

# Hidden Hands: Women’s Collaborative Contributions in Medieval Art

*Oh, the Middle Ages, what a hassle. The so-called "Dark Ages." A historical period of 10 centuries: a bag into which everything has been thrown, to the extent that it needs to be divided into 2, Low and High: again the problem of labels and classifications.*



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Ende, St. John with his Gospel (Beatus of Gerona), 975.

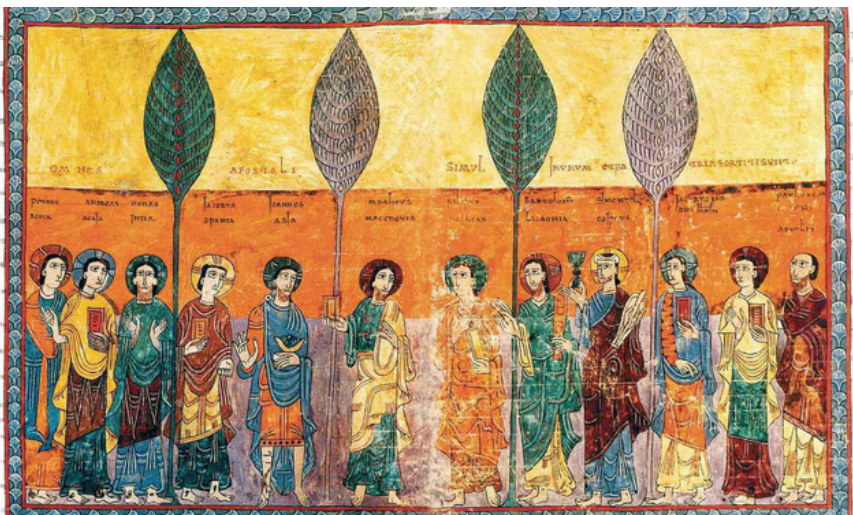
Anyway, the Middle Ages were not dark nor a black hole that abducted all classical knowledge. It was a very fruitful time, culturally speaking. I won't mention the long list of scholars, philosophers, theologians, scientists, poets, who lived in this era. And the artists? Surely you immediately think of the architects of the great cathedrals, many of whom are not even known by name. And sculptors. Someone must have made those statues that decorate those churches, right? Neither are the names of many of them mentioned.

Art in this era was collaborative, to put it in modern terms. A project like the construction of a cathedral or a palace involved the work of artisans of all kinds, and their identity didn't matter. All united in the execution and realization of a project. To give you a modern example: the table you use in your house, who made it? We only know the brand, where we bought it... but who cut the boards, varnished it, and assembled it?



Sibilla von Bondorf, History of Saint Francis, 15th century

Over the centuries, the names of artists who were famous, sought after for major commissions, and who, astonishing everyone with their art, passed into posterity, have reached us. Conversely, how many of them have been forgotten? Imagine the number of "anonymous" ones we have, those works of which we can only say it is "School of" because it resembles such and such an artist, but whose creator is not known with certainty.



Ende and Emeterius, Beatus of Gerona, 975

When a book had to be copied (by hand, page by page), several people were involved. The one who copied the text and the one who illustrated it. Sometimes these two tasks coincided in the same person. Other times there were several scribes and several illustrators.

Were there female painters in the Middle Ages? Of course, and they also didn't escape the general rule: nobody cared about their names, not because they were women, but because that happened with all artisans, regardless of whether they were men or women.

From Classical Antiquity, some female artists are known because they are mentioned by Pliny the Elder, the great ancient encyclopedist, and Boccaccio, in his "De Mulieribus Claris." For medieval ones, you have to search a little more. They are hidden, concealed, and they make themselves noticed from time to time. They raise their hand and say, "Hey, look at me, here I am."



Ende and Emeterius, Beatus of Gerona, 975

Female artistic activity in this period covered many areas. For example, the execution of tapestries for those cold castle walls without sufficient heating. But it was not an activity exclusive to women. And vice versa, there were also female bricklayers and those who carved the stone for the cathedral sculptures...

The same thing happened with manuscripts. The transmission of culture through the copying of books, done by religious orders, especially the Benedictines, was a very important task.



Anonymous, Marcia, De Mulieribus Claris, 15th century

Consider that all of them have facilitated our possession of texts by ancient authors today. And within this army of scribes, there were also nuns, novices, nobles who were educated in convents... Many women sought refuge in them by their own will: some, out of fear of maternity and childbirth (life expectancy was around 50 years on average); others, with intellectual interests, found there the opportunity to develop them, because if they got married, they had to abandon these studies and dedicate themselves to their family.

Over time, the names of the female artists who collaborated in the copying of books were lost. If nobody mentioned them in any commentary, they simply hadn't existed. But... if you search, if you have a good eye, you will find them.

Let me introduce you to a nun named Ende, who is one of the first painters to sign her work. Apparently, she was active in the Kingdom of León. She appears in the Beatus of Gerona, from the year 975. A "beatus" is a book of commentaries on the Book of Revelation. Ende and the friar Emeterius are the ones who illustrate the text; Ende signs it with a Latin legend "Ende, painter and helper of God; Emeterius, brother and priest." She, first and with larger letters.



Ende and Emeterius, Beatus of Gerona, 975



Ende and Emeterius, Beatus of Gerona, 975

Guda of Weissfauen was a German illuminator of the 12th century. She was the first woman to paint a self-portrait. Guda worked on the text of the Homilies of Saint Bartholomew. In the initial letter of the text, the "D" of "Dominus," she included her self-portrait and this inscription in Latin: "Guda, a sinner, wrote and painted this book." (Hey, here I am... Don't forget about me.)



Guda of Weissfauen, Homilies of Saint Bartholomew, 12th century



Claricia, Claricia's Psalter, 13th century

The most playful one: Claricia. She and three other nuns dedicated themselves to illuminating the manuscript of Claricia's Psalter (13th century), which, due to the little nun's mischief (or perhaps, novice), came to be called that way. She had no better idea than to paint herself as the stick of the "Q," of the initial letter of the text, swinging like on a swing.

Another one? Sibilla von Bondorf, a Clarisse nun, German, from the 15th century. She took care of illuminating the book of Saint Bonaventure about the life of Saint Francis, Saint Clare, and Saint Elizabeth and a copy of the Rule of the Clarisses as a gift to the sisters of the Villingen monastery. In the first illustration, Sibilla writes: "This image is by Sister Sibilla of Bondorf. Pray to God for her."



Von Bondorf, History of Saint Francis, 15th century

And a French one: Jeanne de Montbaston. Jeanne worked alongside her husband Richard, in Paris, between 1338 and 1368. They illuminated the 19 copies of the "Roman de la Rose," of which Jeanne made 5. In 1353, Richard died and, to be able to continue with her work, she had to take an oath (mandatory for all scribes) in the corresponding guild.

However, the most famous of the French was Anastasia (14th-15th century), as Christine de Pizan mentions her in her book "The City of Ladies" as the best in Paris. Anastasia is the one who decorated this work with her brushes.



Jeanne de Montbaston and Richard, The Seven Sleepers, 14th century



Anastasia, The City of Ladies, 15th century

One more? Hitda of Meschede, a German abbess, between the 10th and 11th centuries. She illustrated the so-called Hitda Gospels or Hitda Codex.

Who remembered them? Their existence was always known; however, thanks to recent studies on the position of women in art throughout history, they are no longer hidden.

Sources:

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- Mayayo, P. Historias de mujeres, historias del arte. Madrid, Cátedra, 2017
- Personal notes

[Explore the original blog post by clicking here.](#) It's originally written in Spanish.



Hitda of Meschede, Hitda Gospel, 10th century