Manuscripts for Devotion and Display

Introduction

Books made during the Middle Ages often glitter with gold, shine with bright colors, and captivate with lively illustrations. But what kinds of clues do they offer about how the manuscripts were made and who used them? How can we better understand the importance of reading, the need for display, and the concept of self through book production and use? We are going to look at two medieval manuscripts this afternoon from Haverford’s collection. The older manuscript is a Bible probably made in Paris in the second quarter of the 13th century [Pic #1] while the small text is a book of prayers made in England in the 15th century[Pic #2]. They are both in Latin, they organize texts for the reader, and they are decorated in a variety of ways. These books, unlike many other medieval manuscripts, survived and passed through various owners’ hands before coming here. But not everyone considered them historic or sacred.

Among the questions we have is how these manuscripts came to Haverford? This answer in part relies on recent history. Haverford Professor J. Rendel Harris, with support from Haverford alumnus Walter Wood, purchased the prayer book and gave it to the college in 1889 along with 48 other manuscripts, many in Hebrew, Syriac, or Arabic. The book itself has a post-medieval owner’s name from Newport, Essex and the further note that it was a gift from a reverend. The Bible manuscript was
loaned indefinitely to Haverford in 2002 by the Friends Meeting in Philadelphia. An inscription in the book tells us that it was owned by a Richard Wyll in 1482. John Pemberton, an active and forceful Quaker minister, bought the book for 1 guinea in Colchester in 1787 and brought it to Pennsylvania. Pemberton gave the manuscript to the library of the Philadelphia Friends Meeting.

How Were They Produced?

How were these two manuscripts produced? They were both written on parchment, animal skins that were treated to be supple and smooth. If you look closely at both sides of a manuscript page you can often see the difference between the flesh side of the skin and the hair side which may be a more yellow color and sometimes has a speckle of little dots that are hair follicles. The parchment was trimmed square and folded into the size of pages needed. This group of pages, known as a quire, was then ruled lightly often using a gray or reddish brown lead. The scribe had an exemplar of the text which he or she copied on to the new parchment. At the end of a quire the scribe wrote the first word of the next page in the lower margin as a catchword so that the quires could be assembled correctly for binding. In the Psalter catchwords are outlined in red incorporating them into the decorative scheme. When the scribe finished copying the text, the illuminator added illustrations and decorations as specified by the book buyer in the spaces reserved. This artistic
work required skills at mixing paints and working with gold leaf. The sheets of gold were extremely thin and needed to be trimmed carefully, applied on top of a glue and then burnished. The quires were then assembled for binding usually between boards and often given clasps to hold the book shut.

We often think of monks in cloisters busy making manuscripts, but the High and late Middle Ages saw the growth of commercial copyists and illuminators who were lay men and women. Books became an item of trade since manuscripts were valuable and easily transported. Bookmaking fostered other kinds of connections as well. The Pemberton Bible has French style illuminations but experts identify the bookhand as one with English characteristics. This suggests that the Bible was made in Paris possibly with an English university student as the copyist. A university city like Paris had a great demand for Bibles, and copyists produced a range of editions from the deluxe to the relatively cheap. In the latter case commercial scribes divided a book into quires and had several people copy pages at the same time in a process known as the Pecia or “piece” system.

How Were They Used?

Bible

In addition to the Old and New Testaments, the Bible includes the Canon of the Mass and two texts on the Meanings of Jewish Names. [Read
Because of these more technical additions, the Bible was likely made for a priest. By the late medieval period in most parts of England priests were expected to have access to a Bible. At some point in its binding or rebinding parts of the New Testament were put in the wrong order with the Book of Matthew being interrupted by Corinthians, Hebrews and Acts.

Historiated initials mark each book of the Bible. Some of the images are very memorable, like Daniel with two diminutive lions [Pic #6] and Jezebel thrown out of the palace by her eunuchs [Pic #7]. Some of the openings vary in layout like this initial for John. His symbol the eagle is one of several animal depictions. [Pic #8] Many of the initials for the prophets have little to distinguish one from the other. There are further schemes to organize the text and aid the reader in finding his or her place. The name of the Biblical book is written at the top of each page in alternating colors. Within a book the chapters are marked by blue and red initials with decorative flourishes. The manuscript bears witness to a variety of uses. Medieval readers have written in the margins including a fairly long note about St. Anne, the mother of Mary, and the children that she had with her three husbands. Two of the initials have been rubbed away [Pic #9]. For many years scholars have explained this as defacement by strict Protestants who objected to the representation of holy figures as idols. But recent research into medieval practices of devotion suggests that people regularly touched or kissed sacred images as part of their daily
prayers and meditation. [Pic #10] This fit in with a wider trend in spirituality in the late Middle Ages which emphasized the humanity of Christ and urged lay people to imagine participating in the emotions that Christ and Mary experienced at key moments. The laywoman Margery Kempe in the 15th century wrote about serving as the Virgin Mary’s servant and swaddling the infant Christ while weeping for his painful death.

There is a third initial that it is defaced marking the book of Job in which two figures stand next to Job on his dung heap. Their faces have been scratched with something pointed so that they are obliterated. I suspect this is not an act of devotion but likely one of prejudice. The two figures wear pointed hats, one of the ways in which Jews were identified in drawings and in life during the Middle Ages. There are also 6 initials that have been cut out of the Bible. People in later centuries sometimes whiled away a rainy afternoon cutting pretty pictures from old books for a scrapbook. Illustrations in manuscripts were also regularly excised for dealers, but in this case the careless cutting suggests an amateur.

**Psalter**

The Psalter was a devotional book that combined the Psalms with prayers. Lay people aspired to the holiness of monks and nuns who performed the Divine Office eight times daily. The psalter provided the laiety with Biblical texts and prayers to recite and reflect upon. The book of hours developed from the psalter with more prayers taken from the Divine
Office. The Haverford psalter begins with a calendar for each month listing saints’ days and other holidays [Pic #11]. The person ordering the manuscript might choose extra dates to include beyond the standard ones. These choices may help identify the region in which the book was made. You can see how certain saints are given prominence. This is where the expression red letter day comes from. Can anyone make out any of the names? Dunstan is a sign of English origin, as is Edward King and Martyr on another page of the calendar.

Also included in this devotional book are songs taken from the Bible, including the Magnificat in which Mary praises God for the salvation he is bringing to the world. The text was traditionally included in the liturgical office for Vespers.[Read text]. The book originally ended with a prayer to God from the bookowners, an unnamed woman (represented by the letter N for nominis or name) and the man John [Pic #12]. It may have been that John commissioned this psalter as a future betrothal or wedding gift and would have filled in the woman’s name later. Certainly the Psalter was ordered to be pleasing to the eye. Every page has inventive pen flourish decorations in red and blue suggesting plant tendrils. Often gold leaf is added in flower shapes. This floral motif is more fully realized in the one surviving illuminated page [Pic #13]. Other pages like this were cut out by collectors or book dealers. Devotional books like this and books of hours were intended for private use, with the owner enjoying the intricate pictures and decorations. Here a noble woman, likely the countess Mary of
Burgundy, cradles her prayer book in a rich cloth to protect it.[Pic #14] Preachers often complained about women’s vanity and books of hours were singled out as things that attested to their earthly rather than their spiritual wealth. The poet Eustache Deschamps, however, sees the luxury of books of hours in a positive light in one of his poems. [Read Poem] But such personalized books were also prized for their family associations.[Pic #14] Margaret Blackburn, the wife of a successful merchant in York, appears as a donor along with her husband in the window of a parish church. She is holding her book of hours which she willed to her daughter. It survives and is in the York Minster Library. The window the couple endowed is on the left, Saint Anne teaching her daughter the Virgin Mary to read. Mothers were frequently children’s first teachers and they used their prayer books to instruct them in the alphabet, reading, and basic prayers.

**Printing Postscript**

In Mainz around 1455 Johann Gutenberg produced a new kind of Bible from movable metal type. From the Exodus leaf we have here you can note resemblances to the Pemberton Bible in layout and decoration. The Chapter opening has an initial in blue. The beginning of each verse is picked out in red. The lettering follows the Gothic bookhand and even uses some of the space-saving medieval contractions like dns for dominus. On the face of it the page does not look revolutionary, but the economic
impact was noted immediately. The Alsatian chronicler Bernhart Herzog wrote that Gutenberg saved time so that “in a single day two men can set and print more than in former times, twenty or more scribes could write over a number of years.” Undoubtedly this is an enthusiastic exaggeration. But a modern calculation estimates Gutenberg’s workshop with 6 compositors and 6 pressmen produced 180 Bibles in 13 and a half months. This averages out to a little more than 1 Bible per person per month. Demand for books was high especially in university towns. There were 300 print shops in Germany by 1500 but Venice produced the largest number of books in the 15th century. We have on the table a Venetian printed Bible from 1484 that looks very familiar in layout and decoration. Printers diversified their offerings to appeal to different markets from the luxury trade where a large decorated Bible could cost 100 Rhenish guilders to impoverished parish priests who could buy a small Bible for half a guilder. More people were gaining direct access to print but the idea of personalized, lavishly decorated books would go out of style.