I have already provided a general introduction to the collection of non-Italian, non-French, manuscript leaves and cuttings in Volume II, and so here I concentrate on the French items, which form the largest part of the McCarthy collection of manuscripts as a whole. In his Foreword above, Bob McCarthy has explained how he was introduced to French Gothic art as a teenager, on visits to sites such as Chartres Cathedral. Although the names of a few Gothic architects have come down to us, the vast majority of the stained-glass painters, stone and wood sculptors, metal-casters, goldsmiths, ivory carvers, enamellers, seal-designers and engravers, and other artists, are entirely unknown. The situation is scarcely better for manuscript illuminators: sometimes there are colophon or other inscriptions that name them, and sometimes manuscripts can be identified, with a high degree of confidence, with individuals recorded in documentary sources, but more often than not the identification of a manuscript with a named illuminator is based on a balance of probability, rather than secure evidence.

In the introduction to Volume II, I explained my reluctance to use overly precise attributions, and I hope that a perusal of the previous attributions, quoted under each Literature heading, will demonstrate the extent to which they often either have undeservedly long tenures, being repeated uncritically from one publication to the next, or, conversely, have remarkably short life-spans. As an example of the former, the miniatures of cat. 80 in the previous volume were published several times as being from Metz or other inscriptions that name them, and sometimes manuscripts can be identified, with a high degree of confidence, with individuals recorded in documentary sources, but more often than not the identification of a manuscript with a named illuminator is based on a balance of probability, rather than secure evidence. It will therefore be worth exploring the situation in some detail.

Despite the vast number of manuscripts produced in Paris during the life of King Louis IX (1214–1270), a time-span corresponding to the emergence and rise of the University, and the flourishing of professional book-production in the city, the only major study of the whole period written during the past hundred years remains Robert Branner’s monograph, Manuscript Painting in Paris during the Reign of Saint Louis: A Study of Styles (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1977), which is fraught with practical and methodological problems, and is very difficult to use for a variety of reasons. As what follows may be seen as unduly critical of his work, it is worth acknowledging at the outset that the book in its present form is probably not exactly as Branner would have wanted it. He dated his Preface June 1971, and died in 1973, aged only 46. According to a preface note by the General Editor of the series in which the book was published, dated May 1975, “virtually all of the editing of Branner’s manuscript was completed under his supervision before he died” but I have set out on good authority that this statement is not accurate, and that parts of the text existed only in the form of notes at the time of his death. Publication did not take place until 1977, four years after he died: publication was apparently not entirely straightforward, and the text was certainly not fully checked or proof-read by its author.

Branner’s prose is often opaque, the accompanying reproductions (mostly in monochrome) are often too small to allow detailed stylistic analysis, and his entire text is founded on a series of non-creditable assumptions about how “ateliers” were organized and operated. He also deliberately omitted two of the most important manuscripts of the period, to which a significant number of illuminators contributed, the Psalter of St Louis and the Morgan Library’s “Crusader Bible”.

We should first address the crucially problematic concept of “ateliers”. The very first sentence of Branner’s book reads: “This book is an effort to identify and study paintshops active in Paris in the middle half of the thirteenth century”, but nowhere in the book, as far as I have found, are we given a definition of “paintshop”, and we are left to assume that it is synonymous with “atelier”, a word and concept that is also not defined. In Chapter 1, under the heading “The Illumination of Books in Paris”, the first sentence is: “We have no precise knowledge as to how painters and paintshops functioned in thirteenth-century Paris”, yet he continues (p. 11), “What emerges from this study is that a style of painting constituted the tradition of an atelier. I regard this as a fundamental point, so much so that I in fact shall use the terms “style” and “atelier” almost interchangeably.

A little further on, under the heading “The Atelier of the Vienna Moralized Bible”, Branner suggests that “The Latin Moralized Bible in Vienna seems to have been painted by seven major artists” (p. 37), and goes on to explain how their styles can be differentiated! Elsewhere, the output of the “Vie de St Denis atelier” is analysed...
as the work of at least five artists working in different styles, distinguished as the St-Denis Painter, the Marlay Painter, the St-Corneille Painter, and so on. An “atelier” and a “style” are therefore not synonymous, so Branner’s willingness to “use the terms ‘style’ and ‘atelier’ almost interchangeably” has inevitably created unnecessary confusion and misunderstanding.

There is an irony in the fact that, in his introductory chapter, Branner suggests that manuscripts were produced by the bookseller or librarius, who subcontracted individual tasks to independent scribes, illuminators, binders, etc. “There seem to be a few cases where a librarian employed a particular scribe and a particular illuminator more than once, but this was rare” (pp. 9–10). In other words, he acknowledges that production of books was not based around an illuminator’s “atelier”, but around a bookseller, despite the way he describes the organization of manuscript production throughout his text.

It seems self-evident that there were two main ways in which someone in 13th-century France could learn the art of illumination. One was to be either married to, or the child of, someone who was already an illuminator, and learn from him/her. Alternatively, a non-family member could learn through an apprenticeship. In both cases, it is natural to expect the pupil to paint in (almost) the same style as the teacher. In my opinion, a small team consisting of an illuminator, plus his wife and/or offspring, and/or an apprentice, all working in a single household, allowing day-to-day collaboration, can meaningfully be described as an atelier. In practice, the women in this scenario were probably expected to spend much of their day in household chores and the care of children and/or elderly relatives, allowing little time for illumination, which was in any case restricted to the hours of daylight – only about eight hours per day in winter in Paris. Since they could presumably not develop their skills by working full-time, they were perhaps expected to do mostly the repetitive work of supplying minor initials, patterned backgrounds, foliate marginalia, etc., which represented the great majority of the decoration required in most illuminated manuscripts. Even if an illuminator trained his offspring to help him with the figurative illumination, some and daughters would often leave the household after they married; an apprentice, once his apprenticeship was complete, would likewise typically leave and work independently. This would result in a situation where a husband and wife, one or more sons, one or more daughters, and one or more former apprentices might all be working simultaneously, but independently, in slight variations of a single style, within a single city such as Paris. It is very difficult to conceive of such separate people – perhaps working in competition with one another to secure commissions – as a single “atelier”, if that term has any connotation of collaborative work in a shared working-space (as implied by Branner’s other term, a “paintshop”).

In his account of the Johannes Grusch atelier, Branner concludes (p. 86),

> Just as it seems far-fetched to think of a great number of painters working in one shop for a long period of time, so it seems overly subtle to envision several separate but related shops comprising only one or two painters each.

But the latter is exactly what I envisage as the normal situation, for the reasons outlined in the previous paragraph.

> So much for Branner’s highly problematic concept of ateliers, and his regrettable decision often to treat them as synonymous with styles. Another prime example of how Branner based his hypotheses on a fundamentally flawed understanding of how manuscripts were made is his belief that, in some books, the leaves with historiated initials were marked with the “signatures” of different artists:

> there cannot be much question as to the meaning of these marks. Like masons’ marks in the building profession, they probably were used for purposes of payment.

> It is doubtful relevant that Branner specialized in the study of Gothic architecture before turning his attention to manuscript illumination: this would explain his firm belief that these manuscript “signatures” were analogous to masons’ marks. In fact they are nothing of the sort,” but Branner nonetheless used them as a basis for trying to distinguish different illuminators, and as a result tied himself in untenable knots, even going so far as to conclude:

> What these “signatures” tell us is that stylistic analysis alone often is not enough or often is improperly used … by showing that some like images were painted by different artists while some unlike ones were made by the same man.”

He was so strongly attached to the idea that these were signatures that he disbelieved the evidence of his own eyes, and set aside his faith in stylistic analysis as the basis for distinguishing different artists.
A second observation that demonstrates Branner’s ability to misinterpret evidence completely is that (p. 12) 

12 13

10 In a very recent article about the Hornby-Cockerell Bible (2015), Eric Johnson discusses its attribution as follows: “The most common attributions by far is to the Vienna Meredith Bible workshop, but this attribution seems not to be based on any of the materials; it is a conclusion reached independently by scholars who have never seen the manuscript. It is a most likely attribution and as such, it is not a valid attribution.”

11 We are of course reminded of the passage in Christine de Pizan’s The Book of The City of Ladies: “Know you a woman, named Antoinan, who is so learned and skilled in painting manuscript borders and miniature backgrounds that one cannot find an artist in all the city of Paris — where the best in the world are found — who can surpass her, nor who can paint flowers and dainty as delicately as she does, nor whose work is more highly esteemed, no matter how rich or precious the book is. People cannot stop talking about her. And I know this from experience, for she has executed several items for me, which stand out among the ornamental borders of the greatest names.” The colophon in the Bible of Robert de Riling (Paris, 1337) reads: “igitur Ecclisiae Breviarii, decretalium et rubricarum in Codicibus Carolingiis, etc., etc., etc., etc., etc. are synonymous, concluding that manuscripts were a special sub-set. Most (artists who were) not artisans (were) not artisans did we”, compare, however, Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, Manuscripts and Their Makers: Commercial Book Production in Medieval Paris, 1200-1320, 1 vols. (Tournai, 2000), 1, p. 24±25, in which they suggest that the distinction was not used at all. It is a distinction not recognized by many scholars; see e.g. Michelle P. Brown, Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms (Los Angeles and London, 1994), p. 188 and revised edition (Los Angeles, 2018), p. 197.

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14 It is also notable that Branner unconsciously uses non-English terms when English would be just as suitable, if not advisable. For example, he uses the expression “head of a workshop” instead of simply “head of a workshop.”

15 On the uses of the words bibliotecar, libretto, etc., see Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, “The Book Trade at the University of Paris, ca. 1250–1325,” in La production du livre universitaire au moyen âge: exempla et zodiaque, ed. by L. Brasset, B.G. Gimpel and B.H. Rouse (Paris, 1998), pp. 22–43, reprinted in Mary A. Rouse and Richard H. Rouse, Annotator: Witness to Illumination in the Middle Ages: Medieval Texts and Manuscripts, Publications in Medieval Studies, 17 (Notre Dame, 1991, 1993), pp. 229–238, at pp. 226–235, where they suggest that the term bookbinder, stationer, librarian, etc. are not synonymous, concluding that manuscripts were a special sub-set. Most (artists who were) not artisans (were) not artisans did we”, compare, however, Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, Manuscripts and Their Makers: Commercial Book Production in Medieval Paris, 1200–1320, 1 vol. (Tournai, 2000), 1, p. 24±25, in which they suggest that the distinction was not use at all. It is a distinction not recognized by many scholars; see e.g. Michelle P. Brown, Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms (Los Angeles and London, 1994), p. 188 and revised edition (Los Angeles, 2018), p. 197.

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VOLUME III

French Miniatures

Peter Kidd

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