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 handwritten 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 illus-
trated. The style of these paintings and
their clearly delineated frames relate
them to contemporary large scale deco-
orative programs in fresco and mosaic.
Once introduced, the framed painting or
miniature remained a consistent element
in book illumination.

The spread of Christianity influ-
enced 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 dissemina-
tion 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 pre-
cede the Gospel texts. These Tables,
which were devised by Eusebius of
Caesarea in the second century, are not
simply an aid to finding parallel pas-
sages 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 com-
 municates the same authentic tradition.
The Tables are presented within a deco-
 rative 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 apos-
tles. 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 fron-
tispiece, may also be interpreted as an
image of the Church.

Probably the most famous of all illu-
minated 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. Shelved
with the facsimile is a video cassette
that documents its production and the
new techniques used to capture as accu-
rately as possible the details of this
extraordinary manuscript.

The Book of Kells belongs to a
group of Gospel Books that were pro-
duced 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 met-
alwork of a pagan culture, has been
adapted to the parchment pages of the
sacred Christian text. The intricate pat-
terns 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 trea-
sure 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 experi-
ence 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.)**

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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 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.