western, as well as Eastern, books and manuscripts according to a great variety of criteria. In the manuscript ranges of his department are paleographic specimens, bindings, drawings for book illustration, manuscripts of the Encyclopédie, endpapers, and every thing concerning the arts of the book. There are also about five hundred early manuscripts, almost all of which contain significant decorative elements.

There are exceptional manuscripts: the Calderini Pontifical, which has the shelf mark MS Typ 1 and is possibly the first manuscript bought with funds given by Mr. Hofer, two “livres de chasse” written by Jan van Krickenborch for Louis of Bruges, a Ferrarese breviary with remarkable “trompe-d’oeil” borders, to name just four. There are also humbler productions which, in the context of this collection, are hardly less instructive. The collection has grown steadily, but also by leaps and bounds. Manuscripts were found by Mr. Hofer, purchased by him or simply attracted into the collection because of him. On one occasion he stepped back and allowed Richardson to acquire a manuscript, believing correctly that it would end up in the same library after all. And at all times his extraordinary instinct was manifest—an instinct that sometimes surpassed his very considerable scholarship and led to the acquisition of manuscripts now known to be more important than they seemed at the time.

Illuminated manuscripts have, of course, become very expensive, and the Library has never been able to acquire them from its own funds. This has not been the case with text manuscripts. These can still be found and acquired, and there are a fair number of unpublished texts in the collection—a twelfth-century anthology of secular Latin poems, an unrecorded treatise on logic by Wycliffe, and much more.

25 MS Lat 300.
26 fMS Lat 338.
Even as this collection of early manuscripts was being formed at Harvard, the interest of the scholarly constituency intensified sharply. The result was that the librarians in charge gradually became persuaded that these manuscripts, especially the more celebrated ones, were being overused. Funds were raised from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Kress Foundation, and Mr. Stanley Kahr '53 to microfilm the whole collection. After filming, the library staff selected over three thousand decorated or illuminated pages for special photography, both in color and black and white. Scholars who come to Houghton now are given microfilms and photographs and only look at the originals if the photocopies fail to answer their questions. This causes understandable disappointment. On the other hand a visiting scholar, can, in a few days, look through fine reproductions of almost all of the illuminated pages in the collection, and this was not possible in the past. Furthermore, these photographs made possible the catalogue which provided the occasion for these remarks.
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