INSPIRED:
ESSAYS IN HONOR OF
SUSAN DONAHUE KURETSKY

THE FRANCES LEHMAN LOEB ART CENTER
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Frontispiece: Susan Kuretsky with students in the print room of the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, ca. 1993

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Inspiration takes many forms in the intellectual and pedagogical legacy of art historian Susan Donahue Kuretsky. Her scholarship, which comprises lyrical essays on Rembrandt, in-depth probes of art and science in early modern Europe, and exhibition catalogues characterized by skillful interweavings of text and image, has deepened our collective understanding of art from the seventeenth-century Netherlands. As a longtime member of Vassar College's Art Department, as both a student and professor, Susan has actively preserved the impressive history of the study of art at the college, while also continually striving to innovate and adapt the discipline to the twenty-first century.

Perhaps most significantly, as a master teacher and committed mentor, Susan has also inspired a multitude of students. Over the course of her career, she has provided an introduction to Dutch and Flemish art for thousands of college students in the United States. As noted throughout these pages, even when presenting masterpieces that she has seen countless times before, Susan does so with a measure of wonder and awe as though sharing with us her first impression upon seeing something miraculous. In the classroom, she is demanding of excellence, with a gift for guiding students from inchoate thoughts to profound insights.

Those who have had the good fortune of studying closely with Susan have found that their relationships with her have not ended at graduation. For many of us, Susan’s mentorship and friendship have been guiding forces in our professional trajectories. Her wise counsel, and our sense that she always had our best interests at heart, made her a sounding board as we contemplated graduate school, dissertation challenges, career options, cross-country moves, and many other personal and existential questions that will remain unspoken here. In this way, Susan’s mark on a generation of art historians in the United States is profound and deserving of the recognition this Festschrift embodies.

Observation is at the center of Susan’s teaching. For her students, the study of a work of art always returns to the object itself, with the knowledge that the answers are in the art, and that there is always more to say, because there is always more to see. In this spirit, each of the essays in this volume takes a single work of art as its subject; while the seventeenth-century Netherlands is well represented, the selections range in date from the fourteenth century to the twenty-first, and in geographic origin from Chicago to Senegal. The authors of these texts are all former students of Susan’s. Three received their doctorates at Boston University, where she taught in the 1970s; the remainder are alumni of Vassar, where she has spent four decades of her career. The essays vary in their approaches—academic, meditative, journalistic—but all engage deeply with the objects and, in many instances, with Susan’s teaching and scholarship, a continual source of wisdom and inspiration for us all.

Finally, it should be said that the education Susan offers her students transcends
Wrestling with the Devil in the Details: Illuminating the Life of Saint Margaret in a Fourteenth-Century Book of Hours

While the classrooms in Vassar’s Taylor Hall were dimmed for art history lectures, Susan Kuretsky never failed to illuminate these spaces with her insight and eloquence. What most impressed me as a student was her ability to bring into focus tiny, telling details in a work of art: the bird in flight in Bruegel’s *Hunters in the Snow*, or the gruesome banality of the severed skull segment in Rembrandt’s *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Deijman*. The devil, for Ms. Kuretsky (as I knew her then), was in these details that revealed artists’ skill, choices, and consideration. As a mentor, Susan coupled this discerning eye with generosity, kindness, and patience. She was an inspiration to me as a student, and remains one to me today as a scholar and a teacher.

It was with Susan’s encouragement—insistence, really—that I made my first research trip to a rare book room outside the familiar Vassar College Special Collections. My senior thesis addressed an early printed book of hours in Vassar’s collection, and I had logged many hours in the reading room in the basement of Thompson Library. Susan, however, encouraged me to reach further, and helped me arrange a research appointment at the Morgan Library—an exceptional privilege for an undergraduate. At the Morgan, the librarians and curators took my project seriously. When they found I was interested in the artist of the metalcuts decorating the book’s borders, they brought me an illuminated manuscript in the collection also attributed to him. This was the most exquisite illuminated book I had ever seen “in the flesh.” I sat before it, overwhelmed by its beauty—the vibrant colors, the soft, creamy vellum—and wondered how I would possibly find the words to do it justice.

Six years later, as I was completing the research for my dissertation, my work took me back to the Morgan. The focus of my visit was an illuminated book of hours. These compilations of religious texts for private devotion were especially popular with lay readers in northern Europe between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. They were not meant to be read from cover to cover; rather, they contain devotions to be said at different points throughout the day (the canonical hours), as well as other types of prayers, poems, creeds, and stories. The example I went to see at the Morgan was produced after 1318 in the north of France, in Thérouanne or Saint-Omer. It contains a calendar, four separate offices for hourly prayer (the Hours of the Virgin, the Hours of the Holy Spirit, a rare text known as the Mass of the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, and the Hours of the Holy Cross), the Seven Penitential Psalms, the Office for the Dead, the account of the Passion from the Gospel of John, and, at the end, a *vita* (or life) of Saint Margaret, in verse. (It is on account of the inclusion of this final text that I call the...
book the “Margaret Hours.”) These texts are in Latin, with the exception of the Old French Margaret vita. As with nearly all European books predating the mid-fifteenth century, this book was handwritten on sheets of parchment. The proliferation of painted decoration (or illumination) marks this book as a luxury item.

The Margaret Hours seems to have been made for an aristocratic woman: she is depicted more than thirty times in its 292 leaves. It was principally she whom I had come to see, though I was also interested to discover how she got along with the strange animals and hybrid creatures inhabiting the margins of the pages. My work on the Margaret Hours centers on teasing out meaning from the manuscript’s densely illuminated iconography, considering how the artist’s choice of imagery, style, or compositional arrangement might have resonated with the text of the page or the experience of the medieval reader to produce meaning. In this essay, I want to highlight one of the artist’s many such choices, one whose reading I have not managed to pin down.

Medieval manuscripts, especially lavishly illuminated ones such as this, use visual cues and decoration to help a reader find her place within their texts. New sections begin with a large “historiated initial” inhabited by a sacred figure or scenes from the biblical narrative. The beginning of Margaret’s vita, for instance, is marked with an elaborate letter A that occupies most of the space ruled for text (fig. 4). Pale pink vines twisting into tight diamonds create the two sides of the A; their meeting at the top transforms the letter into a pointed arch, complete with delicate Gothic spires. The initial frames the Virgin Mary, Saints Paul and Peter, and the other apostles at the moment of Christ’s Ascension (his feet are seen disappearing into the wavy blue clouds signifying heaven at the pointed arch of the A). The ground inside the initial is rendered in lustrous gold leaf; outside, it is set against a field of blue, white, and orange, its diaper ornament echoing the diamonds within the letter’s forms. The initial is set within a double frame of gold. A column of painted letters to the right continues the text before returning to the regular tenses script in the final two lines of the page.

On pages, like this one, marking new sections in the manuscript, illumination overwhelms text, and the margins seem to compete with the sacred center. In the top right corner, a green bird with a parrot-like beak perches near a vine, while an oversized blue-winged butterfly flits below. To the left, a hybrid creature with a bird’s head, a lion’s haunches, and a long tail covered in gold thorns turns its crowned head to the right. In the large margin at the bottom of the page, another hybrid with a man’s head uses its long neck to peer around the vine-scroll frame. At the center, a pair of pale human legs perform a dance, while a bestial head emerges suggestively on a thin neck from between them. Two apes—a favorite motif of this illuminator—approach from the right, one crouching while the other (much abraded) rides its back, brandishing a whip. Small, gilded circles fill in the spaces around these frames and figures, enhancing the sensation of visual abundance.

It is within this chaotic marginal space that the artist has decided to depict the book owner. She kneels in the right margin, in an area of relatively unadorned parchment. Her kneeling form is of similar stature to, if not larger than, the sacred figures at the center of the page. In contrast to the Virgin’s plain garments, our book owner wears a heavy cloak festooned with buttons and a wide collar lined entirely with sumptuous ermine. Her complex headgear and wimple identify her as a matron. The owner’s appearance here is consistent with her other depictions throughout the book: her kneeling form accompanies nearly every large initial in the manuscript. As this is the last large initial, opening the last section of text in the book, it is also the last of these “owner portraits.”

Here, as in her appearances throughout the book, the owner occupies a liminal space within the fanciful ecosystem of the page. For the manuscript’s fourteenth-century reader, this would have elicited a double thrill: first, the excitement of finding herself depicted within her luxurious book; and second, of seeing herself so close to the Virgin Mary. Although the two figures are separated by the frame of the initial, the owner’s gaze seems to penetrate these compositional dividers. They even mirror each other somewhat in the backwards lean of their bodies, the positions of their arms across their chests, and their rosy cheeks and delicate, feminine features. I imagine that the feelings they would have elicited in their fourteenth-century viewer are not far removed from the excitement that I feel as a modern reader at being able to see, touch, smell, and read a 700-year-old illuminated book.

After this opening page, the book owner disappears from view, and the story of Saint Margaret unfolds in the margins of the subsequent pages. Young Margaret receives
baptism and leads a simple, holy life as a shepherdess until her beauty catches the attention of the pagan lord Olibrius (fols. 114v–116v). When Margaret refuses his offer of marriage, Olibrius has Margaret stripped, scourged, and imprisoned (fols. 117r–121r). In prison, Margaret faces a series of demonic challengers, including the dragon who swallows her alive (fol. 122v) and another demon whom she wrestles into submission (fol. 124v). Margaret’s violent liberation of herself from within the dragon’s stomach is the basis for her status as patron of women and children in childbirth. The illuminations to side the text also include the trials of other Christian figures. By the passage where Margaret is stripped and tortured, for example, an illumination depicts the Flagellation of Christ (fol. 118v). Elsewhere, the image of Saint Anthony draws a connection between Margaret’s temptations and his own (fol. 122r). While the narrative relates Margaret facing her trials alone, the images emphasize her affinity with exemplary forebears.

As neither human nor demonic tortures could shake Margaret’s faith, Olibrius at last delivers her martyrdom (fols. 127r–128v). As the ultimate testimony to her faith, Margaret’s death secures her membership among the saints in heaven and her power to help pregnant women on earth. The manuscript does not depict the moment of Margaret’s death, only its aftermath (fig. 5): to the right, an angel carries Margaret’s soul up to heaven; her earthly body lies in the margin below, its severed head before it, its hands frozen in a position of prayer. Yet her body appears to undergo a sort of transformation. While alive, Margaret had been presented as a youthful and humble virgin, with the same attributes and appearance as the Virgin Mary in the Ascension initial. As a corpse, she takes on the appearance, attributes, and even the prayerful gesture of the wealthy, married book owner. Her decapitated head has lost its halo, but has gained the matronly markers of a wimple and an elaborately knotted veil.

I have long puzzled over this provocative shift in Margaret’s iconography. This visual association between the owner and the saint would seem to have an element of flattery. Yet it also seems to denigrate the book owner, associating her with the cast-off, temporal world that Margaret’s soul is seen joyously departing to the right. In another reading, Margaret’s matronly attributes signify instead the consummation of her marriage to Christ through death; the similarity with the owner becomes coincidental. Like so many illuminations in devotional manuscripts, this image resists clear interpretation, instead inviting readings that somehow both contradict each other and bleed together.

Do the closed eyes on Margaret’s decapitated head parody my own lack of vision? Do they affirm it?

This response is, I suspect, in keeping with the original expectations and use of this illuminated book. This is a small detail inserted by the artist on one of more than 500 illuminated pages. While it has so far gone unnoticed in the scholarship, it spoke to me. Perhaps it spoke to me so strongly because of the conditions under which I encountered it. It was while I was at the Morgan, making my way through the Old French vols., that my father called to tell me his mother had died. My grandmother, Margaret Cunningham Doyle, was nearly eighty-six years old. She had been a teacher and a poet. When I had visited her in the hospital a couple of weeks earlier, I had shown her pictures from recent research trips, and she was full of questions and insights about my findings. After the brief call with my father, I returned to the reading room, the death of one Margaret on my mind while I read about another.

I heard from Susan a few weeks later when she wrote to wish me luck delivering a paper on the Margaret Hours. Her kind message reminded me of her role in bringing me into that reading room for the first time. I thought, too, of my grandmother. The delight that I found in Susan’s classroom in discovering the details of a work of art was one my grandmother also embraced, in poems about percolating coffee and Irish flies. In the course of my own vita, I have been fortunate to have such exemplars appearing beside me to guide my way. Susan and Margaret both connect me to a tradition of perception, contemplation, patience, and generosity. Considering this tradition, I feel about it as I did as an undergraduate in the Morgan: awed by its beauty, uncertain I can do it justice. But I will do my best to honor and carry forth this legacy as I continue to wrestle with the devil in the details.

Maeve Doyle (Vassar Class of 2007) is Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Eastern Connecticut State University. At Vassar, she wrote her senior thesis on a printed book of hours from 1498, and she has been researching late medieval devotional books ever since. Her current research addresses issues of gender and identity in late medieval art, particularly in illuminated manuscripts. Her work has been supported by the Fulbright Commission and the Mrs. Giles Whiting Foundation.

NOTES
1. For an introduction to books of hours, see Roger S. Wieck, Painted Prayer: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art (New York: George Braziller, 1997); this book is cat. 62.
2. New York, Morgan Library MS M.754. The Morgan’s manuscript is a fragment; the first half is London, British Library Add. MS 36684. Both volumes of the Margaret Hours have been digitized and, at the time of writing, are available online at http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=add_ms_36684_f001r and http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/128495. See Alison Stones, Gothic Manuscripts 1260–1320, Part One, vol. 2, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in France (London: Harvey Miller, 2013), 950–954, for a full bibliography.
4. The opening lines of the poem read, APRES LA SAINTE PASSion / Jhesu christ a lascension (After the holy Passion / Jesus Christ at the Ascension). Translation by the author.