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## GETTY RESEARCH ESSAY

### Seeking Illumination: Monastic Manuscripts, 800–1200 March 23–June 13, 2004

“From about 800 to 1200 monasteries functioned as the primary guardians of art and scholarship throughout Europe. Although these religious institutions were physically secluded, their scribes and illuminators created luxurious manuscripts for both the Church and the most powerful political leaders of the day.

The early medieval period saw the beginnings of a unified Europe under the Carolingian and Ottonian Empires. Educational and religious reforms during this time led to a dramatic increase in manuscripts created in monasteries. In the 1100s, manuscript production changed to meet the needs of new religious groups that emerged from reforms occurring within the monastic community. By 1200, the rise of universities and cities had shifted manuscript production to a growing class of secular artisans.”

<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/seeking/>

For this assignment, which you may use as your final paper in English 320, choose three works of medieval art from the Getty collection. At least one of your works should be a medieval depiction of a secular or classical subject and so may come from outside of the Monastic Manuscripts exhibit.. Identify the genre, provenance, and subject, and explain the scene being represented. In your paper you should discuss the relationship between the art you have found and texts of Old and Middle English literature that you have read for this class. Pay particular attention to the shift from Christian to secular in the art and in the literature.

#### Optional Final Paper (5-6 pages MLA style) 20% or 0%

You may write the Getty Research paper in lieu of the research paper described in the syllabus. Like that research paper, the Getty paper will involve some research, should include at least one interesting footnote, and must include a bibliography of at least seven books and/or essays (you may include the three individual works of art as entries in your bibliography). At least five of the entries must be annotated. If you haven't constructed an annotated bibliography before, or have questions please be sure to ask me and/or to review these web sites:

<http://www.library.cornell.edu/okuref/research/skil28.htm#what>

<http://web.infoave.net/~lrashley/annbibl.htm..>

Try to find and purchase cards of the art you select from the museum shop. Be sure to look at the medieval and classical art in the general collection. We will be coming back here next year for the mythology class.



[Explore Art Home](#) [Past Exhibitions](#) Transforming Tradition: Ancient Motifs in Medieval Manuscripts  
**Transforming Tradition: Ancient Motifs in Medieval Manuscripts**  
September 23–November 30, 2003

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Preview Art

Events

An enduring misconception of cultural history is that the fall of the Roman Empire, approximately A.D. 400, disrupted Western civilization so severely that it led to a "dark age," during which the great cultural achievements of the classical past were suppressed. This vision of history does not accurately reflect the fact that many elements of antiquity—architectural remains, small objects such as precious gems and coins, and classical literature—survived and were known to people of the Middle Ages. This exhibition invites the viewer to consider pairings of ancient Greek, Roman, and Etruscan objects with medieval manuscripts. Taken together, the comparisons demonstrate how medieval artists responded to the cultural heritage of antiquity, adapting ancient motifs to a new medium and to a new religion.

See Also

[Manuscripts at the Getty](#)

[Antiquities at the](#)

[The New Getty V](#)

### Singers

The distinctions and discontinuities between the cultures of antiquity and the Middle Ages are underscored in the two visual representations seen here and below.



In the center of this cup, a balding man tilts his head back in song, accompanying himself on a barbiton, an ancient stringed instrument. The Greek letters just above the man's head appear as musical notes issuing from his mouth. The singer wears an ivy wreath and leans against a striped pillow, signs that he is at a drinking party, called a symposium in ancient Greece. This cup, made to hold wine, might have

Cup, Attributed to Epiktetos, Greek, about 510 B.C. [+ Enlarge](#)

been used at a symposium by an ancient Greek much like the man depicted here.

## Singers

Unlike the Greek drinking cup above, this psalter was used not at a social gathering, but in the private and public prayer of medieval Christians.

The ancient Israelite king David is shown here accompanying himself on a harp in a manuscript containing the biblical Psalms. All ancient poetry, both epic narrative and religious prayer, was sung, usually while the poet or performer played on a stringed instrument, a practice abundantly reflected in the art of the ancient world. Although the creator of this image followed tradition and emphasized David's role as author of the Psalms and a singer of poetry, his wooden harp with animal-head terminals is distinctly medieval.



Initial E: David Playing the Harp, Bute Master, northeastern France, about 1270–80



[Hercle,  
Unknown,  
Etruscan, 320–  
275 B.C.](#)

[+ Enlarge](#)

## Hercules

Hercules (Greek Herakles; Etruscan Heracle) was the greatest mythological hero in antiquity. In ancient art, the hero, renowned for his physical strength, is usually shown engaged in a superhuman labor or resting after the completion of an exhausting deed. Here, Hercules appears as a youthful, nude hero at rest, wearing the skin of the ferocious lion of Nemea, which he killed. Hercules sports the pelt, his signature garment, as a fashion model would a couture cloak, exhibiting his godlike physique, confidence, and courage.



[Hercules Poisoned  
by the Shirt of  
Nessus, Boucicaut  
Master and  
Workshop, French,  
about 1415](#)

[+ Enlarge](#)

[🔊 Listen to a discussion of  
this manuscript.](#)

## Hercules

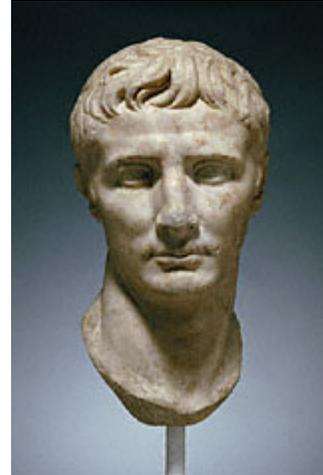
Medieval contexts for the stories of legendary heroes sometimes gave rise to new visual representations. Whereas his untimely end was almost never depicted in ancient art, Hercules is shown writhing in a deadly poisoned shirt in this medieval miniature.

According to legend, Hercules met his death when his wife was tricked into poisoning his shirt with the blood of the centaur Nessus. The manuscript contains a collection of cautionary tales by Giovanni Boccaccio about the lives of illustrious people of the past and their unpleasant deaths.

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### **Augustus, Roman Emperor**

The adopted son of Julius Caesar, Augustus (63 B.C. – 14 A.D.) became the first emperor of Rome in 27 B.C., founding the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Many portraits of Augustus were erected throughout the empire in order to convey his political and social beliefs and to validate his claim to power. To distinguish his rule from that of the earlier Roman Republican period, when gravitas (seriousness) and age were emphasized in portraits, Augustus was always depicted as youthful, as in this marble head. A distinctive hairstyle identifies the emperor: comma-shaped locks form a pincer in the center of his forehead.



[Portrait Head of Augustus, Unknown, Roman, about A.D. 50](#)

[Listen to a discussion of this sculpture.](#)

### Augustus, Roman Emperor

The eighth month of the medieval and modern calendars is named for the ancient Roman statesman Caesar Augustus (63 B.C.–14 A.D.). In this calendar from a monastic service book, he is depicted at the head of the page devoted to the month named after him, supporting a disk indicating the number of hours of daylight and darkness in a typical day of the month. Augustus does not have the facial features and distinctive hairstyle common in portraits of his own time. The medieval artist identified him instead by his role as emperor: he wears a crown and holds an orb, signifying his dominion over most of the known world.



[Augustus](#) [+ Enlarge](#)  
[Caesar;](#)  
[Zodiacal Sign](#)  
[of Leo.](#)  
[Unknown,](#)  
[German,](#)  
[Hildesheim,](#)  
[about 1170s](#)

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