

The Saint John's Bible

Merritt C Nequette

Genesis

A book is a book is a book. Or is it? In the 21st century, millions of books are printed throughout the world each year. A best-seller may sell over a million copies. Books are available in libraries, from independent booksellers, mega bookstores, and warehouse bookstores on the Internet. Books are read, recycled in one way or another, stacked in bookcases and boxes, collected, or used as paperweights. But few, if any, of these books will ever be found in a museum. There is the “coffee table” edition of a book that will be displayed in the home as an *objet d'art*. Curiously, this book may simply be that. Guests will riffle through it briefly, but even the homeowner may never actually “read” through the whole thing. And even then, it may never find its way into a museum collection, unless there is an exhibit of “book arts,” and it is considered a landmark in its class.

So what makes a book worthy of a museum exhibit? What makes any artwork worthy of museum status? First of all, it is probably rare. There is only one *Mona Lisa*, and hundreds of thousands of visitors troop to the Louvre every year to see it. There are millions of reproductions of this work, but only one original. Second, there is something about the artwork that sets it apart from others in its class. We talk of line and form and texture and structure and proportion and on and on. (We use exactly the same terms in describing great works of music.) Somehow those elements have to co-exist in a particular way to create a great artwork. Many of us look at an artwork or hear a musical composition, and decide that we find it pleasing, or even inspiring. This means it has conformed to some innate standard that we have developed.

The third component for achieving museum status (or a repetition on a concert program) is that an expert in the field—art historian, museum curator, musicologist—has determined that all things, or at least a great many things, are in alignment in this work, so there is a reason why we should like it. We hear of brushstrokes, use of perspective, amount of paint on canvas, texture of marble, use

of *pizzicati* and interlocking themes, and all other types of deconstruction of what the artist/composer may have had in mind. After all this, we may *still* like the artwork.

Enter *The Saint John's Bible*. Why have an exhibit of a book sacred to Christianity that tops the best-seller list year after year in the United States and already exists in almost every language and possible translation? The simple answer is that there is no reason to have a handwritten book of any kind in this day and age. Unless it will be an artistic achievement. *The Saint John's Bible* seems to fit the criteria outlined above for inclusion in a museum. It is one of a kind, and likely will remain so. Donald Jackson, the artistic director of the project, has spent years poring over the construction of the book—the font used by the scribes, the types of illuminations used, the placement of text and illumination on the page and the proportion of those elements in relation to the entire volume.

For its part, the monastic community at St. John's Abbey and University in Collegeville Minnesota, has a long tradition of collecting and maintaining rare books and other works of art. Although a Roman Catholic community, the translation chosen for the Bible is not a “Catholic” version, but one which traces its ancestry back to the *King James Bible* and is used by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians.

Calligraphy is on view throughout the MIA: Arabic script in the Islamic gallery (temporarily closed); Sanskrit in the Himalayan *sutras*; a *ketubah* in the Judaica gallery; and poetry on Chinese and Japanese scrolls and screens. When there are European examples, they are likely to be in Latin, Greek, early German, or Middle English. All of these, then, are viewed for their visual artistic quality, since most visitors cannot read them for their literary content.

In a time when the computer allows one to move text and graphics around a page willy-nilly, the slow laborious process of writing anything by hand (not even considering an artistic hand) has caught the imagination of many people. *The Saint John's Bible* is an anachronism of our time. There has not been a handwritten Bible for almost 550 years—since the invention of printing with moveable type. Although Judaism continues the practice of the handwritten *Torah*, and Islam does so with the Qu'ran, Western Christianity has virtually discontinued the practice.

This *Saint John's Bible* is looking back to an old artform, but adapting that artform to our own time. The materials and processes are medieval, but the finished work is contemporary: the illumi-

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nations are modern and somewhat abstract, the language is English, and the layout of the work is formatted on a computer. The project has been featured in the *Smithsonian* magazine and on PBS. *Newsweek* has referred to it as the American *Book of Kells*. Curators and artists have considered it to be museum quality. And so it comes to the MIA to begin its life of being made available for a wider audience to appreciate.

Donald Jackson, the scribe to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's Crown Office, and an internationally recognized calligrapher, told Barbara Walters on "The Today Show," that he was interested in creating a handwritten illuminated Bible. That was in 1970. It was twenty-five years before anyone would take him seriously enough to commission such a project.

Donald has a record of associations with St. John's Abbey and the monks. In 1981, St. John's initiated what became an annual event—an International Calligraphy Conference. Donald attended that inaugural conference and returned three more times as the conference, held somewhere in the United States each year, returned to St. John's.

He was aware that the Bible has been foundational to Benedictine spirituality since the *Rule of St. Benedict* was written with its many Biblical references. And the monks of St. John's have been known for their long-time work in the liturgical movement, ecumenism, cultural preservation, art, and architecture. The "hundred-year plan" of buildings designed by Marcel Breuer, beginning in the 1950s, showed that these monks were thinking ahead for the long term. The monastery, library, and various other buildings which have followed this "plan," and particularly the Abbey Church (the third building completed), have become a signature for the abbey and university.

In 1964, the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library (HMML) was created and embarked on an ambitious project of micro-



filming manuscripts in Benedictine and other libraries throughout the world. HMML now has about 90,000 manuscripts on film; a 25,000 volume reference library; an additional 15,000 rare books, works of art, sound recordings; and a 30,000 volume reference library focused on typography, calligraphy, book arts, church architecture and related subjects. To reflect the addition of these "non-microfilm"

books, the name was changed in January of this year to the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. As the current executive director of the library observed, "Bringing together all of these collections in HMML is a profoundly Benedictine undertaking. For 1500 years we have been committed to glorifying God by creating, caring for, and preserving books, art and architecture of enduring quality and beauty."

In June 1996, the monastic community began to discuss the Bible project, and determined that such a book should be contemporary, ecumenical, multicultural and prophetic. In August of that year, Donald Jackson created the first mock-up of a large-scale handwritten Bible. After almost two years of consideration on the part of the monastic community and the

Board of Regents of the university, a contract was signed in April 1998 by Donald Jackson and Brother Dietrich Reinhart, OSB (Order of St. Benedict), president of the university. Donald signed his name in brilliant red ink with a quill pen. The collaboration was predicated to last almost a decade, with the final volume scheduled to be delivered in July 2007. The operative word here is "collaboration." The artist was not being sent off to his scriptorium—The Hendre—in Monmouthshire, Wales, and expected to return with about 1100 pages of manuscript in ten years. There were a number of strings attached to the commission.

Wisdom

The Benedictines

The *Rule of St. Benedict* is the foundation of a Benedictine community. Written in the early sixth century, it presents a simple, balanced life of prayer and work. Much of the text of the *Rule* is directly quoted from the Scriptures. A central practice of the community is the recitation of the Psalter with the entire 150 psalms completed each week.

The monks are directed to "listen readily to hold reading" and devote themselves to prayer. This *lectio divina* or "sacred reading" is a quiet rumination on, rather than an analysis of, the text. The reader pauses when a word or phrase strikes him. He sits with that word, letting it sink in. Reading passes into contemplation, which passes into prayer. Dietrich Reinhart, OSB cites his favorite passage as one from the last book of the Bible—Revelation—in fact the second-to-last sentence in the entire Bible: "The one who testifies to these things says, 'Surely, I am coming soon. Amen, Come Lord Jesus!' This passage is read on the last day of the liturgical year. It has to do with the end of time, the fulfillment of all the religious hopes for redemption. Whenever I hear this passage, my heart quickens a bit. I know I need to attend to it. And I know that I can only approach its meaning in the realm of art and music and wonder."

Abbot John Klassen, OSB, abbot of St. John's Abbey said, "We have all had experiences of illuminations in the natural world where we had to stop what we were doing and simply look, and allow the full visual impact to soak into our minds and imagination: the fiery disk of sun slipping behind the hills at dusk; cross country skiing through fresh snow, everything fresh, white, and utterly quiet; the gathering dark clouds of a thunderstorm and the intense stillness that occurs before things start breaking loose. These are natural illuminations that draw us into the beauty of the world we live in and into the mystery of God. So often in our time the biblical text is just strange enough, or just enough context is missing, that the pathway into its religious and human significance is missed. What we are trying to achieve with *The Saint John's Bible* is to provide visual points of entry into the text."

The scriptorium tradition

A tradition of calligraphy and learning based on the Bible grew up in Benedictine monasteries and served to preserve much of what we know about classical culture. The monks who arrived in the middle of Minnesota in 1856 to found St. John's Abbey and University brought with them an educational tradition steeped in 1500 years of monastic history.

The translation

The Bible has been translated into many languages over the centuries to accommodate the languages of the people reading it. At the time of Christ, the most universal language was Greek. If anyone was going to learn to read, that was the language he or she learned. As the Romans ascended in power, the language of choice became Latin, and so it remained throughout the medieval and Renaissance periods. In fact, some British universities did not stop lecturing in Latin until the 1930s!

The Saint John's Bible is written in English. The question was which English translation? The choice was made for the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV). It is the result of an ecumenical effort, the work of Christian scholars from major denominations, using Hebrew texts of the Old Testament that have remained virtually unchanged for 2000 years, and Greek texts that have been accepted by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christians. The NRSV features inclusive language and has a noble history, tracing its lineage to the Church of England's *King James Bible*, originally written and published in 1611. The order of books in *The Saint John's Bible*, however, does reflect the Roman Catholic canon. The "Deuterocanonical" books, which Protestants refer to as the "Apocrypha," are included among the other writings in the Old Testament.

The themes

A visual image may "speak" to an individual who has no knowledge of the language that the artist speaks. An illumination, a stained glass window or a sculpture, can convey a religious or spiritual message to a person who has no literate skills at all. Thus, an important consideration is the ability of great art to move the religious imagination.

One of the themes is that *The Saint John's Bible* is a modern manuscript book. It recaptures the spirit of the great medieval Bibles, yet it grows out of completely contemporary artistic and theological sensibility. It is about the real world today. It resonates with Catholic tradition but not in a dogmatic way. The Bible includes pictures from cave paintings, images from the Hubble telescope, satellite images of earth from space, depictions of DNA strands, visual images of sounds, and many contemporary illustrations of fauna and flora native to Minnesota and Wales.

Chronicles

1996, August. Donald Jackson created the first mock-ups for *The Saint John's Bible*. In December of that year, the Executive Committee of the St. John's University Board of Regents authorized a six-month planning and feasibility process.

1997, April. The Monastic Chapter of St. John's Abbey debated the wisdom of embarking on the project. In May, the Board of Regents authorized the president of St. John's University to proceed with the Bible. In December, St. John's purchased the rights to the NRSV from the National Council of Churches of Christ.

1998, April. The contract was signed between the university and Donald Jackson. In July, Donald "officially" began work on the project.

1999, March. The public announcement of *The Saint John's Bible* was made and an unveiling of the first pages was held at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

2000, July. The scribes arrived at The Hendre in Wales. The Bible was the cover story in the December issue of the *Smithsonian* magazine.

2004, May. A full-size facsimile of *Gospels and Acts* was presented to Pope John Paul II in Rome by a delegation from Colledgeville.

The Bible is too large to be bound as a single book. Therefore, it eventually will be bound in oak boards (from a 150-year-old tree felled by a storm in Wales) in seven volumes. The exhibit at the MIA will include folios from volumes 1, 4, and 6.

Vol. 6: *Gospels and Acts* (the first five books of the New Testament—the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the Acts of the Apostles) was completed in September 2002 (136 pages).

Vol. 1: *The Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Old Testament, sometimes referred to as the "Books of Moses" and known in the Jewish tradition as the *Torah*) was completed in September 2003 (158 pages).

Vol. 4 *Psalms* (150 poems of praise and penance, many of which are attributed to King David and King Solomon) was completed in April 2004 (80 pages). This was presented at a press conference at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Vol. 5 *Prophets* is scheduled for completion in April 2005 (272 pages).

Vol. 3 *Wisdom Literature* is scheduled for completion in November 2005 (102 pages).

Vol. 2 *Historical Books* is scheduled for completion in August 2006 (319 pages).

Vol. 7 *Letters and Revelation* (the remaining books from the New Testament) is scheduled for completion in July 2007 (93 pages).

Numbers

The artists

Donald Jackson, Monmouthshire, Wales, is the artistic director of *The Saint John's Bible*, as well as one of the scribes and the primary illuminator.

The other scribes are: Sue Hufton, London; Sally Mae Joseph, Monmouthshire (also an illuminator and senior art consultant for the project); Susan Leiper, Edinburgh; Brian Simpson, Leicestershire, England; Angela Swan, Abergavenny, Wales; and Izzy Pludwinski, Hebrew scribe from Jerusalem.

The illuminators are: Hazel Dolby, Hampshire, England; Thomas Ingmire, San Francisco; Andrew Jamieson, Somerset, England; and Suzanne Moore, Cleveland, Ohio. Aidan Hart, Shropshire, Wales, is the iconographer. Chris Tomlin, London, who traveled to Minnesota to collect samples of plants, insects, and whatever else he thought he might employ in his paintings, is the natural history illustrator.

Vin Godier is the genius behind the computer graphics and computer layout of the text, which the scribes and illuminators use as "the model" in creating the Bible.

The Bible is a combination of the ancient and the very modern. It is written on calf skins with goose quills using hun-

t of the mouth that defiles.¹¹
 proached and said to him,
 e Pharisees took offense wh
 u said?"¹³ He answered, "E
 avenly Father has not plan
 Let them alone; they are blind
 id if one blind person guide
 ll into a pit."¹⁵ But Peter sa
 is parable to us."¹⁶ Then he:
 ll without understanding?
 at ever goes into the mouth
 d goes out into the sewer?¹⁸
 the mouth proceeds from th
 at defiles.¹⁹ For out of the h
 ns, murder, adultery, forni
 tness, slander.²⁰ These are w
 t to eat with unwashed hai

The script used in
The Saint John's Bible.

dred-year-old hand-ground ink. Since it is written in English, there is no model from which to copy. An “original” is therefore made on the computer, showing where each page begins and ends, and where the illuminations will be set. This allows each scribe to begin anywhere in the book and eventually all the parts will fit together.

The script

Donald Jackson spent almost two years trying to decide on the script that would be used. He wanted a script that flowed—that pulled the eye forward into the text. It could not be a copy of a script used for a medieval Bible because those scripts *looked* medieval. The medieval text was in Latin, which uses fewer letters that have ascenders and descenders spilling into the space between lines of text. Latin script and spacing did not lend itself to English, which has many letters with ascenders and descenders. English also has many short words (in comparison to Latin), which disrupts the visual continuity of a line.

Donald also thought of the text as having a relationship to textiles. He wanted the texture of the column to remind the viewer of a subtly-woven fabric. The overall shape of the column is a large unit made up of a variation of dense writing and clean interlinear spaces, rather like a herringbone weave. The illuminations pick up the textile theme by using bits of lace, inked with a roller, to print patterns underneath and through the larger designs. One of the themes for *The Saint John's Bible* is that of reflecting all the world's societies. Textiles are deeply symbolic of interconnectivity. Intertwining threads join to make a wonderful whole. Textiles are, after all, common to almost all the world's cultures.

The scribes

Once the script had been designed, Donald began to assemble his team of scribes. Here, I am reminded of a musical analogy. When string, wind, brass, or percussion players are studying at a music conservatory and aspire to be the best in their field, they know that they will play in an ensemble. They are also aware that although they may have a definite idea of how the music should be played, they will have to follow a conductor's vision (even if it is contrary to their own). On the other hand, pianists and organists can often operate on their own, and may always play as a soloist. I see scribes in the pianist/organist group. They are individual artists. Those who were going to work on this Bible project had to become part of an ensemble following an artistic director. Some scribes, well qualified for the project, found they could not commit themselves to this communal effort, and chose to leave. The current “ensemble of scribes” who have worked diligently on the Bible still comment upon the difficulty of maintaining a single script for a manuscript of this length.

The illuminations

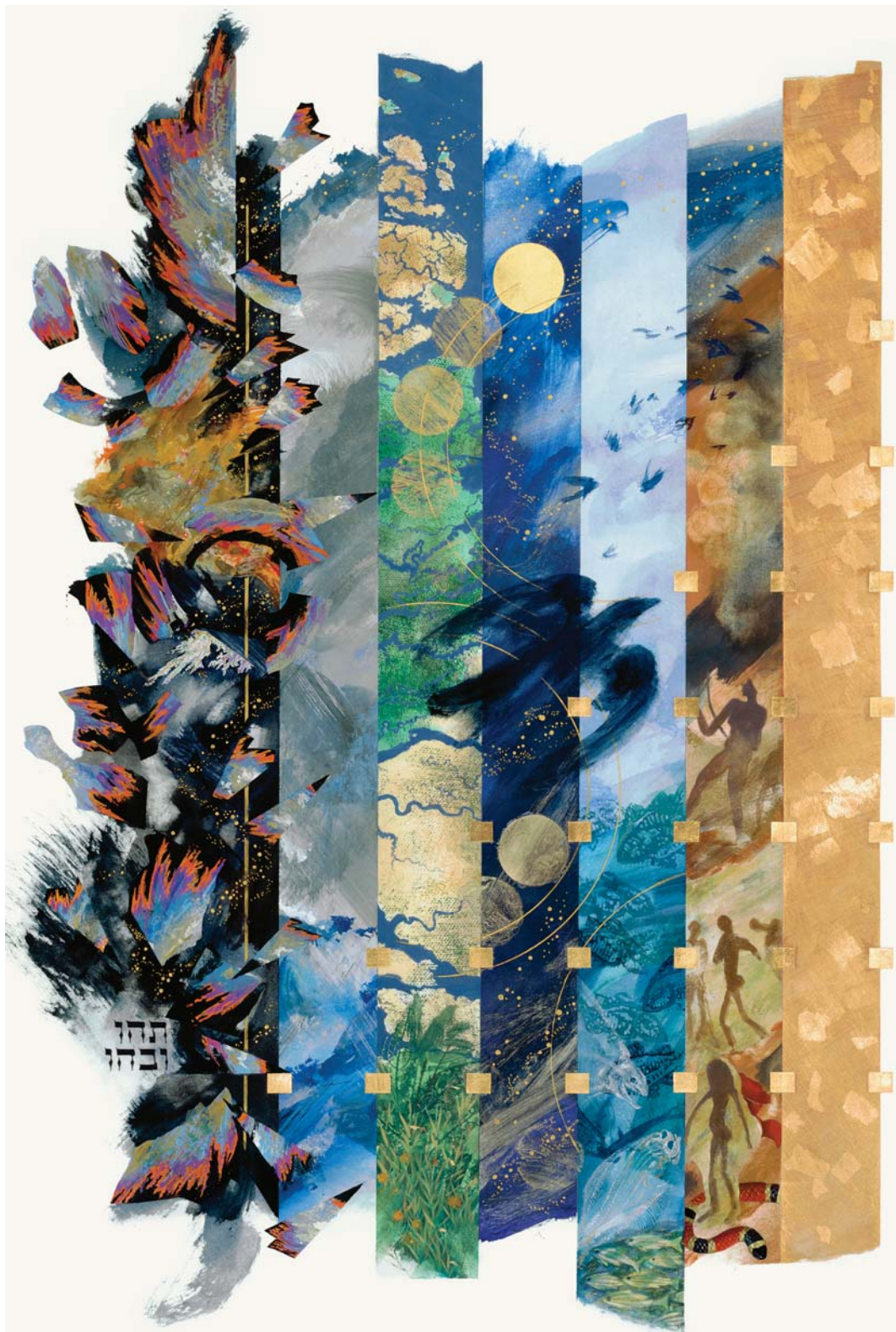
The term “illumination” means a visual method of enhancing the text. Since the creation of these images in a medieval Bible often employed the use of gold leaf, the word may have developed from the fact that when the pages were turned slowly in the light of a candle, the gold reflected the light and shimmered across the page. In any event, the visual element in a book such as the Bible allowed those who were illiterate to gain some idea of what the text was about. The illuminations and other decorations in a Bible often spoke to the place of authorship (including, on occasion, a touch of humor), thus enabling scholars of a later century to date a particular book.

But the concept of an illumination is much deeper than just a “gold shimmer.” An illumination is a visual interpretation of a text. It causes the viewer to contemplate what the text means, much like the Benedictine *lectio divina*. In the same way, people may “read” the illumination differently each time they see it.

The 160 illuminations in *The Saint John's Bible* follow a very definite plan and design. Certain passages were chosen for illumination. Usually, an illumination will be either full page, half- or quarter page. In two instances, the illumination surrounds text in a two-page spread. One full-page illumination extends into half of the facing page. The illumination may involve text or lettering as part of the design. Many are abstract in free-flowing expression, but many representational elements are also found.

The materials used to create the illuminations include acrylics, casein, egg tempera, and gouache. Gold, either in leaf or powdered form, is used to show the presence of the Divine. In the New Testament, a human form in gold represents Christ, to emphasize both his divinity and humanity.

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Creation

A full-page illumination at the beginning of the Book of Genesis. Each vertical segment presents a day of creation and small golden squares are arranged in sequences of the sacred number seven. "I wanted to symbolize God's presence in nothingness as well as everythingness." Fractals make patterns which emerge from nothingness. A long thin gold line in the midst of the first day marks a moment of "light." The separation of land and sea uses a satellite image of the Ganges delta. The sun and moon are silver and platinum respectively. The most ancient representations of human beings are aboriginal rock paintings in Australia. On the golden seventh day, the first Sabbath, all is calm and gold and shimmering. The raven is a messenger in the Bible, representing power, continually flying, tireless, endless.

Artist: Donald Jackson with contributions by Chris Tomlin

Garden of Eden

Two quarter-page illuminations are found in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis. In the "Garden of Eden" a small fraction of a mandala arcs into the scene from the left side. "The Buddhist mandala is about the birth of intellect. Human beings in the garden are enjoying animal life, but it's not just mindless reveling in life. They are also thinking about what it means. People begin to make patterns." The coral snake, one of the most beautiful of snakes, and one of the most deadly, makes its second appearance. The first was in the "Creation" panel at the bottom of the sixth day.

Artist: Donald Jackson with contributions by Chris Tomlin

Adam and Eve

The second quarter-page illumination—Adam and Eve—appears on the page opposite the "Garden of Eden." Anthropologists reported in February 2005 that the earliest-known human remains had been discovered in Ethiopia, which gives further credence to the theory that human existence may have begun in Africa. Eve is colorful and bejeweled. Adam looks a bit pensive. The snake has become part of Eve's necklace.

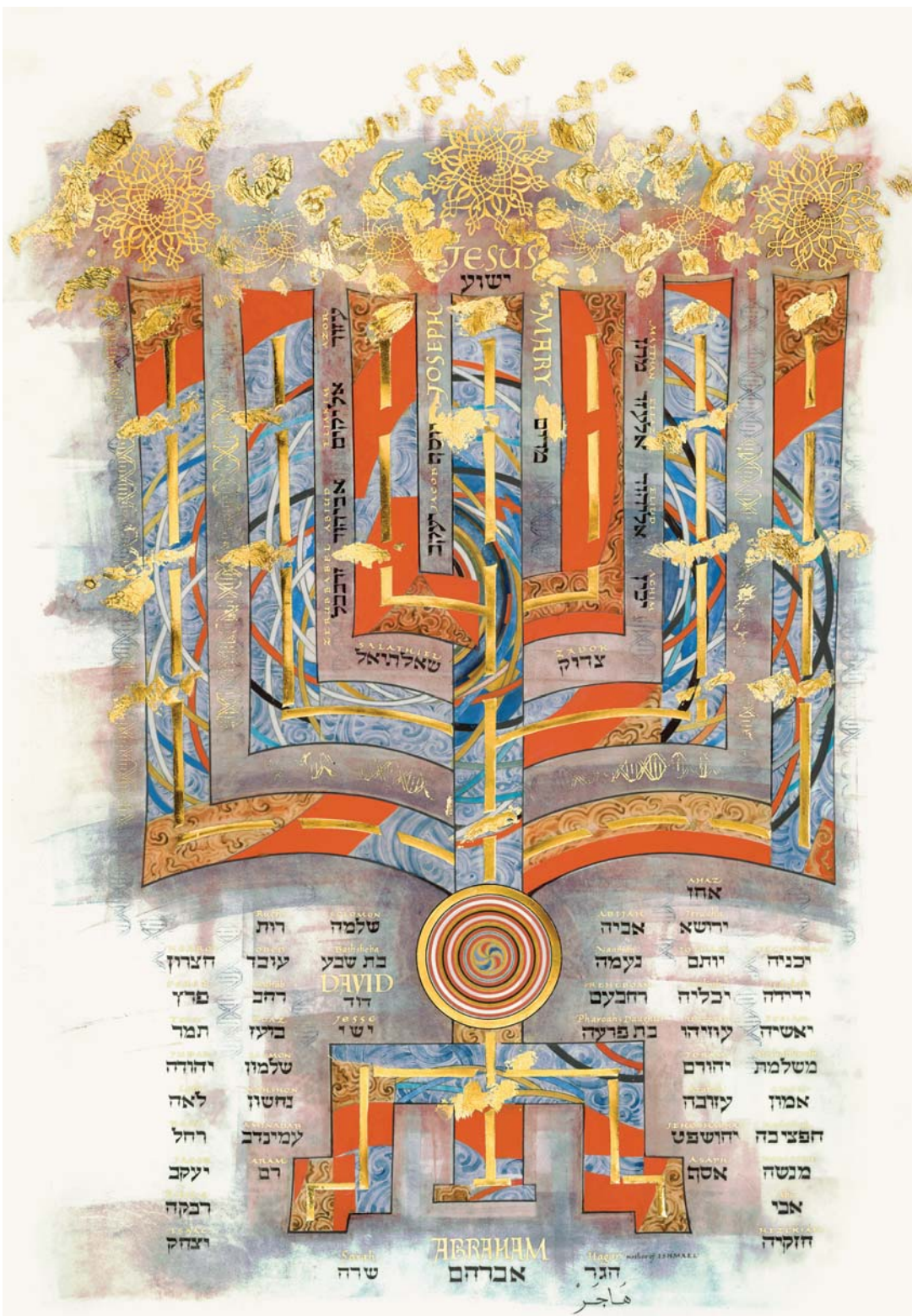
Artist: Donald Jackson with contributions by Chris Tomlin



Psalms Frontispiece

The *Book of Psalms* or “praises” is known as the prayer book of the Bible. For centuries, it has been a source of prayer, devotion and inspiration. In this opening illumination for the book, one sees “digital voice prints” taken from the visual rendering of sounds of religious singing: monks from St. John’s; Native Americans; a Jewish men’s chorus; Buddhist monks; the Islamic call to prayer; and Taoist chant. The “digital voice prints” of the St. John’s monks are seen moving horizontally on every page. The voice prints of other traditions can be seen moving vertically in each of the special treatments. Many traditions praise God through sacred song.

Artist: Donald Jackson; Scribe: Brian Simpson



The Genealogy of Jesus

This illumination, at the beginning of the Gospel of Matthew, suggests a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. The menorah acknowledges Christianity's Jewish roots. It is an invocation of the idea of the family of all people. The menorah becomes the Tree of Life. And it has a springing point, a circle: the core from which all life comes. Christ is human and shares our DNA, so there are double helixes dancing between the branches of the menorah. The artist's ultimate aim was to suggest the "connectedness of all seekers of enlightenment. All paths lead to God." Elements include Islamic style candles and cosmic mandala fragments from the Buddhist tradition. The names of the figures are also inscribed in the family tree. Names are written in English and Hebrew. A tiny word written in Arabic quietly emphasizes Hagar, Ishmael's mother, a visual link to the third great Abrahamic faith, Islam.

Artist: Donald Jackson

The Birth of Christ

In the full-page illumination at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, angels dance through the dark sky; Mary, Joseph and shepherds are looking at a manger which produces a shaft of gold light. Animals are present as well, including the bull in the foreground. An ox is the symbol associated with Luke, in whose Gospel the account of the Nativity is found, but this bull is taken from the Caves of Lascaux, the oldest-known artistic representational depiction found in Europe.

Artist: Donald Jackson

Christ is our Light

"And the Word became Flesh" occurs in the prologue to the Gospel of John. The personified Word comes out of darkness in this full-page illumination at the beginning of the Gospel. The black holes in the background and the Internet image of space from the Hubble Telescope give it the sense of "unendingness." Here the words of the text literally move into the figure of Christ, visually portraying the text.

Artist: Donald Jackson

The Baptism of Jesus

John the Baptist is a seminal figure in the life of Christ. After baptizing Jesus in the Jordan river, this "last prophet of the Old Testament" literally walks out of the pages of the gospels. As the predominant figure in this full-page illumination at the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, he represents the patron of St. John's Abbey and University. The gold figure of Christ is in the center of the picture. The sky is a strong image—representing the excitement and activity in the clouds before tornadoes and storms—not ominous or foreboding, rather, dramatic and hopeful.

Artist: Donald Jackson

The Sower and the Seed

The sower, portrayed in iconic form, is shown wearing modern bluejeans. He sows wheat; some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some in the thorns, and some on fertile ground. The four types of ground are seen at the bottom of the illumination, and all of them are similar to the kinds of soil found near St. John's. However, he also sows "outside the box" and the seed falls into the Word of God in the text. A line was missed in the left column and a bird, eyeing the seed in the text, shows where the line should be.

Artist: Aidan Hart with contributions from Donald Jackson and Sally Mae Joseph

(This illumination is reproduced on page 7 in the March/April 2005 issue of the MIA Arts Magazine.)

The Crucifixion

The crucified figure, raised and in burnished gold, is central to the composition. The cross is set at an angle, heightening the drama of the scene. To one side fragments of purple seem torn by the bright glory of the gold. The Temple curtain was torn in two; here it tears into fragments. The patch of sky above the cross suggests the "blue of enlightenment and the new order" breaking in. Surrounding the vibrant scene is a cool grey/blue border. This has medieval precedents: often a heavy Romanesque illustration will have a transitional, softer edge. The grey border also brings in the recurring theme of textiles. For the torn curtain, a piece of silk was inked and printed. This full-page illumination is found at the end of the Gospel of Luke.

Artist: Donald Jackson

Paul

The buildings to Paul's left and right are apartment buildings on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Above them, to the right, the jewel-like *Stella Maris* chapel, across Lake Sagatagan from the abbey, is a reference to St. John's. Below these, black line drawings evoke the thousands of churches built through Christian history. Paul is wrapped in a Jewish prayer shawl, evoking his youth as a devout Pharisee. This full-page illumination is found in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles.

Artists: Aidan Hart and Donald Jackson



Pentecost

The center of this full-page illumination, at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles, is marked by a gold column of fire and smoke. Unnamed heavenly bodies dart about as streaks of flame pelting the earth, an allusion to the "tongues, as of fire." It is a time of joy, of fulfillment of time and history. Local associations are the Abbey Church emerging from the wall of the golden Jerusalem. At the top of the golden column is the cross from the bell banner of the church. The crowd at the base of the picture stem from the artist's own recollection of a St. John's University football game.

Artist: Donald Jackson

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The pages

Vellum is an organic material. It is, after all, the skin of a young calf. (Although the terms “vellum” and “parchment” are more or less interchangeable today, calligraphers usually reserve the term “vellum” for calf skins, and “parchment” for other skins, particularly those of sheep.) Vellum, when prepared properly, feels slightly velvety to the touch. And, as proven by the durability of medieval manuscripts, it will last for centuries. The Hendre found itself in competition with the House of Commons in securing a sufficient number of skins, since a new law in the United Kingdom is always printed on vellum.

The skins came to The Hendre uncut: large, flat skins with rough edges. They never lie perfectly, and are susceptible to changes in humidity. The skins chosen were smooth, off-white and without blemishes, holes or markings. The thickness of the vellum can vary, both between skins and even within an individual skin. Thicker skins are more stable and able to withstand paint and gilding better, and those are set aside for pages with illuminations. If a page will have both illumination and script, the portion for the illumination will not be sanded down as smoothly as the portion for the writing.

The finished skins have two distinct sides: the hair side and the flesh side. The hair side has a fine, slightly slick texture and generally a soft cream-color. The flesh side has a somewhat rougher texture and is generally a purer white than the hair side. Since the color is different, each folio must be laid out so that facing pages will have the same color. The Bible is created in sets of three double-page folios. Each skin provides four pages of text. The folios are not yet bound into volumes, so it is possible for a number of double pages to be exhibited at the MIA. The same scribe always writes facing pages, thus minimizing the slight differences of script among the scribes.

Again, being organic, the skins would like to return to their original conformation, hanging down on either side of the spine of the calf. The spine-line becomes the fold of the folio. In arranging the three skins for each folio set, the first will be placed hair-side down and will become pages 2-11 & 12-1; the next will by necessity be flesh-side down (so that opposing pages will match) and will become pages 4-9 & 10-3; the top will again be hair-side down (pages 6-7 & 8-5). Folding these three at the spine, the top and bottom skins will be in their “natural” state and force the inner skin to fold “inside out.”

Vellum is somewhat translucent, almost like alabaster. Writing shows through slightly, highlighting the fact that both sides must be ruled exactly the same. The original size of a single page was to be 25 inches high and 15-7/8 inches wide, but eventually the height was adjusted to 24-1/2 inches because the skins available were just that much too small to be trimmed to the earlier size. A monumental effect is achieved by the open book which has a two-page spread of almost 32 inches wide and 24-1/2 inches high.

The writing implements

Three kinds of quills are used in *The Saint John's Bible*—swan, goose and turkey. Only the foremost flight feathers are used for making writing quills. Goose quills are used for the main body of the text. Feathers come from domestic geese in the US and Wales and from wild Canada geese from Minnesota and New England. Turkey and swan feathers are used for heavier letter-forms, such as the capitals and chapter numbers. The scribes, prior to this project, were accustomed to using metal pens. They had to learn to cut their own quills and use quills exclusively for *The Saint John's Bible*.

The inks

Organic Chinese ink sticks had been brought to England in sailing ships with shipments of tea in the early 20th century. Donald had bought a number of these sticks in the 1960s and 1970s from a shop in London that had been in existence since 1810: the sticks had become collector's items. Over the years, he had given some of them as gifts to other calligraphers. Newly aware of the fact that his stock of ink would not be sufficient to complete the Bible, he mentioned this shortfall at some conferences. A number of the recipients of his pre-project largesse offered to send the sticks back to him so that they could be part of this project in an indirect way.

The firm which manufactured the vermilion cakes used for the brilliant red-orange ink had closed in 1867. When the shop, whose owners had stingily meted out the inventory for over a century, closed, Donald discovered that the proprietor had been hoarding over 2000 cakes of the precious color, which he promptly acquired.



The *Stella Maris* chapel (above) on the St. John's campus. Below: the cross in the bell banner of the Abbey Church; the bell banner; and the spacious interior of the Marcel Breuer structure, where the Bible will be carried in procession on special occasions.



The books

The primary divisions in each of the seven volumes of *The Saint John's Bible* are the constituent books. Each book begins with an illuminated title. These are lush and colorful and many have raised and burnished gold letters.

The secondary divisions of the text are made at the chapters. A large chapter number appears in the two- or three-line space allowed after the previous chapter, and a three-line drop capital marks the beginning of a new chapter. There are no illuminated capitals in the Bible. Latin manuscripts often have a decorative initial letter, because the first word is frequently significant to the text that follows. "*Puer natus est*" affords an illuminator a chance to enhance the initial "P" with the entire nativity story. The initial "A" in the English of "A boy was born" does not have the same utilitarian application.

Running heads are placed at the top of each left-hand page in English; in the *Pentateuch*, they also appear in Hebrew on the right-hand page.

Judges

The commission for *The Saint John's Bible* had strings attached. Long strings. A medieval Bible was created in the scriptorium within the confines of a monastery. The scribes and illuminators were the monks. Everyone involved in the project had the possibility of daily contact. Theologians looked over the shoulders of the illuminators and made their suggestions or corrections. It was a collaborative "in-house" project.

The Saint John's Bible uses a copyrighted text. The scribes are in Wales and England. The illuminators are in Wales, England, and the United States. The theologians and art historians "looking over the shoulders" are in Minnesota.

The text

The *New Revised Standard Version* is copyrighted by the National Council of Churches of Christ. St. John's purchased the rights from the NCCC to use the translation for this Bible. Peachtree Editorial Services in Atlanta is the NCCC's official proofreader for the NRSV. When the computer-generated layout of each book was completed, it was sent to Peachtree. The proofreaders thoroughly reviewed the layout for typos and omissions of words or sentences. In addition, they looked at the size and location of chapter and verse numbers, the placement of notations, and the spacing for indentations and paragraph breaks. Each page had to conform to the publishing standards. Then the pages were returned to Wales with all the proofreading marks and final changes were made to the computer-generated layout.

In designing the Bible, Donald had to be aware of all the various NRSV copyright requirements. These included four types of indentation for poetic sections. This problem was resolved by using a slightly smaller and lighter version of the script, which allows two things to happen: the poetry is set off with more words possible in a single line rather than continuing on to a second indented line; and the poetry gains a visual character of its own on the completed page, offering variety to the viewer's eye.

One change was granted from the normal printed version of the NRSV. In a printed edition, the first line of each paragraph is indented. This leaves an amount of "white space" at

the end of the previous paragraph. Although we are used to seeing this in a printed book, the effect in a manuscript is that of a lot of starts and stops. Donald asked for, and was eventually granted, permission to use a paragraph "marker." This consists of a colored block within a line of text that indicates the beginning of a new paragraph. All verse numbers are incorporated into the text as they are in printed versions. The colored block takes the space of the verse number beginning the paragraph, so that number is then placed "dancing in the space" to the left of the column of script. As a result, the columns of text are solid from top to bottom and left to right, as they are in medieval manuscripts.

The illuminations

As Donald was aware that he needed the help of additional scribes and illuminators, so also he needed the monastic, scholarly community to inform and shape the work. At St. John's, the primary working group guiding the design of the Bible, is the Committee on Illumination and Text (CIT). The CIT will continue its work through the completion of the entire project. This group of eight (four men, four women—all Benedictines save one) consists of theologians, scripture scholars, artists and art historians. The main work of the committee is to write detailed briefs for each illumination in the Bible. The committee reviews Donald's sketches and works with him as the illuminations develop. The committee has a responsibility to the St. John's community to guide the Bible through its making; they are also responsible to work creatively with Donald. They form a microcosm of community life, working slowly and sometimes painfully to find the best ways of moving the project forward.

Johanna Becker, OSB, an artist on the CIT, had certain themes she was eager to see prominently featured in the Bible project. Her work with the World Parliament of Religions and the Monastic Interreligious Dialogue reflects her passion for Eastern religion, but she was also interested in feminine, artistic, and non-Christian elements that could be included. At The Hendre, Donald had books on Persian art, alchemy, angels and sacred dance, Hebrew, Islamic and medieval Christian illumination, Indian textiles, and Palestinian costumes.

Within the committee there is an almost equal division between artistic and theological members. They work diligently to understand each other's language. The back-and-forth dialogue often creates new insights in reading the Bible for many on the committee. The committee meets every other week and develops briefs on the areas to be covered by the illumination in question. "Looking over the shoulder" from a continent-and-a-half away often proves difficult. A theological brief containing the following statement—"Here we have a realized eschatology, the 'divine-man,' and yet we must be cautious for this Gospel was indeed redacted to refute Gnosticism."—may prove a bit daunting to the artist. Donald's visits to Collegetville often solve many of these technical linguistic problems.

However, the work of the committee in developing the theological briefs was far-reaching. Biblical scholars weigh in with exegetical commentary (related to a particular Biblical passage, including cross references in scripture), but the members also freely associate the events with art, music and sculpture from contemporary time and from ages past. To this they

add local or regional connections, such as images of water and land associated with St. John’s and the surrounding area.

Lamentations

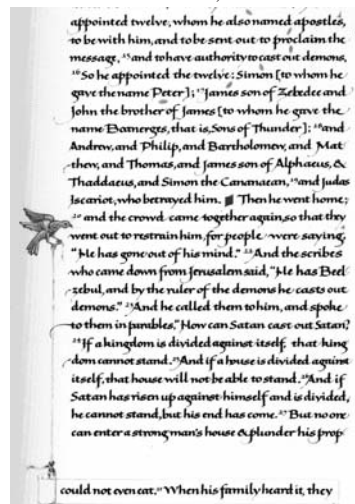
The big questions faced by the artist and the CIT present the greatest cause for tension. As a member of the committee said, “Donald is 99% visual in his orientation.” The committee communicates verbally. This leaves a lot of room for misunderstanding. On the other hand, the artist sometimes presents a visual image that completely encapsulates what the committee is looking for.

But it does present a question of patronage versus artistic freedom. Should Donald be allowed to “do his own thing?” Even within the committee there is a variety of opinion about the degree of freedom he should enjoy as an artist. However, a working relationship has been built.

Interest in interfaith dialogue encouraged symbols from other traditions, while still remaining sensitive to the meaning of the symbols within those traditions. The first illumination Donald presented to the committee was the “Genealogy of Jesus” which he based on a menorah entwined with the Tree of Life. One of the committee members spoke with a rabbi about that use of a sacred Jewish symbol, and it was approved. There are decorative images used from the Qur’an—lacy medallions in the margins. There are some Zen symbols as well as designs used in Navajo baskets in the parable of the “Loaves and Fishes.” There are portions of Buddhist mandalas in some of the illuminations.

That raises more questions. “If this is a Catholic Bible, should we be using Islamic calligraphic imagery? Buddhist symbols?” Somehow the images have to be reconciled with the primary purpose of the book. One of the committee’s tasks is to make sure these images are used with sensitivity.

Other smaller problems also existed. What does the scribe do if he or she makes a mistake? If it is a matter of a letter, or two or three words, or even two or three lines, it is possible to



scratch out the offending text, sand down the vellum, and start over. If the scribe finds, upon reaching the bottom of the column on the computer-generated “original,” that he or she has one more line ruled on the vellum, there is likely a sense of panic. In the case of the page shown here, a medieval trick is a possibility. The missing line is placed in the bottom margin, and some ingenious method of showing the correct position of the line is employed. In this case, a

bird carries a string attached to the errant line of text and points to its correct position. If the mistake is really egregious, the page must be re-written (on both sides) and then sewn as a “singleton” to its mate for the folio.

The psalms are not like the rest of the Bible. The Psalter is pure poetry, composed to be sung. The recitation of the Psalms forms the core of the Benedictine “Office of Hours.”

The CIT decided that the *Psalter* would be divided into five parts, representing the traditional five types of psalms. Each book could have a different tone.

The first and last psalm received a “Special Treatment” (see discussion of these in the *Proverbs* section), but the remainder of the *Psalter* is relatively simple. Each book is written in a slightly different script (by three different scribes). A changing color scheme also distinguishes each book from the others.

Since the psalms are meant to be sung, the idea emerged of depicting sound visually. The experiment in the physics laboratory of playing sounds through an oscilloscope is one that has been used for generations. The pure sound of a French horn produces an almost perfect sine wave; the overtones of a violin present a very different picture.

The image of a sound wave is often depicted as similar to the concentric circles caused by dropping a stone into a quiet pool of water. The circle continues to move outward, but the ripples get smaller and smaller until they seem to disappear. The same thing happens in the air with sound, and there is the philosophical theory that the sound never quits, although we no longer can hear it. Nonetheless, every sound just keeps going somewhere “out there.”

Today the oscilloscope is replaced by the much more accessible computer. Playing recordings of Jewish cantors, Buddhist monks, Native American chants, Taoist chants, and the St. John’s monks themselves singing the Hours, the computer provided a wide variety of visual images of sound waves.

Each book within the *Psalter* has an illuminated frontispiece. On those pages, the non-Christian “images” of vocal sounds appear vertically. Throughout the *Psalter*, the visual images of the Benedictines chanting psalms runs horizontally through the middle of every page.

Proverbs

“Perfection is not an option” is a statement heard often at The Hendre in the process of creating *The Saint John’s Bible*.

Proverbs are short little statements that can stand alone, devoid of context with statements preceding or following them.

In various places throughout the Bible, a small cross may appear in the margin next to a particular text. This cross is based on the cross in the bell banner in front of the abbey church at St. John’s. The cross indicates a passage that St. Benedict quoted in his *Rule*.

Some of the books in the Bible end on a left-hand page or only use a portion of the right-hand page. To create a visual pause, and also to veil the back of the illumination on the other side of the page (which begins the next book), a design is employed to fill the space. This is referred to as a “carpet page” and may be a series of repeated crosses or other designs in many medieval books. The designs used in *The Saint John’s Bible* are inspired by textile patterns of the Middle East, India and Pakistan.

“Special treatments” are used to highlight certain passages like the Lord’s Prayer or the Magnificat. In the volume of *Gospels and Acts* these are incorporated within the text as they occur, and this leads to some problems as they may run on to additional columns or even across pages. In succeeding books, Donald has chosen to treat these as separate from the text and allow them to become a type of illumination in their own right, allowing much more flexibility with placement, lettering, and shapes of words because copyright is not an issue.

When charting out the text on the computer-generated “original,” if it is found that a particular line is going to be extremely tight, it is highlighted in green to alert the scribe to the fact that care must be taken to get everything in. Each page is lightly ruled in three vertical sections so that the scribe can visually compare where he or she is in relation to the computer version.

The lower-case letters in the script are two millimeters high. The height of the script is directly proportionate to the size of the quill.

Latin is a very economical language. English is very wordy. There are 30% more words in an English version of a Bible compared to a Latin version.

Revelation

Donald’s process is not unlike the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, a careful mulling over of the text, looking at the details, thinking, meditating, letting it sink in. The artist’s sacred reading has a practical aim: to spark visual ideas. One member of the St. John’s committee referred to this work as *visio divina*: the design becomes a visual meditation on the text.

People may find that, like any other piece of art, the text and illumination of *The Saint John’s Bible* may be “read” differently by different people. The illumination of the “Ten Commandments” by Thomas Ingmire is a case in point. At the top are abstract portrayals of God in the burning bush and on Mount Sinai. In the middle are block letters—chiseled in stone—of the beginning of the commandments. Toward the bottom are random letters falling in no particular sequence. Reading from the top down, one could see God, the commandments, and everything going awry after that. However, another interpretation is to read from the bottom up—from chaos comes the commandment, which is a step on the way to reaching God.

Another is in the “Luke anthology”—five parables in a single illumination. This was created in September 2001 and included the parable of the Prodigal Son. In the upper portion, Donald painted a disappearing view of the Twin Towers. When this illumination was shown to the CIT, some members thought it was a way of identifying the time in which the Bible was produced. However, Donald’s view was that, in this parable of forgiveness, he had included the destruction of the Towers, because “you are not going to get over this until you forgive whoever did it. The persons who did it may not care that you have forgiven them, or even know that you have done so, but you cannot move on until you come to that point.”

Dr. Evan Mauer, when announcing *The Saint John’s Bible* exhibition at the MIA, stated: “Artist Donald Jackson is continuing the great tradition of handwritten Bibles whose roots go back to the ancient scribes of Israel and the five Books of Moses that are the core of the Old Testament Hebrew Bible. What better thing can you work on than Holy Scripture?”

Representatives from St. John’s have made numerous presentations about *The Saint John’s Bible* throughout the country. These have been given with the aid of reproductions of illuminations and pages of script. The MIA has the honor of being the first venue where the general public will be able to see the one-and-only original of this monumental work of book art. And may we experience *visio divina*.



These are “digital voice prints.” The top left is a Native American chant; the middle is a Taoist chant; the right is the Islamic “Call to Prayer”—the *Adhan*. The three horizontal patterns on the bottom are the voices of the St. John’s Benedictines chanting the psalms.

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Presentations by and Conversations with:
Eric Hollas, OSB, Senior Associate for Arts and Cultural Affairs, St. John’s University
Carol Marrin, Director, *Saint John’s Bible*
Tim Ternes, Director of Public Programs & Education

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Editor’s Notes: This document is an addition to the three-part series on Asian religions. The inaugural exhibition of the *Saint John’s Bible* seemed to call for a separate exposition.

The author for this paper is Dr. Merritt C. Nequette, who holds a Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Minnesota, and has taught for 40 years, the majority at the University of St. Thomas. He did his undergraduate work at St. John’s University, where he became familiar with the Benedictines and their traditions. He returned to the St. John’s campus and the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library to research music in the manuscripts at Melk Abbey, Austria.

He has played an active role at the MIA as the *Muse* designer, a CIF guide, and a designer of materials to integrate music and spirituality with the MIA’s collection.

I have chosen to publish this series in memory and recognition of some of the finest educators I have known: faculty mentors Audrey Parrish and Mulford Q. Sibley;

my father, Edward Hayenga, who shared his superb thinking processes from the moment of my birth; my mother and sisters, Olive Hayenga, Marilyn Hayenga, and Margi Hughes, all of whom have served public education brilliantly and have been wonderfully rewarding friends and colleagues to me; and Pauline Lambert, a colleague and leader whose contributions supporting women have been enormous.

E. Sharon Hayenga, editor

My wife, Pauline Lambert, and I had followed the progress of the *Saint John’s Bible* for a number of years. We were both anxious to see the “real” thing when it was exhibited at the MIA. As a docent, Pauline was looking forward to sharing it with visitors. I have written this article and co-sponsored the publication of this booklet in her memory.

Requiescat in pace.

Merritt C Nequette