A personal treasure: the Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter (Walters Art Museum MS W. 10) and its originally-intended owner

Earlier scholarship on the Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter (Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W. 10) focuses almost exclusively on the identity of the noblewoman depicted in the full-page owner portrait before the start of the psalm text. This study will instead examine how this unusually small manuscript and its illuminations functioned as a private devotional prayer book for its original intended owner, Duchess Matilda Plantagenet (1156-1189), wife of Duke Henry the Lion of Saxony and Bavaria (1129-1195). This analysis will explore how the psalter’s textual content, physical format, and illuminations, particularly the portrait of the originally-intended owner, appealed to the Duchess Matilda sensually as well as spiritually. The Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter offers a rare opportunity to compare the public artistic commissions of a medieval magnate, including architecture, reliquaries, and manuscripts, with the more private works of patronage made at his court. To that purpose, the Gospels of Henry the Lion (Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 105 Noviss. 2°), commissioned by the ducal couple for the Saxon court church of Saint Blaise in Brunswick, will be examined, bringing the intimacy of the psalter into stark relief. The Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter provides a glimpse of the personal and spiritual role that illuminated manuscripts played in the lives of medieval laymen and —women and hints at the taste for personal prayer books with portraits of the owners at their devotions that would arrive in the next century. This thesis will make the psalter the topic of extensive art historical analysis for the first time.
Walters Art Museum Illuminated Manuscripts By: Walters Art Museum Illuminated Manuscripts. Helmarshausen Psalter, Initial Q (Quid gloriaris), Walters Manuscript W.10, fol. 42r. This small volume of psalms was created for the private use of a noble lady, probably a relative of Duke Henry the Lion (1129-1195). It was made at Helmarshausen, the same monastery that produced the sumptuous Gospels of Henry the Lion, which sold at auction in 1983 for nearly 12 million dollars, making it the most expensive art object sold to that point. This psalter is much smaller and less elaborate than the Gospels, The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland is internationally renowned for its collection of art, which was amassed substantially by two men, William and Henry Walters, and eventually bequeathed to the City of Baltimore. The collection presents an overview of world art from pre-dynastic Egypt to 20th-century Europe, and counts among its many treasures Greek sculpture and Roman sarcophagi; medieval ivories and Old Master paintings; Art Deco jewelry and 19th-century European and American masterpieces. www.thewalters.org. A personal treasure: the Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter (Walters Art Museum MS W.10) and its originally-intended owner. Earlier scholarship on the Baltimore-Helmarshausen Psalter (Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W. 10) focuses almost exclusively on the identity of the noblewoman depicted in the full-page owner portrait before the start of the psalm text. This study will instead examine how this unusually small manuscript and its illuminations functioned as a private devotional prayer book for its original intended owner, Duchess Matilda Plantagenet (1156-1189), wife of Duke Henry the Lion of Saxony and Bavaria (1129-1195).