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With Pen or Brush: Women's Traces in Fifteenth Century Italy

Are there any expressions of women's creativity in Late Medieval Italy? The answer is yes. They are manuscripts copied by women, but they are exclusively devotional or liturgical texts with standardized content, as they were mainly transcribed by nuns and, very rarely, by laywomen. Very few examples remain, but they are tangible and direct. They were produced while Italian society was heading towards the Renaissance, but they were often separate from mainstream culture and regarded only the religious communities where they were written. Today these manuscripts are as isolated as they were in the past, circumscribed by their immediate surroundings and generally religious rather than literary. However, colophons, short personal messages left by copyists at the end of their work, allow us to shed new light on these manuscripts and to reveal a past of forgotten identities. Reading them sometimes enables us to reconstruct lives and to glimpse women's social condition at a particular time in history. A few rare colophons written by laywomen from Tuscany's and Lazio's merchant classes in the fifteenth century afford an interesting insight into the times; however equally interesting conclusions could also be drawn from analysis of manuscripts copied by nuns. Furthermore, as women copyists sometimes decorated their manuscripts with simple, yet spontaneous pen or brush strokes, considering them to be precious artistic heritage could also extend their documental importance. An approach to these humble traces of creativity without necessarily researching any of their stylistic, qualitative or aesthetic features may enable us to discover works that should be included in the continuous course of history as works of art.