

# THE FINE ART OF PUBLICATION

RARE FACSIMILE EDITIONS OF ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS IN THE BAILLIEU LIBRARY

BY Margaret Manion

WITH THE GENEROUS assistance, over many years, of its “Friends”, the University of Melbourne Library has built up an extensive collection of rare facsimile editions of illuminated manuscripts. Comprising well over a 100 splendid books, and continuing to grow, this collection constitutes a valuable scholarly and cultural resource. It documents the history of the hand-written book, from the fourth to the 16th centuries, and demonstrates the significant role that decoration and illustration often played in the communication of the text during this period. It also enables the relationship between text and illustration to be studied in a wide variety of genre. These include: classical literature, scientific treatises in natural history, medicine and astrology, biblical texts and prayer books, both liturgical and devotional, secular chronicles and tales of epic and romance.

Before the advent of the typewriter and the more recent word processor, books were first written out by hand, and when scholars or devotees were able to consult the original script, the experience brought with it a sense of immediacy and personal contact with the author. In a somewhat analogous way, before the era of printing, the script itself and its visual presentation — even when this was the work of a professional scribe — often provided special insights into the meaning of the text.

Over the course of this century, however, the quality of facsimile publication has made enormous progress: the minutest details of the original can now be accurately reproduced, colours precisely rendered and even the texture of parchment convincingly simulated. Thus, paradoxically, while the invention of printing was the historical cause for the distancing of the reader from the personal immediacy of the handwritten script, through this same medium it is now possible to provide people, located at very great distances from the manuscript itself, with an experience which for many purposes is as good as seeing “the real thing”. Even when first hand consultation of the original is necessary, or the opportunity avails itself, the facsimile is wonderfully helpful for detailed “follow-up study”.

The Baillieu Library houses many facsimiles of manuscripts, both illuminated and non-illuminated. I focus here on those that are ornamented in some way. These strikingly demonstrate the quality of publication in this area, as well as revealing the close connection that often existed between text, image and decoration in the medieval book.

Two publishing houses that have specialised over many years in high quality facsimile publication are Faksimile Verlag in Lucerne, Switzerland and Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt in Austria. Many of the facsimiles in the Baillieu Library are

their products. One of the most ancient illuminated manuscripts, published in facsimile by Akademische Druck, is a copy of the works of the Roman poet Vergil. This was published in 1980 and is part of the series *Codici Selecti*. The original manuscript which is now in the Vatican Library (Vat. Lat. 3225) was written in the early years of the fifth century and is the best extant example of an ancient classical illustrated book. It is now in a fragmentary state, but once contained all the works of Vergil and comprised some 440 folios. Only 75 folios of the *Aeneid* and the *Georgics* remain today. The text is written in plain rustic capitals with no ornamentation; but it is accompanied by an extensive series of framed paintings or miniatures, which relate the adventures of Aeneas in the illusionistic style of late Roman art. Vergil’s bucolic poems, the *Georgics*, are illustrated with scenes of pastoral and agricultural life and relevant mythological material.

The Vatican Vergil is an early example of the illuminated codex, the format which began to replace the more ancient papyrus roll in the late first century A.D., and which has remained virtually unchanged over the centuries. The practice of presenting the text on horizontal lines in a space framed with margins on all sides, and of ordering the parchment or vellum into sets of folded leaves, called gatherings, characteristic of the manuscript codex was translated

into the printed paper book. The Vatican Vergil tells us, too, that the ancients were happy to have the text of one of their most revered authors lavishly illustrated. The style of these paintings and their clearly delineated frames relate them to contemporary large scale decorative programs in fresco and mosaic. Once introduced, the framed painting or miniature remained a consistent element in book illumination.

The spread of Christianity influenced the growth in popularity of the codex in the early centuries of this era, as the new religion adopted this more manageable format for the dissemination of its sacred writings, especially the four Gospels. While it is generally agreed that the Gospels were written between 60 and 100 A.D. the oldest known illuminated copies date to the early sixth century, and are associated with the liturgy or public worship of the Church where the Gospel Book came to signify the presence of Christ himself. The University Library has a facsimile copy of the *Rabbula Gospels*, one of the earliest of these manuscripts, which is now in the famous Laurentian Library in Florence (ms. Plut. I, 56). The *Rabbula Gospels*, was written in Syriac in 586 by the scribal monk Rabbula of Zagba in ancient Mesopotamia. It demonstrates that at a very early stage the decoration of the Gospel Book was designed to

emphasise the authenticity of the text and to bring home its basic message, namely the mystery of Christ at once human and divine, and his redemptive mission on behalf of the human race.

Decoration in the *Rabbula Gospels* focuses, for example, on the series of Canon Tables or Concordances that precede the Gospel texts. These Tables, which were devised by Eusebius of Caesarea in the second century, are not simply an aid to finding parallel passages in the various Gospel accounts. Much more importantly, they emphasise that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are the four official or canonical texts formally sanctioned by the Church and that each Gospel communicates the same authentic tradition. The Tables are presented within a decorative structure of columns surmounted by an ornamented arch or lunette, while the tiny Gospel scenes, that appear on the outer margins, reinforce the fact that the four texts communicate a common message. Author portraits of the four evangelists also occur in early Gospel Books, testifying to the authentic nature of a tradition that goes back to the apostles. Like the Canon Tables, they become a regular feature of Gospel Book illustration. In addition, the *Rabbula Gospels* has several full page miniatures, which emphasise the climax of Christ's redemptive mission in scenes

of the Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, and its continuation in the life of the Church after Pentecost. The regal depiction of Mary holding the Christ Child, which acts as a frontispiece, may also be interpreted as an image of the Church.

Probably the most famous of all illuminated Gospel books is the *Book of Kells*, now in Trinity College, Dublin. It was written in the early ninth century, either on the island of Iona off the coast of Scotland or at Kells in Ireland, where there was a branch of the same monastic community, and where the book was located for some time. The University Library has a copy of the facsimile made of this manuscript in 1990 by Faksimile-Verlag, Lucerne. Shelves with the facsimile is a video cassette that documents its production and the new techniques used to capture as accurately as possible the details of this extraordinary manuscript.

*The Book of Kells* belongs to a group of Gospel Books that were produced in the Anglo-Saxon world between the seventh and ninth centuries. One of their most striking features is the way in which a decorative vocabulary, originally devised for the stone and metalwork of a pagan culture, has been adapted to the parchment pages of the sacred Christian text. The intricate patterns that embellish the pages of the Gospels charge certain letters and words with a mystical significance beyond their literal meaning. The National Gallery of Australia is looking forward to hosting one of the volumes of the *Book of Kells* early in the year 2000. This will be a unique opportunity for Australians to view this wonderful treasure in their own land. It will also make a visit to the Baillieu more rewarding than ever, either to prepare oneself for the exhibition or to follow up the experience with a more detailed and leisurely study of the facsimile. The commentary presented in an accompanying volume is written by leading scholars in the field.

Illustration for Psalm 43 (44), showing God in bed; in the *Utrecht Psalter*, facsimile published by Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1982 (University of Melbourne Library Collection.)



continued on page 32

from page 31

*The Book of Kells* also reflects certain influences from Carolingian art. The revival of classical culture initiated at the court of Charlemagne, was, in many ways, "book centred", and the University Library has some superb facsimiles of books produced at this time. These include a copy of the *Utrecht Psalter* now in the University Library, Utrecht, which was produced in Reims c.800. Its 150 Psalms and group of canticles and poetic texts, often incorporated in psalters for Christian use, are illustrated by 166 drawings in pen and bistre-coloured ink. These drawings are full of verve and expressive movement and it has been argued that they may be copies after a late antique original. Their subject matter is also arresting, with very literal expressions of particular phrases of the text being woven into the integrated compositions that introduce each psalm. One of my favourites is the introductory drawing to Psalm 43 (44). The psalmist is lamenting the change in the fortunes of God's people who are now at the mercy of their enemies. This is graphically represented in terms of a military attack which takes place around the walls of a city. Above the combat, in the centre of the composition, appears the Lord to whom the psalmist addresses his plea. Instead, however, of appearing as the divine ruler, enthroned in majesty, he is shown lying in bed! This is a literal reference to verse 23 of the Psalm: "Wake Lord why sleepest thou? Do not abandon us!"

The prayer book that enjoyed tremendous popularity, especially with the laity, from the late 13th century on was the Book of Hours. It is so called because its key devotions, such as the little Office or Hours of the Virgin, the Hours of the Passion and the Vigils of the Dead, were modelled on the Divine Office, which was performed by clerics and those in religious orders at the canonical hours of the day. These books were often splendidly illustrated with compositions that reflect the interests of their owners as well as the devotional



"The False Prophet orders the killing of those who refuse etc".... in Folio 20R of the *Lambeth Apocalypse* facsimile, London 1990. (University of Melbourne Library Collection.)

life of the time. The University Library's extensive collection of facsimiles of Books of Hours effectively demonstrates the range and variety of this genre, and one particular group provides an insight into the personal taste of a great medieval bibliophile. Several of the Books of Hours of Jean, Duke of Berry, have been identified from the descriptions given in his inventories; and the University Library is the proud owner of facsimile copies of *Les Petites Heures* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms. lat. 18014) *Les Très Belles Heures* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms.nouv. acq. lat. 3093, together with sections in the Louvre and the Museo Civico, Turin) and *Les Très Riches Heures*

(Chantilly, Musée Condé, ms. 65). Together these books document a major period in French manuscript painting and provide a fascinating profile of the interests of a great book lover.

The books discussed here are but an indication of those available in the facsimile collection, whose development the Friends of the Baillieu Library have so consistently and generously supported. This collection, moreover, bears remarkable testimony to an acquisition policy that has succeeded in combining both quality and utility. Not only do these books constitute a valuable scholarly resource, they also make available to a wide readership rare treasures of the past. ■

Professor emerita Margaret Manion, A.O. is an art historian with specialist interests in Medieval and Renaissance Art. Her publications on manuscript illumination include: *Medieval and Renaissance Illuminated Manuscripts in Australian Collections* (with V. F. Vines), 1981; *Medieval Texts and Images* (ed. with B. Muir), 1991; and *The Art of the Book* (ed. with B. Muir), 1998.