

# Medieval Bologna

ART FOR A UNIVERSITY CITY



This exhibition focuses on medieval art made in the northern Italian city of Bologna (fig. 1), home to the oldest university in Europe. The school traces its origins to the late eleventh century, when scholars started gathering in this city to study ancient Roman law. Turning their knowledge into a commodity, they soon began offering classes to students for a fee. Although other subjects, such as medicine and theology, would also later be taught there to great acclaim, law was what initially brought Bologna international renown as a center of higher learning. By the late thirteenth century, a time when Bologna was the fifth-largest city in Europe, about two thousand students flocked there each year. In addition to Roman law, they studied *canon law*, the rules governing the Catholic Church.



fig. 1

The academic environment in Bologna gave rise to its unique artistic culture. Professors enjoyed high social status and were buried in impressive stone tombs carved with classroom scenes. Most importantly, teachers and students created a tremendous demand for books (all of which had to be

entirely handmade before the invention of the printing press). In the thirteenth century, Bologna became the leading center for manuscript production in Italy. Most books came out of a revolutionary new commercial system involving merchants, parchment makers, scribes, illuminators, and clients. Legal textbooks were made in great numbers and are remarkable for their size and heft. In addition to colorful narrative scenes and gleaming gold, their pages often bear the notes and corrections of their original owners—evidence of the labor of learning.

This exhibition offers an in-depth look at the business of making books in Bologna, including the efficient system of production and the colors of the pigments used by illuminators. The meaning and purpose of the *miniatures*, or small scenes, in legal textbooks are also investigated. Their themes include crime and punishment, marriage,

wills, and classroom instruction (fig. 2). The miniatures break up ponderous Latin texts and may have helped students to memorize the law. Today, they give insight into medieval society and how it was regulated. The best Bolognese illuminators amaze us with their ability to create complex decorative programs to surround the text. They are engaging storytellers, clearly seeking to delight and sometimes even to amuse readers.



fig. 2

Beyond the university, the arts also flourished in medieval Bologna. In the thirteenth century, the new mendicant religious orders, including the Dominicans and Franciscans, arrived and dotted the cityscape with large churches, which were filled with frescoes, panel paintings, and sculptures. They also had a great need for books, such as bibles and choirbooks (cover). Other major art patrons were the city's guilds, which commissioned illuminated copies of their statutes and membership rolls, and popes and cardinals, who typically sought the very finest objects by the most talented artists.

Drawn from libraries, museums, and private collections, the works of art in this exhibition span in date from 1200 to 1400 and are presented in historical context. In the thirteenth century, Bologna enjoyed independence, and the university was in expansion. This period also witnessed the beginnings of the Piazza Maggiore, a vast square in the city center lined with government buildings (fig. 1). The fourteenth century was more turbulent. Bologna was often under autocratic rule, and the plague of 1348 reduced the population by nearly half. In the last quarter of the fourteenth century, however, the city rebounded, and in 1390 it initiated construction on the Basilica of San Petronio, an ambitious church dedicated to the city's patron saint. Although never finished, it is one of the largest churches in the world and, from its prominent position on the south side of the Piazza Maggiore, expresses Bologna's enormous civic pride.

This exhibition is the first of its kind in the United States and aims to introduce the art and history of Bologna to new audiences. By focusing on Europe's first university city, it seeks to expand our understanding of art and its purposes in the medieval world.

Trinita Kennedy  
Senior curator

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**Cover:** Nerio (active late 13th–early 14th centuries). Cutting from a choirbook (antiphony): Easter Scenes: The Three Maries at the Tomb with the Angel of the Resurrection, and The Resurrected Christ Appearing to the Three Maries (in initial A), ca. 1315. Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment, 9 3/8 x 9 3/8 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1912, 12.56.1  
**Fig. 1:** Aerial view of Bologna with Piazza Maggiore. iStockPhoto. Photo: Yasonya **Fig. 2:** Master of 1328 (active 1320s–40s). Leaf from Gregory IX, *Decretales (Liber extra)* with *glossa ordinaria* of Giovanni d'Andrea: Classroom scene (in initial G), ca. 1330. Tempera, gold, and ink on parchment, 17 3/8 x 11 1/4 in. The Morgan Library and Museum, New York, Purchased in 1927, MS M.716.iv (detail)

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