

Ransom Center Guidelines Safe Handling of Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts

The Ransom Center Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Collection includes single leaves and bound manuscripts that range in age from 300 to more than 1000 years old. Please be aware that handling old manuscripts requires some forethought in order to avoid damaging them. The individual and sometimes quirky attributes of old book bindings and text blocks demand that a reader use care to safely support the cover and text block to keep the book open while studying.

Conservators at the Ransom Center seek to stabilize deterioration and damage with minimal treatments in order to preserve the physical qualities of manuscripts and bindings for scholarly research. Minimal repair techniques can only be considered if staff and patrons handle collection materials carefully. Please help us to ensure access to this unique collection of early manuscripts for students and scholars by handling each item with care. In some cases we may require you to use a digital facsimile because of the extreme fragility of the original.

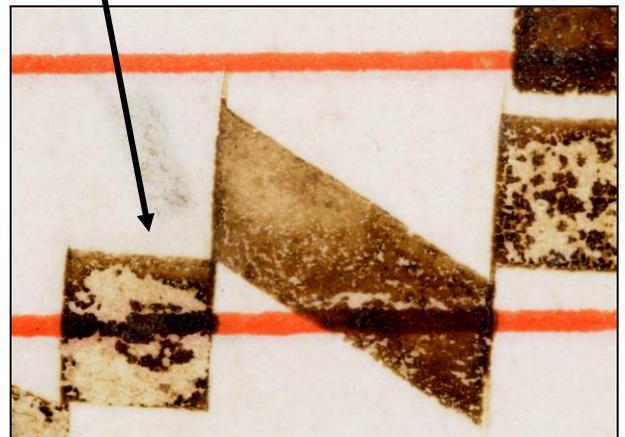
As you turn the pages of a bound manuscript, flex the pages as little as possible. Over time, organic materials such as paper, parchment and leather become brittle and can tear easily. Often the ink and decorative colors used for writing, illuminating and decorating a manuscript are no longer firmly attached to the page. This is especially so if the pages are made of parchment, which can have a smooth surface; or, if the pigment binder, such as gum arabic, which adheres the writing inks and decorations to a page, is desiccated or dried. Limiting the flexing while turning pages will reduce wear and tear on the media and support.



DETAIL OF
MEDIA LOSS

Note flaking pigments in the detail to the lower left and desiccated powdery inks in the detail to the lower right.

HRC Leaf A 30



General Handling Guidelines for Manuscript Materials

- Wash hands with soap and dry them completely. Wash hands frequently when using materials for a long period of time. Oils and salts in perspiration will damage paper and parchment. Hand lotions, creams and wipes should never be used prior to handling collection materials. We do not require gloves to handle books or single leaves of paper or parchment.
- Prepare a large, clear space on your table to study collection items.
- Do not lean on collection materials or place anything on top of them. Do not touch or drag anything, such as clothing, jewelry, your hair or any other object across the surface. This is especially important when handling early manuscripts, where the media might be very loosely attached to the page.
- Always use pencils to make notes. Pens are not allowed in the Ransom Center Reading and Viewing Room.
- Do not write on paper that is resting atop collection materials. The impression can pass through and damage the material.
- Keep all call slips and call number flags with the appropriate items. Use blue flags available at the desk to mark pages for photoduplication.

Handling Guidelines for Medieval and Early Modern Bound Manuscripts

Detail of
powdery
blue
and flaking
red
pigment

HRC Leaf 5i

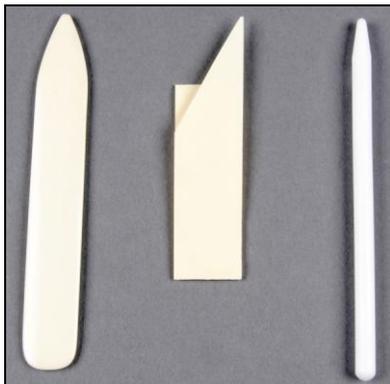


- Turn the pages of a bound manuscript slowly and **flex the leaves as little as possible**. Decorated parchment leaves, in particular, should be flexed as little as possible. The media used for many old manuscripts, which includes pigments in decorations and inks used for writing, is often no longer firmly attached to the parchment leaves.
- If a binding is difficult to open, handle it carefully and do not force it to open. Be creative in positioning the book with multiple book supports.



HRC 6

- Unless directed otherwise, do not use plastic book rests because they cannot be adjusted to properly support a book. Book supports reduce wear to illuminations, decorative features and fragile writing media in early manuscripts by limiting the opening of the book and therefore the amount of flexing to which the page and the media are subjected.
- When studying a page in a bound manuscript, hold the book open with book snakes rather than with your fingers. Make sure the snake is also supported so that its hanging weight does not force the book open more than is appropriate for the book.
- During viewing, drape book snakes across the top or lower corners of the pages without touching any media. If media extends to the leaf edges, be very careful that the book snake is not dragged across the inks or pigments.
- If moving from the front to the back of a fragile binding, rather than thumbing through each page, close the front board and then flip the book to the back.
- Manuscript inks and pigments are exceptionally susceptible to abrasion and loss. Never touch the media. In the classroom use only soft and blunt pointers to highlight a passage.



If you are studying a manuscript that is a single leaf and wish to view the other side, return the item to its folder so that it is supported as you turn it.



HRC 13

Additional handling instructions for individual manuscripts may be noted on the call slip flag. Please follow these directions carefully.