

Initial R: The Resurrection, Antonio da Monza

Initial R: The Resurrection

Antonio da Monza

Italian, Rome, late 1400s or early 1500s

Tempera colors and gold leaf on parchment

25 1/4 x 17 1/8 in.

Ms. Ludwig VI 3, fol. 16

Background Information

This page comes from a choir book made in the **Middle Ages**. The book is over two feet tall, which is almost the length of a skateboard. This large size allowed a group of singers to read the notes and words together. The biggest choirs would have had as many as thirty to forty singers, although most choirs would have had fewer.

This choir book—called a **gradual**—contains all the chants sung by a choir in the Christian mass. In the most lavishly decorated choir books, **illuminators** enlarged the first letter of each hymn and filled the initial with an elaborate image inspired by the song's text. A grand initial *R* ornaments the most elaborate page in this gradual, the opening of the mass for Easter Sunday, the most important holiday of the Christian calendar. Within the initial *R*, Jesus gives the priestly sign of blessing while holding a cross staff with a banner, a traditional sign of his Resurrection. Below him, several Roman guards awaken from sleep. A long vista extends into the distance to include a monastery.

In the border, decorative and figural **motifs** derived from classical **antiquity**, known as **grotesques**, delight the eye. Winged **putti** scamper across the backs of tritons (half-man, half-fish sea gods), and Roman lettering mingles with military trophies and carved cameos.

This choir book was created entirely by hand. The pages of the book are made of parchment, a high-quality writing support crafted from the specially prepared skins of sheep or goats. When this book was made, the printing press had already been invented by Johannes Gutenberg (in 1440), and paper could be found in Europe as early as the fourteenth century; however parchment continued to be used in the Middle Ages in spite of the greater cost involved. It was valued for its beautiful texture and translucency and ability to withstand the wear and tear of everyday use. Choir books, in particular, continued to be handmade for several centuries because of their huge size and the fact that every page of music was different.



Initial R: The Resurrection, Antonio da Monza

For a book this large, a whole cow would be needed to make one sheet of parchment. Each sheet of parchment would be folded to create four pages of a book. Because this book required 99 sheets of parchment, a whole herd of cows would have been needed for it. Therefore, only wealthy churches or individuals could afford to have these books made. Some of the most famous artists working in Italy during this period were hired to decorate choir books. Because this work is decorated with a lot of gold leaf, the patron who commissioned the artist would have been very wealthy.

About the Artist

Antonio da Monza (Italian, active 1480–1505)

The illuminator Antonio da Monza brought a **Renaissance** fascination with antiquity to the art of manuscript **illumination** at the end of the 1400s and beginning of the 1500s. Identified through his signature on a picture from a book made for Pope Alexander VI, now in Vienna, he was a native of Monza, outside of Milan, and a member of the Franciscan order.

Antonio's artistic style was influenced by the art of Leonardo da Vinci. Scholars have attributed to Antonio several books made for religious worship, as well as some miniatures in the Sforza Hours and in Antonio Minuti's *Life of Muzio Attendolo*. The late-fifteenth-century discovery of the Golden House of Nero, an ancient Roman villa, and its Fourth Style wall paintings influenced Antonio's work, supplying him with a rich visual vocabulary of ancient motifs.

Initial R: The Resurrection, Antonio da Monza

Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at the work of art. What details do you notice?

What colors do you see? (*blue, gold, red, brown, etc.*)

What kinds of lines do you see? (*curvy, straight, diagonal, horizontal, etc.*)

What kinds of shapes do you see? (*circles, rectangles, squares, diamonds, ovals, geometric, organic, etc.*)

What lines and shapes are repeated? (*circles, squares, organic shapes, curvy lines, horizontal lines, etc.*)

What details do you notice in the page's borders? What other details do you see? (*curvy blue leaves, circles containing people, serpents with colorful tails, angels with wings shaped like triangles, etc.*)

What words would you use to describe this work of art? (*fancy, pretty, detailed, etc.*)

This page comes from a book that contains chants sung by a choir in medieval times. What similarities or differences do you notice between the medieval way of writing music and the modern-day way? (*Both have a staff, but the modern-day staff has five lines; the medieval staff has four. Medieval notes are square; modern-day notes have ovals and stems.*)

Only monks and **canons** would have had access to this book, and only wealthy people were able to read and write during medieval times. How would you feel if you were not allowed access to the manuscript page or could not learn how to read or write unless you were wealthy?