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First published in 1981, a historical account of illustrated books which stresses the artist's response to his text and the visual quality of the page.

The author of this stunning book, John Harthan, retired in 1976 as Keeper of the Library of the Victoria and Albert Museum. In the United Kingdom, he was in charge of England's national collection of books on art and books as art. Brilliantly and comprehensively exploring how manuscripts and printed books have been illustrated from Ancient

Egypt to the late twentieth century, this history has a readable text and a wealth of significant art. Harthan places emphasis on the historical cultural context in which the books were produced. "Book illustration," he writes, "is like a hand-mirror in which one can see reflected great historical events, social changes and the movement of ideas down the centuries." Most of the books he discusses are represented by illustrations often on more than one page. Some may argue that imaginative writing should not be illustrated because graphics may interfere with the dialogue between author and reader by imposing another individual's visualization of a text. This notion has long given way to the appreciation of decorated literary texts - at least since the fourth century AD. The illustrator is a mediator between author and reader rather like a stage designer in the theater. Harthan, in the first chapter, discusses the ancient world,

Byzantine illustration, Carolingian and Ottonian, Romanesque, early and later Gothic, Hebrew and Renaissance manuscripts. Among ancient Egyptian papyrus rolls, the first example of book illustration was Book of the Dead (1370 BC), a collection of spells, incantations and rituals easing a soul's passage through the nether world. The dry climate of Egypt preserved many of these rolls. Most fascinating are the erotic scenes and animal satires, almost comparable to comic strips. In Constantinople, scribes preserved features of late antique illustration, adapting them to Christianity.

Religious books constitute the kernel of medieval illumination and illustration. The gorgeous color plates of the fourteenth century come from the Biblical texts, the Old Testament, Psalters and Gospels. Until the twelfth century, only the clergy and the ruling classes could own such books. By the thirteenth century, because of increased opportunities for education and enrollments in Universities, more books were needed. Paris, the richest, largest city of Europe, popularized arts and learning and provided work for manuscript illustrators to copy architecture, sculpture and painted windows. In Italy, a medieval health handbook, originating as an Arabic treatise, described medicinal values of herbs, plants, and foods, and advice for a sound health regimen. Made in Lombardy around 1400, the ready-reference for home treatment contained a page showing the eggplant (aubergine) and claiming the vegetable was good for hemorrhaging. Harthan includes this fascinating illustration in History. The earliest Hebrew illuminated manuscript dates from the 9th century and is Egyptian in origin. By the fourteenth century the Hebrew Bible and the Haggadah were part of religious services at home. Because the Haggadah was not a synagogue text, artists embellished the Bible story of the Hebrews' escape from Egyptian slavery. The Haggadah became enormously popular; in the 13th and 14th centuries, it was so handsomely illustrated and cherished that many volumes survived the wandering of the Jews throughout the world. The most brilliant period of Renaissance illumination was inaugurated by Florentine artists around the fifteenth century, with splendid manuscripts painted by the Giovanni brothers. -- From Independent Publisher About the Author John Harthan was Keeper of the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum.