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## ART : The Earliest Feminists : An exhibition at the Getty Museum of images of women in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts paints a picture of how some wielded power even when they had none.

July 23, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is an occasional contributor to Calendar*

*In brief, all women--whether noble, bourgeois or lower-class--be well-informed in all things and cautious in defending your honor and chastity against your enemies! My ladies, see how these men accuse you of so many vices in everything. Make liars of them all by showing forth your virtue, and prove their attacks false by acting well.*

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The above is not, as you might suspect, a monologue from any of three recent movies about the Middle Ages. No, this spirited defense of the virtues of women was written in 1405 by the esteemed author Christine de Pizan in her "Book of the City of Ladies."

The quote is also an introduction to "Devotion and Desire: Views of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," a modest exhibition of 20 pages from the collection of illuminated manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, where it opens on Tuesday. These jewel-like images selected from religious books and tales of courtly love illustrate the many positive ways in which women were portrayed between the 8th and 14th centuries in Europe.

Most significant, the exhibition's curator, Adam Cohen, suggests that the illustration of feminine ideals--meant to counteract the depiction of women as temptresses, witches and agents of the devil--was influenced by women who had attained limited power in their positions as abbesses and patrons of the arts. By today's standards, such expressions could be seen as a public relations campaign to establish an exalted and protected status for women.

Cohen, a graduate intern at the Getty Museum who was recently appointed curatorial assistant in the manuscript department, says the idea for the show originated from his dissertation research on the Uta Codex, a complex manuscript commissioned by an intellectual abbess in 11th-Century Bavaria. "The show covers 800 years throughout Europe, but I've tried to connect a lot of dots," Cohen says. He hopes to establish a connection between the portrayal of feminine ideals and medieval social attitudes about the roles of women.

Cohen apologetically acknowledges that the exhibition refers only to aristocratic and wealthy women who could afford to commission such luxury manuscripts.

"This was a closed society," he says, "and I chose to focus on their views of ideals, because these objects were produced for their own ends. I can't do a show on the daily life of women, because the medievals weren't interested in representing it in manuscripts."

James Marrow, a medieval art historian at Princeton University, said of the theme of the Getty exhibition: "It's quite clever, because one doesn't normally pair those two concepts. To play off the piety of ordinary women with women as objects of desire takes it away from the theological abstraction and fleshes it out more stimulatingly. Interest in the stories of women has been in vogue [among scholars] for two or three decades, so it's not so much the subject per se that is novel. What makes it interesting is the way it's articulated."

After looking through more than 1,000 pictures in 200 aged books and cuttings in the Getty's collection, Cohen discovered three strands of representation: women as religious exemplars, as pious patrons of holy texts and as ideals of love.

In the religious books of the period, Mary as mother

of God is a popular subject, as are women saints. St. Catherine of Alexandria, for example, is the subject of an extraordinary 15th-Century composition from the Gualenghi-d'Este Hours, a prayer book illuminated by Taddeo Crivelli. A venerated 4th-Century martyr, she defeated 50 pagan philosophers in a debate and defended her Christianity even when tortured on the razor wheel. In this image, the wheel appears just below her portrait, which shows her standing at a lectern reading--indication of her abilities as a philosopher.

At the bottom of the picture, a dog with swollen teats symbolizes the maternal love of the church. The female pelican in the lower left of the image symbolizes the belief that these birds pierced their breasts for blood to feed their babies; the pelican thus becomes a symbol of Christ's nourishing his followers through his own blood. Alliances between women's maternal nature and the nurturing church are suggested in many of the manuscripts.

During the Middle Ages, vows of poverty and chastity were considered signs of superior morality, even among the most powerful. Hedwig, Duchess of Silesia, for example, was canonized for her acts of charity. In one panel, she is depicted convincing her husband, the Duke of Silesia, that he must build a convent. In a second, she is shown leading a group of nuns into the completed structure.

"In all honesty, there was a wide division between the view of women as positive and how women were treated," Cohen says. "They had no social voice; they were not empowered politically." Women's limited influence came through marriage to their father's political allies or in the convents as abbesses. They had to act indirectly.

"Although the nunneries and cloisters were cut off from the world in theory, the membrane surrounding them was permeable," Cohen explains.

The commissioning of manuscript was, for women, one means of expression. As an example, Cohen indicates a page in the exhibition that is colored purple, with gold and silver text. Since purple could be used only with the permission of royalty, whoever commissioned the book has to have been of the highest rank. Cohen believes that it was one of Charlemagne's daughters, Theodrada, the Abbess of Argenteuil.

For scholars to know the names of women like Hedwig and Theodrada after 700 or 1,000 years proves the women's ability, despite the strictures upon them, to infiltrate the social and political realms of their times.

In the 15th Century, the patroness Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, collected religious books as art objects and compiled one of the first personal libraries; its more than 200 volumes included the first book printed in English, by William Caxton. (A copy is now in the Huntington Library in San Marino.) Her husband, Charles the Bold, likewise had his own extensive library. Previously, only monasteries had libraries.

Included in this exhibition is a sheet from a philosophical treatise Margaret commissioned, titled "The Vision of the Soul of Guy de Thurno," thought to have been illuminated by the great Flemish painter Simon Marmion. It depicts the return of a ghostly husband who reminds his wife to pray for his salvation.

"It is meant to indicate the appropriate relationship and responsibilities of the widow to the deceased husband," Cohen says. The bottom of each page of the manuscript bears the entwined initials-- *C* for Charles and *M* for Margaret.

In the late Middle Ages, with the increase of wealth among the commercial and industrial sectors and the rise of a middle class, more women had access to personal funds to commission volumes of prayer known as books of hours.

"It was a status symbol as well as something devotional," Cohen says. "Often, the texts were small, the pictures big, so you know that the person was more interested in looking at pictures than reading prayers." The core texts were standardized, so expression lay in the illustration. In our media-saturated era, it is easy to overlook what must have been the formidable impact of such pictures, finely executed in brilliant colors and gold.

Increased trade brought about greater secularization. In addition to religious books, during the 13th and 14th centuries women commissioned courtly tales of love like "The Story of the Good Knight Tristan," the legend of a knight torn between his devotion to the Breton King Mark and his passion for the king's beloved Isolde. These tales, which were influenced by women as both patrons and audience, portray the ideal of virtuous and refined ladies to be admired from a distance and noble men in armor on a spiritual quest. The stories were read aloud at court as entertainment, the soap operas of their day.

One of the most widely read texts in late-medieval Europe was the *Roman de la Rose*, one page of which is included in the exhibition. It was a philosophical discourse on the nature of love, especially the conflict between the ideal of chastity and the biblical command to reproduce.

"Virginity was an ideal for men and women because Christ was chaste," Cohen says. "For women, it was a conscious expression of their spirituality, something they could control because it was connected to their bodies."

The book's theme of carnal versus ideal love helped men and women of the period negotiate their anxieties, and the Getty's image depicts the allegorical figure of the Lover attacked by the forces of Shame, Fear and Danger, while the imprisoned Fair Welcome looks on from her tower.

Through such works, Princeton's Marrow sees parallels between the Middle Ages and our own time: "The real issue is that at any given moment in time, the culture has developed certain forms and rituals which become arenas where anxieties are played out. For example, some of those arenas now are porno shops, or interview shows on TV where they discuss bizarre sexual behavior so that literally or vicariously, people can work out impulses and feelings.

"They didn't have TV in the 14th Century, but what did they have? The illuminated manuscripts."\*

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*"Devotion and Desire: Views of Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance," J. Paul Getty Museum, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu. Tuesday-Oct. 8. Tuesdays-Sundays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Admission and parking are free, but parking reservations are required. (310) 458-2003; TDD: (310) 394-7448.*