

# Two Gradual leaves

Gwen Quirk

The Baillieu Library in 2008 purchased two illuminated parchment leaves from a late 14th century Umbrian Gradual. A Gradual contains the chants for the celebration of the Mass, and takes its name from the practice of singing the chant of the same name on the steps of the ambo, or *gradus*, before the reading of the Gospel. The sequence of choral chants in the Gradual matches their order in the Missal, in which the complete text of the Mass is set out according to the arrangement of the liturgical year. Two distinct series of parallel annual celebrations co-exist in the calendar of the Catholic Church. The Temporal cycle is divided into seasons beginning with Advent and Christmas and culminating in Paschaltide. These celebrate the coming of Christ, his saving life, death, resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost which signals the continuation of Christ's mission in the life of the Church. The Sanctoral cycle commemorates the feasts of the saints.

One of the Baillieu Library's newly acquired leaves contains the music and words for the Introit (or entrance chant) for the feast of Pentecost in the Temporal cycle. The other leaf is from the Sanctoral cycle of the same Gradual and celebrates

the feast of Saints Peter and Paul on 29 June. The vellum leaves, decorated in ink, coloured pigments and gold leaf, come from what must have been a splendidly illuminated choir book of large dimensions (the leaves now measure 52.6 x 38.8 cm and 53.0 x 38.7 cm respectively). The identity of the illuminator is not known, but the



book was probably produced in Perugia, an important artistic centre in the 14th century, and may come from the circle associated with Matteo di Ser Cambio, a panel painter and illuminator active in Perugia between 1356 and 1424.<sup>1</sup>

We may well ask why a book for the sole use of choristers was

illuminated at all. The answer lies largely in the evolution of written forms of music. Before music was written down, the chants of the Mass were taught and learned by rote, resulting in widely divergent regional practices. After Guido of Arezzo's invention of precise music notation in the 11th century it became possible to standardise liturgical chant throughout the west, and the religious orders of the 13th and 14th centuries helped to expedite this process by producing large numbers of chant books in their scriptoria and encouraging their use. Feasts were added to the liturgy, and chants became longer and more complex. Consequently a larger and more demanding repertoire required increased performance skills, and groups of professional cantors were engaged who read from a single choir book propped on a lectern before them. This occasioned the enlargement of books, and often the need for several volumes, inviting decoration of these now impressive and valuable choral books. Illumination appears to have served both a practical and devotional purpose. A hierarchy of initials not only reflected a feast's importance in a carefully graded ranking system, but also possibly operated as a signpost for both cantor and choir, functioning

Previous page: Artist unknown [Umbria, probably Perugia, late 14th century], leaf from a Gradual (Pentecost), ink, coloured pigments and gold leaf on vellum, 52.6 x 38.8 cm (detail). Purchased 2008, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. The full leaf is illustrated on the back cover of this magazine.

as a mnemonic association for the recall of both melody and text. As well as signalling major feasts, historiated (illustrated) initials probably also acted as a devotional aid whereby the theme of the feast could be evoked immediately, its theological intent recollected and possibly communicated more effectively by the singers.

That these books also attracted large-scale illumination such as decorated initials and elaborate borders appears to indicate that, along with liturgical vessels, vestments and older liturgical books, they were considered sacred items. The major feasts invited the most elaborate chants and the largest and most beautiful illustrations. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in Italy, where sets of choir books, often illuminated by the most gifted artists of the day, became a source of ecclesiastical and civic pride, and were placed on public display.

In the Gradual, the Introit (or entrance chant) for the most significant feasts was singled out for the most generous illustration and decoration. The feasts of Pentecost in the Temporal cycle and of Saints Peter and Paul in the Sanctoral cycle are both major feasts. In the Baillieu leaves they are introduced by illumination of the highest quality.

A large historiated initial (illustrated on page 9) occupying the height of two music staves illustrates the initial opening the Introit for Pentecost, *Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum ...* (Wisdom 1:7, 'The Spirit of the Lord fills the whole world ...'). In the upper section of the letter 'S' the dove of the Holy Spirit plunges earthwards from a fire-rimmed blue heaven containing an eight-pointed star—the number of perfection frequently associated with God's creation of the world—perhaps a symbol here of the birth of the Church at Pentecost. The bird's halo incorporates a wide green cross which represents the salvation offered by the crucifixion of Christ, and from its mouth issue the red flames symbolic of the power of the Spirit. The heads of the 12 apostles, haloed in gold and outlined in black, appear in the lower half of the initial. Some members of the group look towards the source of divine grace while others appear to exchange glances, and several raise their hands in prayer. Faces and hands are lit by the radiating divine flames, and spatial depth is subtly implied by the curve of the 'S' which intercepts the fiery rays and creates the illusion that the scene is occurring behind the initial.

A large historiated initial 'N' (illustrated above) introduces the



Introit for the Mass, *Nunc scio vere, quia misit Dominus Angelum suum: et eripuit me de manu Herodis, et de omni expectatione plebes Judæorum* (Acts 12:11, 'Now I know in very deed, that the Lord hath sent His Angel, and hath delivered me out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the people of the Jews'). This text refers to Peter's imprisonment by Herod for preaching the Gospel, and his miraculous release by an angel. The initial celebrates the dual leadership in the Church of the two Apostles, who are identified by their characteristic attributes. Saint Paul holds a sword, symbol of his martyrdom by beheading. This was considered the most merciful method of execution, and was an option open only to Roman citizens. Saint Peter displays the keys, the mark of the authority conferred on him by Christ.<sup>2</sup> Distinctive in the composition is the way in which these saints gaze at each other and firmly grasp hands, while the Lord, holding a scroll, blesses them from above.

The burnished gold grounds of both historiated initials are pounced with a variety of designs and the haloes of the figures are also incised with distinctive patterns. These impressions serve not only as decoration, but function in a manner analogous to mosaic tesserae; their

Opposite and below: Artist unknown [Umbria, probably Perugia, late 14th century], leaf from a Gradual (St Peter and St Paul), ink, coloured pigments and gold leaf on vellum, 53.0 x 38.7 cm. Purchased 2008, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

placement at varying angles tends to intensify the reflection of light from the gold surfaces. Use of this tooling technique over an entire gilded area is unusual in manuscript illumination at this time, and may indicate that the artist was also experienced in panel painting.

The elegant, restrained border decoration with its fine decorative scrollwork is characteristic of Perugian illumination, in contrast to the more freely meandering foliate sprays found in much Tuscan and northern Italian manuscripts of this period. This is particularly apparent on the page depicting Saints Peter and Paul, where the acanthus leaves are strictly disciplined into a formal geometric design ending in individual finials (illustrated right).

Entwined around the lower edge of the border on the Pentecost folio (illustrated on back cover) is an elegantly drawn stork whose feathers and underlying body are rendered in fine long black brushstrokes over a mid-brown base. This may be a late Gothic grotesque, together with the two facing crows and disembodied bovine head which also inhabit the border. On the other hand, medieval bestiaries link storks with crows which supposedly guided them in their migratory flights across the oceans to Asia,<sup>3</sup> so they therefore may

refer to the universal mission of the Apostles received at Pentecost. A connection has also been discerned between Saint Luke as the writer of the account of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles and the head of the ox placed at the top of the border adjacent to the frame of this initial.<sup>4</sup> The evangelists were traditionally associated with the four winged beasts around the throne of God in the Apocalypse, and of these the ox is identified with Saint Luke whose Gospel emphasised the sacrificial aspect of the life of Christ. Both folios also have small bas-de-page illustrations. The Pentecost leaf depicts a pair of butting rams, while on the other folio the ants carrying seeds—now partially erased—may

relate to the bestiary interpretation of the ant as an exemplar of industry and communal co-operation.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to functioning as a mnemonic marker, the illustrations in medieval choir books added a further level of exegesis to the texts and their chants. In Italy particularly, the illumination of the choir book reached impressive heights, with paintings executed by major artists, and these books were valued as church treasure far beyond the function they fulfilled for the choir. The Baillieu Library's Gradual leaves are splendid examples of the fine painting lavished on these books.

Gwen Quirk completed a Bachelor of Music in 1964, followed by a Diploma and Graduate Diploma in education. In 2007 she completed a Postgraduate Diploma in art history. She is a member of the Friends of the Baillieu Library.

#### Notes

- 1 Sotheby's, *Western manuscripts and miniatures*, (catalogue for auction held in London on 8 July 2008), London: Sotheby's, 2008.
- 2 Matthew 16:19, 'I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'
- 3 Stephen A. Barney and others (eds and translators), *The etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 264, Book XII.vii.16.
- 4 Sotheby's, *Western manuscripts and miniatures*.
- 5 Sotheby's, *Western manuscripts and miniatures*. See also *The Medieval bestiary*, <http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast218.htm>, accessed 30 November 2008.

