

The New Criterion

Features March 2018

Words made flesh

by Eric Ormsby

A review of Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World by Christopher de Hamel.

Few objects are earthier than a medieval manuscript. Written with quill pens taken from the feathers of geese, they are penned on parchment, vellum made from the skins of animals. The ink of their scripts is concocted from gall-nuts or charcoal. They may be adorned with rich pigments scooped from the soil or with gold and gems. They are sewn with threads of natural fibers, and they are bound in wooden boards sheathed in leather. The more exalted their contents—Bibles, books of hours, scriptural commentaries—the more chthonic their aspect. The amalgam of transcendent texts with materials entirely terrestrial makes them palpable analogues of incarnation, the Word made Flesh, spirit clasped and conjoined with the humblest matter. Of course, printed books share in this luster, but by definition they are not unique, one-of-a-kind, the work of a single scribe (or team of scribes). Manuscripts have a stamp of...

The rest of this article is locked. Please make sure you are logged in to view the full article.

Eric Ormsby is the author of *The Baboons of Hada*, a selection of his poems (Carcenet).

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 36 Number 7, on page 20

Copyright © 2024 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<https://newcriterion.com/issues/2018/3/words-made-flesh-9586>