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How digital libraries may influence the description of medieval manuscripts: working with e-codices

In the past ten years, we have seen a huge increase in the digital reproduction of medieval manuscripts. With only a few clicks, we can access old manuscripts, either in part or in their entirety, in digital libraries as well as their descriptive metadata.

Like all other publications, in either paper or electronic form, it is necessary to have an index to easily access the large amount of information available in the database.

Modern technology provides us with various means of inserting an index. However, the heterogeneity of the metadata often prevents us from obtaining satisfactory and complete results. This would suggest that it is necessary to change the criteria for preparing the digital description provided with each electronic publication.

As a scientific editor of e-codices, the Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland who provides free access to all medieval manuscripts and to a selection of more modern ones, and specialist of book illumination, I was able to make a number of observations mainly regarding descriptions of the **decoration** of manuscripts.

I have chosen the example of the “bianchi girari”: the white vine-stem initial. It is a type of illumination, which originated in fifteenth century Florence, to decorate manuscripts in new humanistic writing. The white vine was generally left as a blank parchment on a background of various colours. Initially, the prevailing background colour was blue. This type of decoration in a codex enables us to date it back to a fifteenth century Italian production.

Looking for this term 'girari' we obtained different results depending on whether we search in full text or using the available filters.

The reason for that is that the author responsible for the summary of the manuscript or for the main description do not always use correct terminology. In order to find all the manuscripts with this type of initial, you have also to do a new search using the French word “entrelac” and the German word “Weissrankeninitialen”. Without consistent terminology, the search results are greatly influenced by the language in which the descriptions are published in e-codices.

Using consistent terminology can be a solution, but only when the authors of the descriptions use the correct historic-artistic terminology.

I have already been able to observe certain changes in the way of describing the decoration of illuminated codices.

About 400 new descriptions have been published in e-codices. Most of them were ready for online publication, whereas some had to be reworked or edited. There are no pre-established editing criteria. Researchers send a description in Word format, which we encode in XML. After adding mark-up language and links to the images, the description will appear on the screen laid out similarly to traditional paper catalogues.

The information is subdivided into pre-established categories according to an external or internal description of the manuscript, the history and bibliography. There are no space restrictions, and the text is presented with blank spaces, lists and tables which in the case of re-adaptation of paper catalogues is done during the encoding in XML.

In the new scientific descriptions the authors themselves, especially those not specialised in illumination, make frequent use of list and tables.

On the contrary, art historians subdivide the description of the decorations in its hierarchical components and not according to the page order. They choose a critical and historic-artistic interpretation of the codex decoration. The reader therefore has to go through the whole paragraph about decorations to find the links needed to verify the art historian's interpretations.

In my opinion, the changes brought by the digital libraries may have the following advantages:

- The technical possibility of providing a link to the image will eliminate the necessity of providing a detailed analysis and description of the decoration, as well as making indications of the colours superfluous.
- It will be easier and faster to describe manuscripts with a complex decoration.
- Also non-specialists in miniature will be able to provide these kinds of description.

However, in the long term, there will also be some disadvantages as:

- Frequent use of a simplified language will detract from historic-artistic terminology.
- Gradual inability to understand the role of the miniature and initials in the context of an illuminated manuscript, and to interpret the relationship between the images and the text.

