This volume belongs to a series that highlights aspects of the Getty's holdings. The collection of illuminated manuscripts is only fifteen years old. At its nucleus lie 144 European medieval and Renaissance manuscripts from the collection assembled by Peter and Irene Ludwig of Aachen in the second part of the twentieth century on the advice of book dealer Hans P. Kraus, and purchased by the Getty Museum in 1983. (See the four-volume catalogue by Anton von Euw and Joachim M. Plotzek, Die Handschriften der Sammlung Ludwig. Koeln, 1979-85; on the dealer see H.P. Kraus, A rare book saga. The autobiography of H.P. Kraus. New York, 1978.)

In the Introduction Thomas Kren, Curator of Manuscripts, briefly situates the Getty's collection in the history of other institutions' manuscript acquisitions. He notes that few museums have actively or systematically pursued this area, as in most cases great private libraries migrated into public ones: the library of the Burgundian Dukes which forms the heart of the Bibliotheque Royale Albert I in Brussels, or the Medici library made public in the sixteenth century as Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana in Florence come to mind. Kren cites the Walters Art Gallery and Cleveland Institute of Art, the only museums in America committed to the encyclopedic collecting of manuscripts and cuttings, as models for the Getty Museum's collection.

The purpose of Masterpieces is to "display" illuminations from the cream of the Museum's holdings (53 manuscripts and cuttings are highlighted). Indeed, this volume is a beautiful picture book with high quality reproductions and brief explanations of each item. (The format and layout are reminiscent of Francois Avril's Manuscript Painting at the Court of France: The Fourteenth Century. New York, 1978, and Marcel Thomas' The Golden Age. Manuscript Painting at the Time of Jean, Duke of Berry. New York, 1979, but without their extensive historical introductions and bibliographies). The intended audience for the present volume appears to be the general Getty Museum visitor interested in a pretty souvenir, for the entries accompanying the images are summary, and no bibliography or suggestions for further reading are provided, although the book closes with a glossary of terms and an index of people and book types. It is a pity that the curious reader is not offered the option of further knowledge. In fact, the Getty's previous publications of its manuscripts have included brief bibliographies: e.g., Kren's own The Visions of Tondal (Malibu 1990) and Scot McKendrick's The History of Alexander the Great: An Illuminated Manuscript of Vasco da Lucena's French Translation of the Ancient Text by Quintus Curtius Rufus (Malibu 1996). The color images, however, are excellent and allow the viewer to discern the textures of the parchment pages, the tempera paints, and the different kinds of gold applied to virtually every page illustrated here. The quality of the manuscripts themselves is remarkable.
Especially interesting are less common artifacts: a Vidal Mayor created in Northeastern Spain c. 1290-1310 (No. 22) is the only surviving version of a systematic law code commissioned by James I of Aragon and Catalonia in 1247, following the reconquest of Spain from the Moslems. It was composed by Vidal de Canellas, Bishop of Huesca, who had studied law at the University of Bologna and was one of the leading figures at the court of James I. Vidal wrote two versions in Latin; the present manuscript is a copy of the larger one (hence Vidal Mayor), translated into Navarro-Aragonese vernacular. Reproduced here is the opening page of Book 5: the section deals with issues of credit, and the historiated initial E depicts a dispute between two noblemen brought before a seated king, resolved by an equestrian duel under the eyes of the king and his official.

Another fascinating item is a cutting from a lavish French folio edition of Valerius Maximus, Fais et dits memorables des romains, produced in Bruges c. 1475-80 for Jan Crabbe, the Abbot of the Cistercian Abbey at Duinen (No. 41). In this miniature, the Master of the Dresden Prayerbook illustrated the episode in which Valerius instructed the emperor Tiberius on the value of temperance. In a rich interior space two dinners are in progress: a noble and richly-clad party decorously and solemnly partakes of its meal in the farther section of a hall; while a low-class assembly messily and noisily carries on at a parallel table in the foreground. The depiction of the stout, low-class revelers behaving in all manner of indecorousness presages the moralizing imagery of Peter Bruegel the Elder.

Kren writes that the acquisition of the Ludwig collection not only supplemented the Medieval and Renaissance holdings of the Getty Museum, but also extended its coverage of paintings back to the ninth century (p. 7). This equation of manuscript illuminations and paintings is revealing: Kren was Assistant Curator of Paintings prior to the formation of the manuscripts department at the Getty, and Masterpieces treats its subjects as if they were paintings. The texts of which the illustrations form integral parts are addressed only generally; there is little interest in the interaction between text and image; and at times the text is noticeably cut off in the reproductions of the illuminated pages (e.g., a late thirteenth-century Antiphonal from Bologna with a historiated initial depicting Christ in Majesty (No. 19), or a series of miniatures from Guiart de Moulins' Bible historiale produced in Paris c. 1360-70 (No. 24)). A few openings are illustrated in full and give a clearer picture of the relationship between text and image: in an eleventh-century German Sacramentary the representation of the Holy Spirit descending on the Apostles at Pentecost faces the relevant Biblical passage (Acts 2:1-4) (No. 5); in a twelfth-century German Gospel St. Matthew is busy writing on the verso, and the opening lines of his book appear on the recto (No. 6). Still, not a single illustration shows a book as an object.

Brief entries, often occupying less than a full page, accompany the plates. Of the four authors, I found Adam S. Cohen the most informative, combining historical and cultural awareness with visual acuity. In his discussion of a thirteenth-century Gospel Book from Nicaea or Nicomedia (No. 20), for example, he both addresses the political and geographic shifts in thirteenth-century Byzantium which prompted the relocation of artistic production from Constantinople to other cities, and notes the technique employed by Byzantine illuminators of coating the parchment with egg white in order to give a glossy appearance to the page—which unfortunately resulted in paint easily flaking off miniatures (he quotes Planudes, head of a monastic scriptorium, on this problem). In the entry accompanying an early fifteenth-century Missal from the Collegium Ducale in Vienna (No. 29), he addresses the internationalism of Europe and some of the cross-fertilizations in Central European art, exemplified here by the illuminators trained in Bohemia, but working in Vienna.

Thomas Kren's discussions, on the other hand, are less attentive and well-rounded. Elucidating the composition of a Last Judgment in a mid-fifteenth-century Book of Hours from Ghent (No. 37), for example, he notes the souls of the saved rising out of a white lily in the border to the left of the central scene, but overlooks the burning ones crowding the mouth of hell tucked into a blue lily in the right margin. In his treatment of the opening of the Hours of Simon de Varie painted by Jean Fouquet (No. 33), Kren mistranslates the motto of the owner written on the scroll in the upper border, "VIE A MON DESIR" as "Life according to one's desire," distorting the boastful tone which would be more appropriately conveyed as "Life the way I want it"; and he does not even mention the accompanying motto, "PLUS QUE IAMAIS," in the lower border. Discussing an illusionistic depiction of an altar-reliquary of the Sorrowful Madonna painted in a late fifteenth-century Book of Hours from Provence (No. 36), he comments on the materials the miniaturist imitates, including a fictitious strip of parchment with the words "O Intemerata" tacked onto the metal shrine. Yet he fails to mention the inscriptions and blazons running along its
upper and lower edges: while the lower and the upper left inscriptions appear to be pseudo-Arabic, the upper right one copies exactly the royal emblem of the Nasrid dynasty (the rulers of Granada and what was left of Muslim Spain from 1238 until the Christian conquest of 1492) -- "There is no Victorious One except God." This phrase was ubiquitous on the walls of the Alhambra and in letter-forms identical to those of the Getty manuscript. Meanwhile, the fictive lower inscription is flanked by polychromatic Mamluk blazons, perhaps transmitted to the West by glass vessels or textiles. The separation of texts by emblems in the upper and lower borders of the shrine resembles the disposition of similar motifs on Islamic metalwork. Such Islamic luxury objects were imported to Europe through trade and diplomatic channels, and their employment here by a French craftsman is the reverse of Muslim painters' use a century earlier on the ceilings of the Alhambra of chivalric iconography derived from French ivory caskets (see Jerrilynn D. Dodds, "The Paintings in the Sala de Justicia of the Alhambra: Iconography and Iconology," Art Bulletin 61 (1979) 186-97). While Islamic elements are employed for their decorative effect rather than original meaning, this image is a vivid illustration of the rich cultural cross-fertilization in fifteenth-century Europe.

There are other visual joys contained in the illustrated pages that are be worth mentioning. Undergoing temptation in the Garden of Eden, in an early fifteenth-century Parisian manuscript of Boccaccio’s De Cas des nobles hommes et femmes (No. 30), Adam is shown as an old, gray, and bearded man, truly fashioned in God’s image, as is made clear by the tiny creation scene in the lower left corner of the page where he appears as the elderly Lord’s twin. The opulent illuminated page of a late-fifteenth or early sixteenth-century Gradual from Rome (No. 48) offers a direct visual quotation from Leonardo da Vinci -- a kneeling putto with butterfly wings in the lower border echoes Leonardo’s infant St. John the Baptist in the "Virgin of the Rocks." Finally, since Kren emphasizes the fact that Gerard Horenbout, the illuminator of the splendid early sixteenth-century Flemish “Spinola Hours” (No. 50), served as a court painter to the Regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria (perhaps the original owner of this volume), it may also be interesting for the reader to know that the artist subsequently emigrated to England to enter the service of Henry VIII Tudor.

Masterpieces is an excellently produced volume that offers great visual delights to its beholder. It would be more profitable not only to scholars, but also to intelligent and curious general readers had it contained a bibliography and a more detailed treatment of individual pieces. But as a picture book, and a reasonably priced one at that, it succeeds beautifully.