

Two great libraries bring word and picture together

by Nora Hamerman

The Bernard H. Breslauer Collection of Manuscript Illuminations

by William M. Voelke and Roger S. Wieck, assisted by Maria Francesca P. Saffiotti
The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, 1992
252 pages, paperbound, \$49.95

1492: An Ongoing Voyage

edited by John R. Hebert
Library of Congress, Washington, 1992
169 pages, hardbound, \$25

On Dec. 9, the J.P. Morgan Library in New York opened its exhibition of "The Bernard H. Breslauer Collection of Manuscript Illuminations." This is the first show to gather for the public the single leaves of illustrated books collected by the rare book dealer Bernard Breslauer, ranging from the late 11th to the early 17th centuries. Now an elderly gentleman living in New York, Mr. Breslauer was born in Berlin, fled from Hitler with his family to London in 1937, and gradually rebuilt his father's book trade after World War II.

The exhibit introduces one not only to these magnificent small works of art, but also to the mind of the collector, who used his formidable knowledge and taste to acquire a great collection with resources too limited to purchase full books. These leaves had at some point in the past been removed from damaged books, or books were actually pulled apart and the decorated pages sold separately. One might be scandalized at such mutilation, but the practice is documented as

early as the 15th century.

Breslauer's single pages will be on view at the Morgan until April 4, along with another important show of letters and other documents of Thomas Jefferson (whose 250th birthday is being celebrated). The show is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue written by William M. Voelke and Roger S. Wieck, which is a model of scholarship—each entry filled with solid information about the subject and history of the picture, discussion of "sister leaves" from the same source and now in other collections, and a modest solicitation of input from experts, since the Breslauer leaves have not been studied before as a group.

What is miniature painting?

Anyone who delves into the monumental arts of the medieval and Renaissance period, by which I mean large-scale painting and sculpture, soon suspects that the pictures were intended to be "captioned," if not literally, at least conceptually. One should not overemphasize the notion of the "Bible of the poor"—in which the Gothic cathedral sculptures and later, frescoed murals, had as an included purpose the telling of sacred stories to the illiterate. In almost all cases, a real understanding of the visual artifact requires a knowledge of the text or texts upon which it was based. Christian Europe was a consummately literate society, and while writing and picture never blended into each other (as in the case of that other consummately literary civilization, China), nevertheless they worked on their marriage all the time.

The Breslauer manuscript pages verify this connection, because they are often quite similar to big altarpieces and murals, but in every case they occur in the context of a text or text with musical score. The art of painting on relatively non-absorbent vellum (sheepskin) with delicate little scenes, single figures, and decorative borders gave us our word "min-



Adoration of the Magi, *historiated initial E* by Franco dei Russi, 1470s, 15×15.7 cm. The artist had collaborated on one of the most magnificent books in Italian art, the great Bible of Borso d'Este (completed in Ferrara in 1461). (Bernard H. Breslauer Collection.)

ature” (from the Italian verb *miniare*, to color with red lead, a word of Iberian origin), which has come to mean anything exquisitely small, like these paintings.

Often, though not exclusively, carried out by monks, but in any case by well-trained artists, this skill was held in very high regard. In a famous episode in Dante’s *Purgatory*, set in the year 1300, the poet asks a soul repenting for the sin of pride, “*Non sei tu Oderisi, l’onor di Gubbio e la gloria di quell’arte ch’illumina si chiama a Parisi?*” (“Aren’t you Oderisi, the honor of Gubbio and the glory of that art called illumination in Paris?”) One artist in the Breslauer collection, an illuminator who flourished in the 1320s in Perugia, an Umbrian town very near to Gubbio, was named Marino di Oderisi—perhaps a relative of Dante’s interlocutor. Dante’s *illumina* (illuminate) refers to another aspect of miniature painting—the use of very costly, hand-burnished gold leaf to give the illusion of light on the page, which is what creates the sparkle we find so enchanting. The finely ground pigments included other expensive minerals, such as ultramarine blue, made by crushing lapis lazuli, which came solely from Afghanistan and cost as much as gold. The binding medium was glair, derived from eggwhite; or gum arabic.

The relation between text and picture is embodied in the “historiated initial,” in which the capital letter that begins a paragraph is made especially large and “puns” by serving as

a picture in its own right, as well as often being filled with a story relevant to the text. In Cat. 2, a French leaf dating from the late 12th century, a seated saint perches in a V composed of a pillar and a stylized swan. I counted 49 such historiated initials out of 104 items—nearly half!

One of the most beautiful examples of an artist’s ability to “pun” between the form of the letter and the scene he wished to depict, is the historiated G from a choirbook illuminated by Franco dei Russi, who was active at the two influential Renaissance courts of Urbino and Ferrara in the 1460s and 1470s. The round space inside the letter G is exploited by this celebrated illuminator to form a composition circular both in the plane and in depth, as the journey of the Magi spirals from the background toward the front. (The rather mean-looking horses are an apparent allusion to a legend which characterized the Magi as mortal enemies before the Star brought them together.) An interesting detail is the fact that there is no African Magus, as often depicted by Flemish and Spanish artists of a slightly later era; rather, the servant who holds the horses of the Magi is the African.

Choirbooks

The books from which Mr. Breslauer’s single leaves came, varied widely in purpose. A great many were used in the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of these



Adoration of the Magi, Miniature from a Book of Hours illuminated by the Master of the Older Prayer Book of Maximilian I, Belgium, ca. 1490, 17×9 cm. The artist demonstrates his gift for bringing out human content in traditional devotional subjects, as the wrinkled and balding oldest Magus kisses the foot of the Child, and the young black Magus doffs his headgear while gazing in wonderment at the Virgin. (Bernard H. Breslauer Collection.)

were Missals, with the text of the Mass to be read by priests and deacons; there were Lectionaries from which the Scripture readings were read out; others were Graduals and Antiphonaries, destined for use by a choir. (Choral singers who have reached the age of reading glasses can appreciate the size of these monumental illuminated scores; they were meant to be read by the entire choir, which was generally made up of monks or nuns, required to sing plainchant as part of their religious duties.)

In this regard, there is a particularly interesting large leaf (Cat. 75) from a Gradual illuminated in Florence by the well-known artist Bicci di Lorenzo, who also painted large-scale altarpieces. In a two-story composition which once orna-

mented a Gradual, he depicted the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, and below it, St. Bridget and nine nuns of the Brigittine order which she founded. The nuns are craning their necks to read a large choirbook mounted on a lectern and held down with a weighted cord. One nun turns the page, and standing just behind her, another nun raises her hand in gesture, perhaps marking time. (Choir directors did not stand in front waving their arms, but individual singers would keep the count with their fingers or by tapping on each others' shoulders. As polyphonic music emerged, with extremely complex mensuration, such counting techniques became ever more necessary.)

This large page is of unique historical interest. Dated around 1435, it coincides with the preparations by the neo-Platonic humanists of Florence for the watershed Council of Florence, the ecumenical council which convened there in 1439 and launched the Renaissance on a European scale. It is the only manuscript illumination attributed to Bicci di Lorenzo, a prolific painter whose known works include the Annunciation in the Walters Gallery in Baltimore, one of the very few early Italian altarpieces to be preserved fully intact with its original frame and predella. According to the Breslauer catalogue, the choirbook from which this miniature comes was "probably commissioned for Il Paradiso, the Brigittine convent in Florence founded by the Alberti family in 1394, three years after St. Bridget was canonized by Boniface XI. The convent was built on the land of the Alberti palace, where some of the greatest Florentine minds participated in Florentine gatherings." Nuns came from some of the most important families, such as the Alberti, Machiavelli, Frescobaldi, and Ghiberti. The Swedish St. Bridget (1302-73) had been very active in persuading the pope to return from exile in France to Rome. The renewed activity of the Brigittines in Florence in the 1430s might be linked to plans for the Council of Florence, which was to shore up the papacy in Rome and end a new schism.

The 'Book of Hours'

Others of the books from which Mr. Breslauer's pages came, were illustrated commentaries, such as Peter Lombard's *Liber Sententiarum* or the Beatus commentary on the Apocalypse, or law books, like the *Decretals* of Gratian, the compendium of the canon (church) law. There were legal documents—registers of guilds, and a ducal privilege with a wonderful portrait of Duke Francesco Sforza, who ruled Milan. There were beautiful ornamented books intended for private devotions—Psalms and especially, Books of Hours, for praying the "hours" or devotions which followed fixed sequences according to the time of day and seasons of the year. These include several by Simon Bening (ca. 1483-1561), who was both the son and father of an illuminator, and who many scholars consider the individual who brought Franco-Flemish illumination to its pinnacle of perfection. Close to Bening is the "Master of the Older Prayer Book of Maximilian I," a Ghent illuminator who painted the "Adora-

tion of the Magi” from a Book of Hours of ca. 1490. The young African Magus who tips his cap to the Christ Child is a singularly moving image.

From Spain come two masterpieces, the first dating from the first third of the 13th century, the era of the great French Gothic cathedrals and the spread of the Cathar heresy. It is an illustration to the commentaries on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liebana, a popular Spanish book completed in 776. In the miniature, the Lamb of God is shown as a crusader striking the heads off ten evil kings, a subject from Apocalypse 17:12-14. The second Spanish leaf is a very large leaf from an Antiphony commissioned by the Cardinal Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza sometime between 1482 and 1495. It has the coat of arms of the cardinal and an historiated initial P with the Ascension of Christ inside it. Cardinal Mendoza was the leading member of the famous Mendoza family which is credited with having brought the Renaissance to Spain—not merely with importing the Italian Renaissance, but with fostering an independent Spanish line of Christian humanism. In 1482 Mendoza became archbishop of Toledo and Primate of Spain, and he was involved intimately in the decision by the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella to sponsor the voyage of Columbus in 1492.

‘1492’ at the Library of Congress

Simultaneous with the opening of the Morgan show, this reporter had the opportunity to view another show with some related contents, featuring rare manuscripts, maps, and early printed books as well as a few oil paintings and precious scientific instruments of the 15th and 16th centuries. This is “1492: An Ongoing Voyage,” which has been at the Library of Congress (Madison Building) in Washington for some months and will remain there until Feb. 14, 1993.

The hundreds of objects in the Washington exhibit are awesome (in the traditional sense of that word), and the fact that 90% come from the Library’s own collections gives a mind-boggling insight into the riches which belong to that institution. Just to give one example, the Library owns the first book printed in Portugal, in 1489 (the year Portuguese explorers first rounded the Cape of Good Hope and proved that the Indian Ocean was not an inland sea) and lo and behold, it is a Hebrew Torah!

Unfortunately, I would be disinclined to take any youngster to this show, because, despite a veneer of historical objectivity, it is organized as a polemic against the Columbus quincentennial celebrations and the very notion of European civilization—the only civilization to date which has not failed. Thus the exhibit will feed into the general climate of brainwashing which typified most public school programs on this topic during 1992. This bias is known in Spain and Spanish-speaking countries as the Black Legend, according to which the Spanish conquistadors and the Roman Catholic Church are portrayed as uniquely vicious oppressors of the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, the whole idea that Columbus “discovered” anything is pooh-poohed, and in



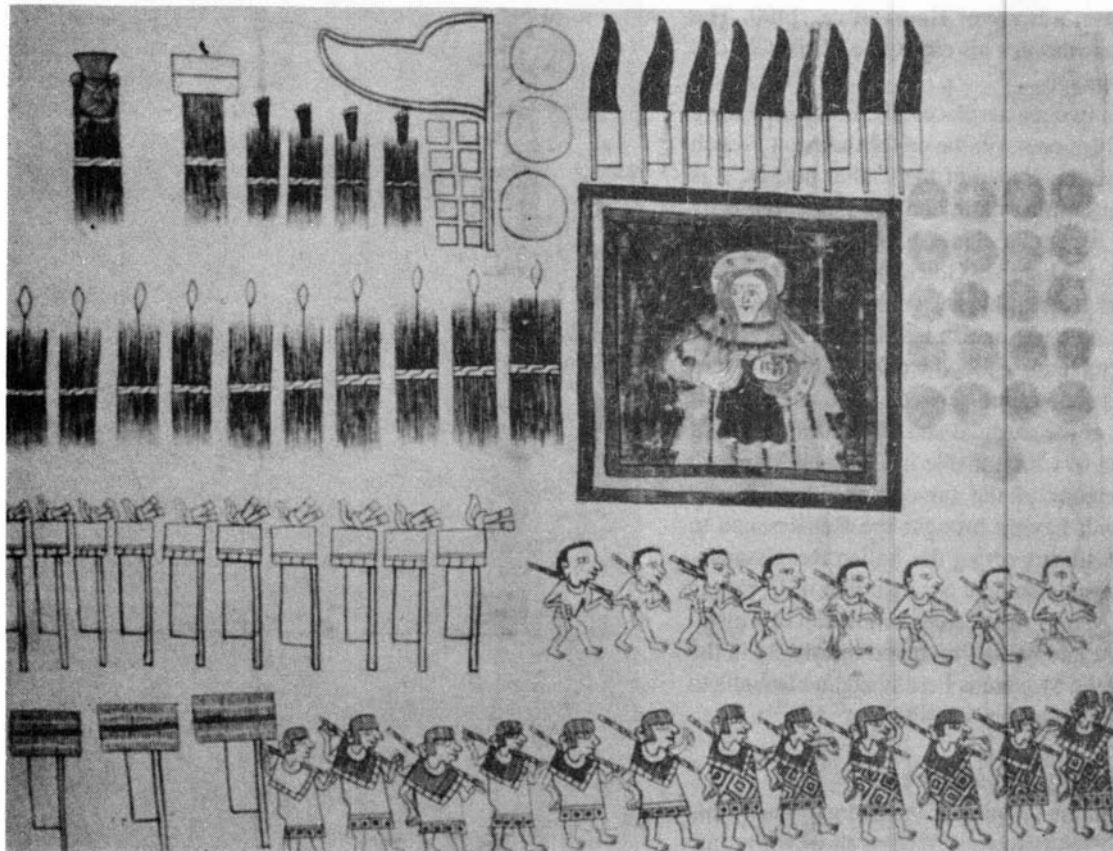
Penitent David, leaf from a Psalter (collection of psalms), Italy, ca. 1500. The initial B begins Psalm I (“Beatus vir”—happy is the man). David, considered the chief author of the psalms, kneels in prayer at the front. In the background of the deep landscape, earlier scenes of his life are shown. (Bernard H. Breslauer Collection.)

general, it is conveyed that the native Americans would have been better off if Columbus had never sailed.

Particularly obnoxious is the eight-minute videotape which begins the exhibition, and plays over and over so that you are never quite out of earshot of it. Only one quote from Columbus is used, which portrays him as obsessed with gold. Europeans are one-sidedly presented as greedy and violent, and it is even stated that they “introduced slave labor” to the Americas, which is an outright lie. (The Aztecs practiced debt-slavery on their own subjects. Captured enemies were treated more honorably, of course—they were sacrificed and eaten.)

The exhibit itself, and the accompanying catalogue, are somewhat better than this disastrous introduction. For example, although the video does not even mention the evangelization of the Americas, the show contains numerous impressive examples of the books written and printed by the Spanish missionaries, who attempted to master and to give written form to the various indigenous languages, such as Nahuatl, which prevailed in the Aztec domains of Meso-America, and Quechua and Aymara in the Inca domains of the Andean spine.

The first section of the exhibit, dedicated to the indige-



Tribute, including a banner with Madonna and Child, Huejotzingo Codex, Mexico, 1531. This document protests injustices by colonialists and is painted on indigenously made paper. Harkness Collection, Library of Congress.

nous American societies before 1492, gives the false impression of a tranquil and large population living at peace with the ecology and contentedly munching on renewable resources. The point is made that “Indians” was a European term devised to cover what were a wide swath of distinctive cultures, which would not have regarded themselves as having a common name. Some of the earliest surviving written and illustrated records of these societies are on display.

It would be foolish to deny that many Europeans who came to the “new world” did evil things, that many were greedy, and that many practiced slavery. It would also be foolish to deny the real accomplishments of ancient American civilizations. But whatever they had achieved in the past, the great empires which ruled the western hemisphere when Columbus, Cortés, and the other Spanish soldiers, explorers, and missionaries started arriving, were plunging toward oblivion, and with them the societies they ruled—because their religion was based on hallucinogenic drugs, human sacrifice and cannibalism, polygamy, and slavery. However deep the differences in language and custom which divided these native American societies, those repugnant traits were largely universal.

To try to inculcate sympathy for such societies, as the conceptual framework of the Library of Congress exhibit does, is to endorse genocide in the name of “ecology” against the descendants of those native Americans, who now inhabit Ibero-America and form a growing ratio of the North Ameri-

can population as well. The fact is that only an outside intervention could have saved the American “Indians” from the collapse of their societies.

That intervention came fortuitously from Europe, where, many centuries earlier, Christian evangelization had rescued the peoples of northern Europe from the twin evils of the aggressive Roman Empire and their native human-sacrificing, nature-worshipping cults. Given the way the Library of Congress has mounted “1492: The Continuing Voyage,” we should almost expect that the next salvo will be an exhibit honoring the Druids and the Germanic cults, which hung their enemies’ entrails on trees for decoration, and attempting to prove that the missionary efforts of St. Boniface, St. Patrick, and others were merely an instance of “contact between two cultures.” (This is intended to be a sarcastic *reductio ad absurdum*, but judging from the “Winter Solstice Whole Earth Concert” recently offered at New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine, I fear it could soon materialize.)

If you can hold your nose against the stench of political correctness, however, the Library of Congress exhibit is more than worth seeing. Simply to examine the original prints by Albrecht Dürer at close range is worth the trouble of getting to the Library (admission is free of charge), not to mention the many other extraordinary engravings on display, like those of the Dutch engraver Philip Galle, who recorded the most advanced technologies of the late 15th century. There are oil portraits of Ferdinand and Isabella painted in

their lifetime, in 1499. There is a series of European maps from the mid-1300s to the end of the 16th century, which kaleidoscope the advances in knowledge that occurred over a couple of centuries. There are dozens of early drawings, prints, and watercolors recording the appearance and customs of the native American population.

One piece owned by the Library of Congress itself is especially revealing. The Huejotzingo Codex of 1531, produced less than a decade after the completion of the Conquest of Mexico, is a painting by indigenous artists on pre-European paper and it records a lawsuit which the people of the town of Huejotzingo (state of Puebla) asked the conqueror of Mexico, Hernan Cortés, to initiate against certain members of the first Audiencia, or high court of New Spain, who had abused the people and unjustly used the incomes and profits secured from the town during Cortés's absence. It contains what may be the earliest known indigenous image of the Madonna and Child. You would not realize this from the exhibit, but the catalogue makes clear a very important point: that the natives looked to Cortés as their protector. In other words, it was not a matter of the good natives versus the bad Spaniards, but instead, of deep factional splits among the Europeans themselves, as well as, no doubt, among the indigenous. These splits must also be examined in the case of the massive introduction of black African slave trading into the Caribbean, a crime which is documented by artifacts in the show associating it with sugar-cane cultivation, but never actually probed in terms of its historical causality.

A glimpse at a more transcendent notion of cause is provided in the section dealing with navigation, cartography, and instruments, which is among the most inspiring parts of the exhibit. This includes a page from the book by Rodrigo Zamorano, *Compendio del arte de navegar* (*Compendium on the Art of Navigation*), published in Seville in 1588, showing a compass with the image of the Virgin and Child in the center. It is labeled "*Maris Stella succurre nobis*" ("Star of the Sea, come to our aid"). Columbus and other Mediterranean sailors associated this star with the Virgin Mary, one of whose titles was Star of the Sea (*Maris Stella*).

The Latin hymn, "*Ave Maris Stella*," became the theme of numerous polyphonic Mass settings by the leading composers of the Renaissance, such as one composed around 1510 in Italy by the Franco-Flemish genius Josquin des Prez, and later, by the Spaniard Renaissance composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (1549-1610). One can not help but wonder if this music were not intended to celebrate the discoveries and evangelization of America by Europeans, under the aegis of the Virgin Mary.

If the destiny of the civilization that resulted from that encounter is to build a new model of society in which every individual, regardless of skin color or ethnic origin, is treasured as a creature made in the living image of God, then the Library of Congress exhibition, despite its monstrously flawed premises, presents a formidable compendium of the cultural resources from which this can be made reality.

British ecologist promotes going thirsty

by Alexander Hartmann

The Dammed: Rivers, Dams, and the Coming World Water Crisis

by Fred Pearce

The Bodley Head, London, 1992

376 pages, hardbound, £18

When you read this book, you will have the impression that the author really "did his homework," and researched just about every water project in the world—and certainly all the major ones—for their environmental impact. His list of references is long, and often it refers to interviews and observations the author made on "fact-finding tours" throughout the world.

You are introduced to the irrigation techniques invented millennia ago in the Near East, in the Americas, and elsewhere. After all this work, you might think his opposition to each and every major project under way to improve the availability of water for human consumption, whether in households, agriculture, or industry, were the hard-earned fruit of his labor; and his position, that we have to return to the ancient technologies of "harvesting water" to feed an—if possible—non-growing human population, were indeed what should be done; and his polemical language were justified. That is what any reader will think who is not familiar with the issues.

But if you have any knowledge about some of the little details of the issue, you will find that his polemic is less a justified judgment reached after a fair trial, than it is a symptom of incurable bias that prevented the author from seeing the truth—or maybe, just from reporting it.

Half-truths and lies

There is no *audiatur et altera pars*, you are told only one side of the story. Just one example: He claims that the ancient Mexican technique of using "floating gardens" permitted up to six harvests per year on lakes covering about one-fourth of the central Mexican plains, feeding up to 100 million natives at the time of Columbus. He does not report, though, that most of these lakes were too salty for any agricultural use, a fact widely known in Mexico. With the technologies that were in use at the time in the Americas, only about 20 million people could possibly have existed there. There are