



MANUSCRIPT MASTER

M. Moleiro's products go back in time – centuries, to be exact. The Barcelona-based company reproduces manuscripts and maps from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Its founder Manuel Moleiro has a mission to bring these works back to life and into the public eye.

Text: Muamer Bećirović
Photos: Rubén Mondelo, M. Moleiro Editor

Can you explain to us what kind of product you sell and what makes you so special?

At M. Moleiro Editor, we specialise in producing perfect replicas, exclusive limited editions, of the world's most beautiful illuminated manuscripts, maps and atlases. If somebody compares an illustration taken from the original manuscript with our replica, there is really no way to distinguish one from the other. In that way, we ensure that our clients possess codices that are virtually identical to those that once belonged to their great owners and book collectors such as Charles V, Henry VIII or Margaret of Austria. This can be accomplished due to our unique methods. For each manuscript, we use paper or parchment with the same characteristics as the original one. They are also bound in the exact same way as the original codex. We make every effort to reproduce not only the colour, thickness, texture and exact size of the parchment, but also the wear and tear and even the smell of the manuscript acquired over the centuries. The outcome is not a facsimile, it is in fact, a new original.

How did the idea come about to specialize in this product? What is the entrepreneurial story behind it?

My vocation of reproducing illuminated manuscripts and codices as perfectly as possible developed over a long period of time. There was a world of works of art with paintings of small and even minute format hidden from the public eye for centuries in the silent depths of library archives.

But why? Paintings and sculptures are made to be exhibited. Their very structure is ideal for this purpose, a single glance being enough to see them in full. But books are different. To see an illuminated codex in full, one must turn its pages, one by one.

This was the crux of the matter: the dissemination of these works of art and codices. And ultimately, to release them from their inaccessible archives or display cabinets and let every page be touched and scrutinised. A fascinating task indeed.

How do you manage to copy a book that is centuries old? There are differences to the paper, the smell and the color.

In order to reconstruct the original codex, an image of each page in the manuscript is needed. Every folio of the manuscript is photographed recto and verso with a multi-shot high-resolution digital camera. These are then adjusted to further match the colours of the original when they are printed on paper or parchment specially designed for each codex.

Our vegetable parchment is obtained using an exclusive process developed by us. It is coated with a number of layers (in the same way the medieval illuminators prepared the pages before painting on them), which is the only way to guarantee the sharpness and accuracy of the colours and the brilliance of the details in gold. To render all the nuances of the original work, we combine various printing techniques (offset, serigraphy, engraving) with manual finishing. A true replica - we can even say a clone of the original manuscript - is produced using traditional methods. Binding is done entirely by

hand with the same techniques and tools used by medieval binders.

The binding must match the codex's original binding exactly as regards the type of leather (calfskin, goatskin and lambskin being the most common) or cloth, cover ornamentation, colour of the headbands, flyleaves, clasps. The decoration of the cover is produced by artisans using various tooling techniques and gilding is also applied manually.

What is the particular difficulty of reproducing the product?

Checking the proofs against the original manuscript is definitely one of the most laborious and demanding steps, but is also the key to producing good identical reproductions. Although digital imaging and colour software are very sophisticated today, they are never able to render the exact hues or contrasts found exactly on a manuscript's pages. It is essential to compare the printed product with the codex and correct any differences between them. The printed proofs should be checked against the original in the holding library as many times as necessary. We repeat this operation until the printed page is indistinguishable from the original.

Another particular difficulty is to choose the right pigments to match the natural pigments used to decorate the medieval and Renaissance manuscripts. This leaves all sorts of irregularities as they are affected by the type of paper or parchment they are used on. It is extremely challenging to find a way to mirror this effect, but our inks have been developed to reproduce the characteristics of these natural pigments.

What was the most special product you produced and for whom?

Making a perfect replica of the lushly illuminated *Bible of Saint Louis*, originally made for King Louis IX of France, was definitely a very special endeavour. The sheer scale of the project was almost unheard of. The task was to reproduce 1250 pages, all illuminated with an abundance of gold. The team working on the reproduction of the *Bible of Saint Louis*



M. Moleiro's replicas can be found all over the world in libraries and museums. Pictured above: *The Hours of Charles of Angoulême*.

consisted of over 60 people and experts from six different countries contributed to the two commentary volumes that accompany the perfect replica of the codex. It could hardly be otherwise in the case of a work deemed to be the most lavish book ever created by human ingenuity, with no less than 4,887 paintings of biblical scenes hidden amongst its pages: a veritable art gallery in a book form.

The codex is nowadays segmented: the three volumes that constitute the Bible are held in the Toledo Cathedral in Spain, but the final quire – the last part of its third volume – was removed at some point in history and is now in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York. Our edition restores the codex to its original state. Even Pope John Paul II was gifted an exemplar of this extraordinary Bible.

What is your typical customer? Is this only for history enthusiasts?

The vast majority of our customers are private individuals. They are gen-

uine booklovers and seek to ennoble their private libraries. They may also have a particular interest in specific contents and topics of ancient manuscripts. For example: medical botany and therapeutic practices. They are usually of medium-high purchasing power.

Numerous libraries, museums from all over the world and prestigious universities such as Harvard or Princeton are also our customers. In this way, our editions allow researchers in countries far away from the library that houses the original manuscript to study these works. Our editions are also chosen as official gifts on numerous occasions. The Vatican, the White House and the Elysée Palace all have M. Moleiro codices in their libraries. They are even sometimes featured in movies and TV series, such as *Kingdom of Heaven*.

In which countries do you sell your products?

Since the love of beauty knows no



All the binding is done by hand; the decorations on the cover are also produced by artisans. Pictured above: *The Isabella Breviary*.

borders, our replicas reach all those interested in art, culture and history. We have customers in more than 75 countries on all continents. This includes France, Germany, Switzerland as well as the USA, Mexico, Brazil, Australia and Japan.

How much competition do you face in this industry and how do you set yourself apart?

There are very few publishers in the world who specialise in manuscript reproduction. While most publishers offer a simple paper support on which photographs of pages are printed, we basically make a new manuscript. Unfortunately the facsimile industry has declined to such a degree with so many low-quality works being produced, that I personally decided to distance myself from the concept of facsimile by coining the term “identical reproduction” or “new original” for our editions – because that’s what they are.

How many copies do you sell per year and how many employees do you have?

Each edition is unique and limited to 987 copies numbered and authenticated by the notary public. The fact that the print run is less than 1,000 is born of the desire to offer customers a select, painstaking product that can increase in value. And number 7 is very significant: it’s a biblical number, it’s perfection.

The average price of our edition is €4500 and the codices are sold until the limited edition runs out. The editions are unrepeatabe, so when all the 987 copies are sold, that is it.

We hire around 50 people, but there are many more involved in the production of perfect reproductions and commentary volumes and their number goes up with each edition we publish. We collaborate with photographers and digital image professionals, university professors, archivists and experts in manuscripts.

Do you care about digitalization for your business?

Although digitalization is seen as a terrible threat to the publishing world, we actually consider it very positive for our business. For many people, it is the first and easiest way to enter the world of manuscripts and to get to know this fascinating patrimony. However, the feeling of holding the book in your hands simply cannot be compared to looking at it on the screen. Those who want to discover those books in the most unique and personal way, will seek the “real thing”, and our new originals are as close as you can get to recreating the experience of sitting next to a fireplace admiring exquisite paintings in a 500-year codex. Our codices have souls because the final touches are always decided by the human eye, not by computers.

What are your plans for the future?

We will continue to expand this dream library that is our collection with the most beautiful and fascinating illuminated manuscripts not yet reproduced. We have just edited and published the breathtaking Mattioli’s Dioscorides illustrated by Cibo and our next project is the one of the most original and fascinating works of Breton manuscript illumination, the *Hours of Jean de Montauban*.

Manuel Moleiro is a native of Cea, a small town in Galicia, Spain. He studied journalism at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. In 1977 he founded the publishing house Ebrisa, specialising in the publication of high quality art books. Fourteen years later, in 1991, he founded M. Moleiro Editor, where he uses an unique process to develop exact replicas of the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts.