The small figures (drolleries) which appear beside the page numbers – two hundred of them throughout the book – are taken from the Croy Hours, compiled 1430–1440 in Ghent or Bruges and illuminated by such famous artists as Gerard David, Simon Bening and Gerard Horenbout.

Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex 1857. A facsimile edition of this manuscript has been published by Faksimile-Verlag Luzern (cf. p. 44).

The drolleries on pages 1, 3, 4, 9, 25, 33, 38, 42 and 48 are taken from the Hours of Mary of Burgundy, produced c. 1470–1480 in Ghent or Bruges and today housed in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex 1857. A facsimile edition of this manuscript has been published by ADEVA, Graz (cf. pp. 366f.)
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174 Hadith Bayad wa-Riyad (Story of Bayad and Ryad)
176 Codex Borgia
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196 Codex Manesse
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100,000 visitors. It is above all the thrill of being so close to these precious treasures that are worth several millions and upon which we would otherwise never cast an eye that virtually bedazzles us – treasures that once belonged to emperors, kings and dukes and of which only one single copy survives in the whole world! And, of course, we are overwhelmed by the sheer opulence of the glimmering gold used by the painters to embellish their miniatures in order to display the wealth of their patrons in an adequately fitting manner. This book leads us right into the heart of medieval manuscript illumination and presents 167 of the most beautiful, most significant and most famous illuminated manuscripts from A.D. 400 up to 1650. The year 1600 was deliberately chosen as a final marker because by this point book illumination had reached or even passed its heyday and the printed book was already making its triumphal entry, outstripping its hand-written counterparts. The term “beautiful” in our context – as in any historical context – may well be subjective, and indeed the taste of the

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 Byzantine princess Anicia Juliana, to whom the Vienna Dioscorides manuscript was presented as a gift (c. A.D. 512), hardly corresponds to the aesthetic ideal of the 21st century. However, all the works presented here were in their own time – and certainly still are today – considered to be objects of “beauty”. No comparable survey of the finest codices from twelve centuries has existed so far. Even though our compilation focuses mainly on Europe, no less than 21 codices from Persia, Turkey and India bear witness to the flowering of oriental (Islamic) manuscript illumination, especially in the 16th century. We present them for the first time ever in a chronology together with European works of the same kind. South America is represented by a pleated manuscript. Chinese and Japanese painting was not included as their traditional hanging and transversal scrolls have nothing in common with the bound codices of the West. The Qur’an manuscripts with their fascinating calligraphy were also excluded due to their renouncement of pictorial depiction imposed by the Islamic religion itself. Other countries were neglected in view of their artistically less sophisticated production. The codices are presented and described in chronological order. Special emphasis was placed on readability for interested lay readers, foregoing all too complicated terminology. The terms used are explained in a Glossary. Each manuscript is introduced with an overview offering useful information as to its date and place of origin, format, extent, language, content, miniaturist, illustrations, patron, owners etc. in order to orient the reader at a glance. This is unfortunately lacking in similar publications, including the majority of specialist studies, and even in many catalogues compiled and accessible in large libraries. Even less widely studied are the oriental manuscripts. They have frequently been split up according to the customs of the country where they are kept and dispersed by the winds of time, so that sadly in these cases only sparse information could be added. Wherever possible, the manuscript pages and miniatures were reproduced in the original format. Most of them are featured on a right-hand or left-hand page in order to reflect their appearance on a recto or a verso page in the original manuscript. To convey the sheer wealth of colours used in the original books, 214 pages were printed with gold as a fifth colour. And to remind readers that we are dealing with miniatures taken from manuscripts and not from panel paintings, our edition contains a total of 66 double-page illustrations. The comprehensive appendix presents a further 20 important manuscripts and famous works that have not been treated in the main text. The biographies of the artists provide additional information on the lives and works of the miniaturists discussed in the text. And last but not least, an extensive systematic bibliography lists further reading as well as secondary literature. The original inspiration for this book goes back to almost forty years ago, when, during my studies on secular Gothic illumination, I had the chance to view hundreds of codices in several libraries and was even allowed to leaf through quite a number of these marvellous items. When working on this book, the facsimile editions mentioned in the overviews preceding each manuscript description provided me with an invaluable substitute for the original codices. The contributions published in the commentary volumes accompanying these facsimiles have in many cases shed decisive new light on manuscript illumination, a field that is far from being fully researched. In addition to all those colleagues who kindly supported my work, I would like to extend my special thanks to Dr. Ursula Struzl, Graz, and Dr. Manfred Kramer, Lucerne.