



**Illuminated  
Books of the  
middle ages**

ROBERT G. CALKINS

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The color plates are scanned in from *Late Antique and Early Christian Book Illumination* by Kurt Weitzmann (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977).

## Introduction: From the Earliest Bibles to Byzantine Manuscripts

**B**ooks produced during the Middle Ages, before the perfection of printing with movable type by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century, were all handwritten and are therefore called manuscripts. The study of these books requires the expertise of many specialists: paleographers who analyze the development of various forms of script, liturgical and literary historians who examine the text and its variations, codicologists who investigate the structure and physical makeup of the book, and art historians who study the decorations, usually small painted pictures. These illustrations are often called miniatures, not because of their size but rather after the minium or orange lead used in their preparation and in the writing of red-ink headings or rubrics. Actually, the miniatures may constitute only a small proportion of the ornament in a manuscript, for frequently the text also contains decorated letters and penned calligraphic flourishes and is surrounded by elaborate borders. All of these elements are present in varying proportions in what is called an "illuminated" manuscript. In the narrow sense the term illumination refers to any ornament to which gold, silver, or bright colors have been added. In many medieval manuscripts, these illuminations take on a major function in relation to the book, whether as symbolic ornament, iconic representations of holy personages, or pictorial narration accompanying and elaborating the text. The scale or lavishness of this decoration is usually determined by the importance of the text it opens, major divisions having elaborate ornament, and lesser subdivisions having less obtrusive accentuation.

The form of handwriting or script and the motifs of decoration and styles of painting in miniatures went through various stages of development during the Middle Ages, but the basic format and structure of the book was established by the late antique—