

# NAUGHT IS THIS MUNDANE RUMOUR BUT A BREATH OF WIND

*A glance at the concept of eternity*

## European Illuminated Manuscripts

EXHIBITION OF MANUSCRIPTS IN A DISPLAY CASE

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN MUSEUM

*Non è il mondan romore altro ch'un fiato  
di vento, ch'or vien quinci e or vien quindi,  
e muta nome perchè muta lato.*

Naught is this mundane rumour but a breath  
Of wind, that comes now this way and now that,  
And changes name, because it changes side.<sup>1</sup>

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*  
*Purgatory XI*, 100-102

In *The Divine Comedy*, after the poet has completed his journey through the terrifying *Inferno*, and once he has reached *Purgatory*, Dante finds three souls who recreate three aspects of the sin of pride (*Purgatory XI*). Among them is the soul of the manuscript illuminator Oderisi da Gubbio, who confronts Dante with the sinful emotion of vanity linked to art, conveying to him that artistic pride does not merit such effort, as everything in this world is futile and in a thousand years, the glory associated with the author's name will be long forgotten. According to Oderisi, instead of seeking to achieve fame and glory, artists and poets should shed their vanity and accept the humility of mundane, ephemeral things, because everything is fleeting, and their names will never have a home in the memory of those who follow.

<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, foreword by Robin Kirkpatrick, illustrated by Gustave Doré, edited by Josie Mitchell, Catherine Taylor, Taylor Bentley. London: Flame Tree Publishing, 2018. For the other citations of this work presented here, we use the same translation.

From a modern outlook, however, we do not adhere to this claim, of course, because art, as we know, over the centuries, by virtue of its nature and scope, and some artists, thanks to their work, effort and dedication, inspire precisely the opposite of inexorable oblivion.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, at the end of his journey, now in *Paradise*, Dante gives an excellent explanation of this concern, that of being forgotten by those who come after, who will read and reflect on his words in future times: *And if I am a timid friend to truth, / I fear lest I may lose my life with those / Who will hereafter call this time the olden* (*Paradise XVII*, 118-120).

On the subject of this appeal for remembrance by ancient authors, and the learning and reflection they sought to observe from then on, let us focus on this surprising episode: at the time of the first major fire at Vorau Abbey, in Austria, in 1237, the monk in charge of the library, determined to save the works from destruction, flung manuscript after manuscript from the window, so that they did not succumb to the flames that ended up devouring him. 'He sacrificed his life in order to save irreplaceable manuscripts for posterity'<sup>3</sup>, because each manuscript, each copy produced at the monastic *scriptoria*, or later, in the workshops of copyists and miniaturists, contained the holy words, and their illuminations demonstrated the great significance of that Word, to be disseminated and instructed among faithful Christians. These manuscripts were Holy Bibles, Psalters, Missals and Apocalypses, produced for those familiar with the Holy Scriptures, or Books of Hours, which included calendars and daily prayers for the lay community, as well as secular books that contained literary narratives, classed as profane because their content was not devoted exclusively to religious themes.

The lesson we are taught, in this case, by the masters of painting and the word – and the episode in the Styrian abbey is a key example of this very thing – is the fact that humans always strive for the artistic object to be preserved and for it to achieve a certain kind of 'eternity,' given that works tend to be updated, over the centuries, through observation and reading, through the reflection of the public, through the preservation carried out by the generations that follow. Although these illuminated manuscripts were produced as the result of commissions, according to patrons' demands, or with the intention of a vernacular or mercantile use, these books come to us as unique objects, genuine treasures that go beyond whatever past utility governed them, after many, many centuries. Arguably clearer to our modern gaze, given the retrospective nature inherent in it, these books, as true works of art, allow us now to venture a step beyond their religious and sacred context, and the formality of western Christian iconology that surrounds them, and speak to us in terms of universal matters that

- 2 See the thoughts of Teodolinda Barolini on Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* published on the *Digital Dante* platform, particularly her commentary on Canto XI of *Purgatory*. Barolini writes about Oderisi's words to Dante: 'And yet, and yet... I write this [in relation to Oderisi's belief in the oblivion of the artist's glory after a thousand years and to his appeal for humility over the sin of artistic pride] on the verge of 2015, which will be the 750th anniversary of Dante's birth in 1265: already three-quarters of the way to 1000 years. And Dante's words still live.:'; see Teodolinda Barolini, «*Purgatorio* 11: After 1000 Years?», in *Commento Baroliniano, Digital Dante*. New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2014. Available and accessed at: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/purgatorio/purgatorio-11/> (12.10.2021).
- 3 Ingo F. Walther, Norbert Wolf, «Introduction: Manuscript illumination in the West», in *Codices illustres. The world's most famous illuminated manuscripts – 400 to 1600*. Cologne: Taschen GmbH, 2018, p. 11.; see also, in this introductory note, the allusion these authors make to Dante's encounter with Oderisi da Gubbio, in *Ibidem*.

always determine and affect human existence in the world. Themes based on curiosity and inquiry into the creation of the world and of humankind, what we are made of and what lies beyond us, that is, the journey that awaits us at the end of this journey we have made, the journey that goes beyond a shared earthly road, loved or unloved, tormented or confused, perhaps unfortunate, erratic, or prosperous and serious, swift, virtuous, although almost always incomplete and nonconformist, a journey that will (as we know right from the start) suddenly end one day. On that day, there remains a story of all that was or was not experienced, shared, achieved, or, in the case of the great poets and artists, what was produced, with great mastery, as work, perhaps to be sung, read, heard, observed, constantly raising questions and posing the arduous challenge of finding answers in it – something that has endured, as we know, until the present day.

With the aim of proposing an observation and reflection on the images and content of some of the most noteworthy manuscripts and illuminated works in the Calouste Gulbenkian Collection, seven manuscripts and a single folio from a Holy Bible are presented here. This selection relates to a narrative about the history of humans and their faith, and the belief in that which, perhaps, created them and awaits them after their earthly demise. Rather than presenting a fixed idea of an eternity that is divine, infernal or heavenly, however, these works show us, more than anything, that eternity is without doubt attained through art. It is achieved, in particular, through the art of the book, of telling stories, sacred or profane, by writing and illustrating them, by *illuminating* them, for those who once looked at and learned from them, for those who look at and reflect on them today, and for those who will come later and continue to preserve that *mundane rumour* that, even if it is fleeting as an act, is celebrated and fulfilled in the written and illustrated pages of illuminated manuscripts.

**FILIPA CORREIA DE SOUSA**

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