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Press Release

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*Heaven on Earth:
Manuscript Illuminations
from the National Gallery
of Art Press Event*

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**RARE MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATIONS EXHIBITION
PROVIDES A FEAST FOR THE EYES AND NEW
RESEARCH AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART,
WASHINGTON
MARCH 1 THROUGH AUGUST 16 2009**



Belbello da Pavia (Italian, active c. 1430 - c. 1473)

Initial M: The Annunciation to the Virgin, miniature from a choir book (antiphonal) (Lombardy), 1450/1460

tempera and gold leaf on vellum

Rosenwald Collection, 1948

(Updated July 27, 2009) Rare medieval manuscript illuminations, last exhibited in 1975, will be showcased in a stunning installation, *Heaven on Earth: Manuscript Illuminations from the National Gallery of Art*, on view in the East Building from March 1 through August 16, 2009. Fifty-two single leaves and four bound volumes, among them

a number of important recent acquisitions, date from the 12th to the 16th century and were made in France, Germany, Austria, Bohemia, the Netherlands, Spain, and Italy. Comprehensive wall texts will include new scholarly information, uncovered since the last time these works were exhibited.

"Protected inside closed volumes on library shelves for centuries, many of the images are today as breathtakingly vibrant and beautiful as they were centuries ago," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

Exhibition Support

The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art.

The exhibition is supported in part by a generous grant from the Thaw Charitable Trust.

Manuscripts at the National Gallery of Art

Heaven on Earth offers the first in-depth look at these rare works of art in Washington since the 1975 exhibition *Medieval and Renaissance Miniatures from the National Gallery of Art*, the initial showing of the 49 leaves and cuttings from the illuminated manuscripts in the Rosenwald Collection. To accompany the 1975 exhibition, the Gallery published an extensive catalogue (now out of print) that set a new standard for scholarly accomplishment in the study of medieval manuscript illumination. Although the catalogue authors greatly advanced knowledge of the Rosenwald miniatures, now much more is known about the often anonymous artists or the places and dates of the manuscripts' origin.

In the last three decades, interest in illuminated manuscripts has grown tremendously, resulting in an abundance of authoritative publications. Manuscript collections in both the United States and Europe that were previously unknown, inaccessible, or unpublished are now readily available for study in a wide range of fully illustrated books and articles, leading to new attributions. This wealth of new information has enabled the Gallery to reexamine its miniatures in the vastly enriched context of recently discovered and related works of art and to answer many of the questions left unresolved in 1975.

Recent reattributions by Gallery curator Virginia Tuttle include Fra Gregorio Mutii da Montalcino's *Death of Saint Benedict*, formerly attributed as late 14th century Italian, and *Saint Peter Enthroned*, (c. 1420), which was thought to have been made by a follower of Lippo Vanni, however, Tuttle has confirmed that the miniature is in fact by Sienese artist Lippo Vanni.

An important recent acquisition, *The Three Maries at the Tomb with the Angel of the Resurrection* (1274/1280) by The Master of Imola, also Sienese, was instrumental in leading Tuttle to the conclusion that another work in the Gallery's collection, *The Nativity with Six Dominican Monks* (1265/1274) was by the same artist. The Gallery's scientific laboratories cooperated closely with Tuttle in analyzing these works.

The Exhibition

Prior to the invention of the printing press in the 15th century, texts were laboriously inscribed by hand on carefully prepared parchment made from the skin of sheep or calves. Artists adorned the most luxurious books with painted decorations, known as "illuminations" because the frequent use of gold leaf made the pages glow. Given the time, effort, and materials required for their production, illuminated manuscripts were extremely precious works of art treasured by their owners.

The majority of the works in the exhibition depict a range of sacred subjects, as the books most commonly illuminated throughout the Middle Ages were bibles and liturgical texts used in church services and in the daily cycle of prayers offered by communities of monks and nuns. In the late Middle Ages the most popular illuminated books were private devotional texts, called "books of hours," prepared for well-to-do patrons. Secular texts were also illustrated and are represented in the exhibition by manuscripts treating canon law, ancient history, and civic statutes, as seen here in *The Meeting of Achilles and Hector*, from *Histoire Ancienne Jusqu' à César* (c. 1450).

Most of the miniatures in this exhibition are single leaves or cuttings that have been removed from manuscripts. In the 19th century collectors often cut illustrated pages or illuminated initials out of manuscripts to frame them as independent works of art. That practice is now condemned. Once outside the protection of their

books, illuminations are increasingly subject to damage and loss, and their original contexts become difficult to trace.

Exhibition Curator and Related Activities

The exhibition curator is Virginia Grace Tuttle, associate curator of old master prints, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Gallery talks in the exhibition will be held at 12 noon on March 6, 13, April 2, 28, and May 7, 19, and 27; and at 1 p.m. on March 12 and April 19.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION:

Heaven on Earth: Manuscript Illuminations from the National Gallery of Art

National Gallery of Art, Washington—March 1–August 16, 2009

Drawn from the Gallery's extraordinary collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscript illuminations dating from the 12th to the 16th century, this stunning exhibition of some 50 leaves is the first in-depth look at these rare works of art at the Gallery in more than three decades. Painted on vellum with brilliant pigments and an abundance of gold leaf, these miniatures once "illuminated" the texts of handwritten, primarily sacred books. Protected inside closed volumes on library shelves, several of the images are today as vibrant and beautiful as they were centuries ago. The exhibition includes works from the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection of manuscripts, as well as by more recent acquisitions.

The exhibition is supported in part by a generous grant from the Thaw Charitable Trust.

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering the East and West Buildings. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 x 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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