



# The art of the facsimile

Preserving history throughout the ages



Pentecost (from the facsimile of Pacino di Bonaguida's Picture Book)

Some dreams of mankind are paradoxical: we strive to create the perfect copy and at the same time we complain about losing the aura of the original. When it comes to works of art whose reproductions are omnipresent, millions upon millions of people from around the world travel to big museums in order to catch a glimpse of their reflections thrown back by the painting behind glass, and often even with a camera before their eyes. While the plethora of pictures on the Internet is becoming unmanageable, the attraction of an encounter with the uniqueness of works is growing in such a manner that these works would achieve prices on today's art market their creators never dreamed possible.

A very particular balancing act in this cultural situation is the facsimile. The word itself – deriving from the Latin prompt *“fac simile!”* meaning “Make alike!” – refers to the reproduction of an object that is not only a visual replica but a tactile one as well. Unlike a picture in an art book or on a poster, the facsimile does not only cut out the most striking feature in order to present it in a flat way but has to be complete and of identical dimensions. In contrary to the picture, it is expected to convey the three-dimensional impression of the model provided with a rear page and if necessary a framing. Although the facsimile lacks the value of a relic like the original, it allows a handle as it was possible to earlier generations. In fact, it virtually asks to be taken into the hands, because it replaces works that hardly anyone can even touch.



## On the street

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The most important role of the facsimile is for the knowledge of medieval manuscripts. Before the invention of printing by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz around 1450, each book was a unique individual. For the literate peoples, the handwritten book represents an indispensable treasure due to the fact alone that many things still could not be read in modern times, let alone to be edited. The examples in which those unique works still fall victim to the stupidity, or brutality, or to fire or water, show their indispensability in a terrible manner. Some events of the recent past, we have suppressed today: During the Prussian bombardment of Strasbourg held by Frenchman, with the Alsatian literature essential witnesses of German history were lost, including the *Hortus deliciarum* of Herrad of Landsberg. In Chartres, the Americans destroyed a substantial portion of precious scholarship during the bomb attacks; today only a manuscript catalog is left as a testament to those titles. In a fire in Turin in 1904, the most significant part of the *Turin-Milan Hours* was destroyed; a treasure of French and Dutch book illumination that was discovered only two years before. Uncountable damage was caused by the Arno flood in Florence in 1969 and the flood of Lisbon a few years later. New unimaginable dangers appeared just recently in Timbuktu and Mosul, where fundamentalists destroyed an invaluable legacy that they, blinded as they are, despise and fear at the same time.

The *Berlin Hours of Mary of Burgundy* serves as a reminder of the great historical situation when Burgundy passed to the Habsburgs, and is an example of the risks that exist even in museums that we consider fortresses of preservation: The manuscript had disappeared for three years until it fortunately showed up again undamaged, which gave publisher Müller & Schindler the opportunity to reproduce it as a facsimile. Scholars of the Kupferstichkabinett (Museum of Prints and Drawings) and the Free University of Berlin analysed it and wrote a commentary volume about this work, which could finally be presented in an exhibition to a grateful audience who, until then, had barely a notion of the inexhaustible riches of such a book.

Such spectacular cases call for the utmost care when dealing with them, and also the extraordinary fragility of such objects that vividly embody piety and poetry, history and wealth, and thus are able to represent the history of cities, regions and sometimes entire countries. Their mission is to continue reporting on the thinking and culture of bygone eras and at the same time stir a visual sensation. In spite of the technical challenges that single volume presents anew, nowadays it is possible to achieve such a reliable reproduction that, in many aspects, the facsimile is a worthy substitute of the original – showing not only the most beautiful leaves or the images only in detail, but also the overall character of the book with its original sequence of leaves and cover, including even its tactile properties.

In the half century since its establishment, the publishing house Müller & Schindler has demonstrated what is possible in this field: great manuscripts from the High Middle Ages, like for example the Munich Gospels of Otto III, were reproduced with such a deceptively authentic look that in a TV show even a cultural journalist fell into the trap of the hidden camera as he believed to have the stolen original in front of him. In the same deceptive way, the St Albans Psalter was reproduced: a Romanesque masterpiece from England that monks had managed to take to the continent during the quarrels of the Reformation, where it eventually found its new home in Hildesheim, Germany, and even survived the bombing of the war. But the publisher is not only interested in those already famous books; they exhumed completely unknown manuscripts from the museum of the Château de Chantilly or the National Library of Ireland and were able to surprise even book historians with their excellent commentary volumes.

The publisher sees its mission and challenge not only in books in its usual form as a bound

codex, but also in tackling other formats. One example is the facsimile edition of the Marriage Charter of the Byzantine princess Theophanu and the Holy Roman Emperor Otto II: a purple parchment scroll with text written in gold, belonging to the treasures of the Bibliotheca Augusta in Wolfenbüttel, Germany. Another example is the reproduction of the Vienna Model Book that explores the limits between book and object: the drawings of this model book from the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Museum of Art History) of Vienna are mounted on maple tablets arranged in a fanfold and still conserve their original, fine binding of blind-tooled leather.

Occasionally, former owners have – not always for the benefit of the masterpieces – toyed with books and paintings, a subject which Müller & Schindler has also taken up: Like the 64 textless images whose intended purpose remains unexplained until today and that now decorate some kind of altar in Baltimore; but instead of tracing back their hypothetical origins and presenting them as a religious book, they are shown in their current form. We are talking about the Stein Quadriptych of Simon Bening. A step further goes the reproduction of the unconditional main work of French Renaissance painting. What once was the book of hours of the French royal treasurer, Étienne Chevalier, was disassembled in the 18th century to decorate several cells in a monastery of the Congregation of Saint-Maur. But then the Duke of Aumale had the outrageous miniatures from the 1450s newly assembled for the Sanctuary in Chantilly; and it is in this form – entirely following the concept of the *fac simile!* – in which these sophisticated paintings of Jean Fouquet will be released by Müller & Schindler, of course, including all remaining pieces of this work, that are presently scattered all over the world.

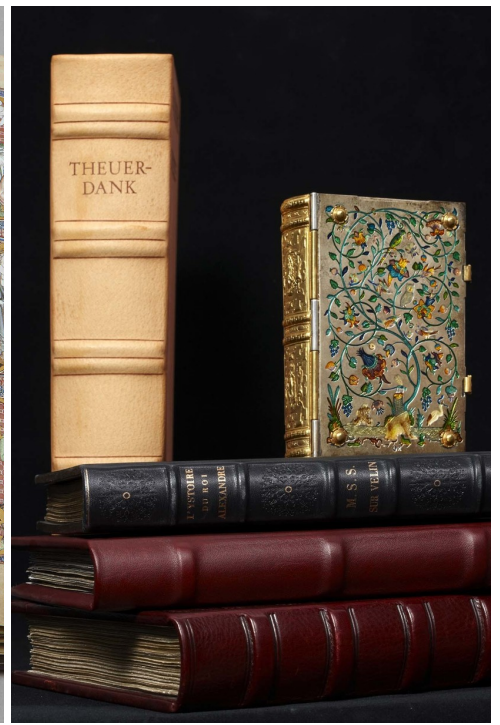
Those who want to have a living relationship with illustrated manuscripts as fortunately preserved treasures of the past will neither be satisfied with the scarce exhibitions, where merely a double page of an open book is displayed in a vitrine with dimmed lighting, nor with the disembodied images on the Internet, where every difference in size is ignored. Even the best reproductions in fine art books will not be enough for the aficionados. Only the facsimile does justice to the work as it has been preserved and conveys a vivid, palpable impression of what has survived centuries of war, inequities and misfortune.

Text by Prof. Dr. Eberhard König (translated from German)  
Courtesy of [Müller und Schindler](#)

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## Captions

1. Double page from the facsimile of the Book of Lovers
2. Several fine art facsimile editions
3. The Vienna Model Book (facsimile)
4. Facsimile editions with precious bindings (leather, gilded, velvet)
5. Double page from the facsimile of the De Lisle Psalter (detail)
6. Facsimile editions with gold-tooled leather binding

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