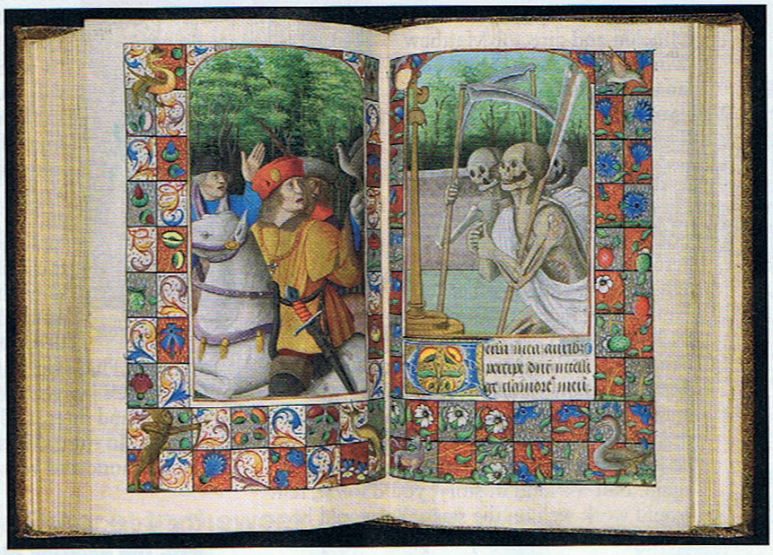
Exhibition of the week

Colour: The Art and Science of Illuminated Manuscripts

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (01223-332900, www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk). Until 30 December



The Three Living and the Three Dead, from the Book of Hours, Use of Rome (1490-1510)

Most medieval art is now lost, said Florence Hallett on TheArtsDesk.com. Whether through war, floods, fire, vandalism or botched restoration efforts, all but a fraction of pre-Renaissance creative endeavour has "succumbed to the ravages of time". Nowadays, illuminated manuscripts are the best preserved legacy of visual art in medieval times; unlike so much else, the "richly decorated" pages of many such devotional texts have survived intact. Cambridge's Fitzwilliam Museum holds one of the world's finest collections of illuminated manuscripts, and to mark its bicentenary, it is hosting an exhibition of 150 examples created between the sixth and 16th centuries. The "beguiling" books on show in The Fitzwilliam's darkened galleries "twinkle convincingly" – just as they would have done by candlelight in the Middle Ages. This is a "rare and wonderful" opportunity to see these "exquisite treasures".

The monks who created the first illuminated manuscripts aimed to "glorify God" and "pass down the written word", said Jonathan McAloon in The Daily Telegraph. But as the form developed, a professional class of illuminator arose. The exhibition traces this history, showing how the Byzantine-influenced style of the tenth century developed into the "softer, more sinuous" forms of the 12th. By the late 14th century, the art "reached an apex", as evidenced by an encyclopaedia depicting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Its text is "shot through with gold", its margins an "explosion of spiky ivy". Elsewhere, an unfinished 14th century pontifical is a "masterclass of gold work" with a "strangely modern" composition.

The show "blows apart clichés" about the medieval world, said Jonathan Jones in The Guardian – particularly that it was "drab" and that its art was "impersonal and generic". The Middle Ages brought to life in these books was "saturated with colour", full of "agony and ecstasy". A "startling" depiction of a nude, blue-green man serves to illustrate melancholy, while a "spectacular" scroll from the reign of Henry VIII explains the "science" of alchemy, looking for all the world "like a prop from a Harry Potter film". You only need look at a 13th century English book of psalms depicting a "moving" image of Christ on the cross to see that this is "expressionist art, as full of emotion as a work by van Gogh".

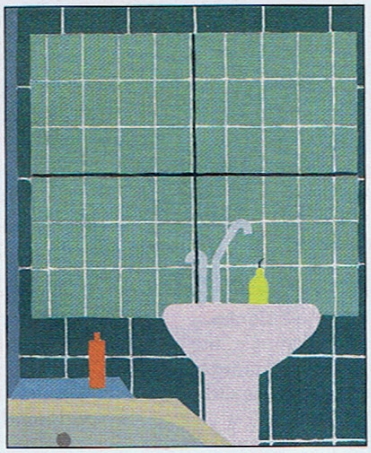
Where to buy...

The Week reviews an exhibition in a private gallery

Zsofia Schweger

at Griffin Gallery

Hungarian artist Zsofia Schweger's deceptively quiet paintings of interiors bring to mind any number of 20th century art references; one moment, she appears to be in hock to the eerie symbolism of Craigie Aitchison, the next the clean lines and defined shapes of Patrick Caulfield. But the 27-year-old Schweger is very much her own artist, and the harder one looks at these unpeopled interiors, the more this becomes clear. On learning that all of these paintings are based on the rooms of the house where she grew up, it's hard not to impose a Freudian reading onto them. The brushstrokes are frenetic, scrappy, entirely at odds with the gentle palette and apparently mundane subject matter: one can't help but wonder what the artist is implying. Is this an intimation that traumatic events took place here? The sinister undertone of these paintings is perversely compelling. Prices range from £375 to £4,450.



Sandorfalva, Hungary #30 (2016): £1,350

21 Evesham Street, London W11 (020-8424 3203). Until 30 September

Monet's destructive urge

"They are among the world's most famous paintings and sell for tens of millions of pounds each," says Richard Brooks in The Sunday Times. But a new biography of Claude Monet reveals that the artist destroyed about 200 of his water-lily paintings, "after being savaged by critics and racked with self-doubt". Monet was a perfectionist, and slashed hundreds of paintings as he sought perfection. And evidence unearthed by biographer Ross King shows that these destructive outbursts worsened during the last 20 years of his life, when, with his eyesight failing, he painted huge canvases of the lily ponds of his garden in Giverny in Normandy. They were derided by critics and the public, who preferred his earlier work. Georges Clemenceau, the former French prime minister and a close friend, said a few months after his death in 1926: "Monet would attack his canvases when angry. And his anger was born of dissatisfaction with his work. He was his own greatest critic."