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Illuminated Manuscripts: A Recurring Theme

by Wendy Buckle

Even though thousands of illuminated mediaeval manuscripts survive in libraries, museums, archives, and private collections, the illustrations from only several hundred have found their way onto postage stamps. While most manuscripts appear only once, several have been used by more than one postal authority, and this article is an attempt to draw together several examples of the stamps that have been used multiple times.

One of the most popular sources for stamp designers are Books of Hours, decorated devotional works made for individual patrons. The core of the work is the Hours of the Virgin, a standard series of prayers and psalms to be read daily. Whilst they had primarily a devotional purpose, they were also a status

symbol, designed to be held in the hand of the owner and admired. To that end, most are quite small, with one exception—the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, which measures 30cm x 21.5cm, perhaps the most lavish of all Books of Hours.

Jean Duc de Berry, third son of King John II of France, inherited the Duchies of

Berry and Auvergne when he was 20. He is said to have commissioned up to fifteen Books of Hours, six of which are extant. The *Tres Riches Heures* was illuminated by three brothers: Paul, Herman, and Jean Limbourg, originally from the Netherlands. They started work on it in 1410, but when the three painters and their sponsor all died in 1416, possibly victims of plague, the

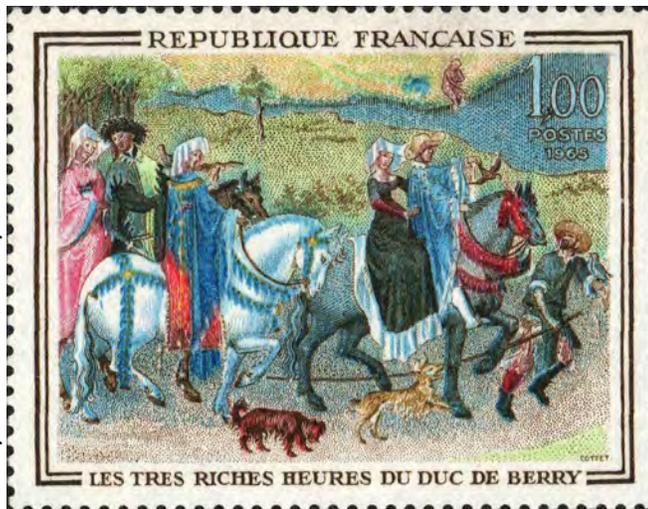


Fig. 1: France, Sc1115, issued on 25 September 1965, showing the illumination titled "August: Leaving for the Hunt."

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manuscript was left unfinished. It was further embellished in the 1440s by an anonymous painter, who many art historians believe was Barthélemy d'Eyck. In 1485-1489, it was brought to its present state by the painter Jean Colombe on behalf of the Duke of Savoy. The book currently resides in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

Not surprisingly pages from the *Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* appear not only on one of the French Art stamps (Fig. 1), but also as a set of Christmas stamps issued by Ireland in 2002 (Fig. 2). All the stamps show off the delightful detail of mediaeval life portrayed in the original manuscript book.



Fig. 2: Ireland, Sc1443-1445, issued as a Christmas commemorative set on 7 November 2002

Whereas Books of Hours were written for the laity, other works were written for use in churches and monasteries. One of the most famous is the *Book of Kells*, Gospels written in the 8th or 9th century. Opinions differ as to whether the manuscript was produced at the Columbian Monastery of Kells or on the island of Iona (Argyllshire).

Each Gospel was originally prefaced by a full-page miniature containing the four evangelist symbols, followed by a portrait of the evangelist facing the opening text of the Gospel, which was given an elaborate decorative treatment. Ten full-page illuminations survive, which comprise two evangelist portraits, three of the four evangelist symbols, a carpet page, the Virgin and Child surrounded by angels, a miniature of Christ enthroned, and miniatures of the Arrest of Jesus and the Temptation of

Christ. There are thirteen surviving full pages of decorated text including pages for the first few words of each of the Gospels. Eight of the ten pages of the canon tables also have extensive decoration. Colours used were bright red and reddish purple (made from ochre), emerald green (malachite or copper), deep blue (lapis lazuli or indigo), and yellow (ochre). Most scholars believe that four unknown artists contributed to the work.



Fig. 3: Ireland, Sc323-325, issued as a Christmas commemorative set on 16 October 1972



Fig. 4: Turks & Caicos, Sc413 (left), is part of a set commemorating "Icons or Illuminations" issued on 26 November 1979; it depicts "Christ Attended by Angels." Fig. 5: Sierra Leone, Sc728 (right), issued on 18 October 1985 as a Christmas set

The *Book of Kells*, perhaps the most beautiful example of early Celtic art, has not been well served by stamp reproductions. A detail of the Virgin and Child is used on a set issued by Ireland (Fig. 3), but to poor effect. Turks and Caicos used the Portrait of Christ (Fig. 4). Perhaps both these designs are hindered by the rather dark colours of the original; overall they

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Figs. 6 and 7: United Nations—Vienna, Sc346a (left) and 346a-f (right). The souvenir sheet was issued on 4 March 2004 as part of the “Indigenous Art” series begun in 2003. Besides the illumination from the *Book of Kells*, the sheet includes an illumination from a Portuguese medical treatise (Sc346f).



Fig. 8: The Nativity as reproduced on issues (left to right) from Great Britain (Sc646), the Cook Islands (Sc292), and Dominica (Sc541)



Fig. 9: The Annunciation to the Shepherds as reproduced on issues (left to right) from Great Britain (Sc645), the Cook Islands (Sc293), and Dominica (Sc542)

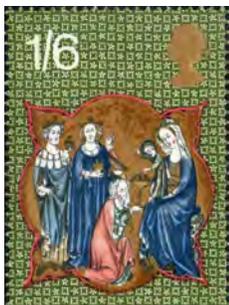


Fig. 10: The Adoration of the Kings as reproduced on issues (left to right) from Great Britain (Sc647), the Cook Islands (Sc295), and Dominica (Sc545)

Figures 8, 9, and 10 are selections from sets issued by Great Britain on 25 November 1970 (Sc645-647), the Cook Islands on 30 November 1970 (Sc292-296a), and Dominica on 14 November 1977 (Sc541-548). All show illuminations found in the *De Lisle Psalter* held by the British Library as Arundel 83 II, being bound with the *Howard Psalter and Hours* (Arundel 83 I). The Arundel Manuscripts were purchased in 1831 by the British Museum, now part of the manuscript collection of the British Library. The manuscripts were collected by Thomas Howard, 2nd Earl of Arundel. In 1666, his grandson, Henry Howard, divided the collection between the College of Arms and the Royal Society and in 1831, the manuscripts held by the Royal Society were purchased by the British Museum.

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seem too dark for a small design. The Sierra Leone miniature sheet, showing the full page Virgin and Child looks better (Fig. 5), with its wide white background, but why the anachronistic design of a spray of flowers for the surround? The most successful design based upon the *Book of Kells* is a 2004 United Nations stamp from a miniature sheet of six (Fig. 7), which includes a wonderful zoomorphic initial letter (Fig. 6).

Psalters, containing the Book of Psalms and usually a Calendar, Litany, and the Office of the Dead, could be used by both priests and laity. They were found in monastery libraries and parish churches, but were also owned by rich aristocrats. The *De Lisle Psalter*, commissioned by Robert De Lisle between 1310 and 1340, has long

been popular with stamp issuing authorities. It includes 24 illustrations: 13 moral, devotional, and theological diagrams; 9 pages of images of the life of Christ; and 2 facing miniatures of the Madonna and Child and the Crucifixion. Some of the illuminations are faithfully produced in several issues. Great Britain, Dominica and the Cook Islands have all used images of the Nativity for their Christmas issues, with three images—the manger scene, the Shepherds, and the Three Kings—used in all three sets (Figs. 8, 9 and 10). None of them are entirely successful, however, perhaps because the originals are somewhat dark and too detailed for an effective stamp design. Another Cook Islands set (Sc316-318) and miniature sheet (Sc318a) use illustrations of the Crucifixion from the *De Lisle Psalter* for an Easter issue (Fig. 11).

The manuscripts considered so far have all been religious subjects, but the final manuscript has a secular theme. The *Manesse Codex* has been used on postage stamps by no fewer than six postal authorities. It was written and illustrated around 1304 C.E., with an addenda dated ca.1340. The manuscript was produced under the patronage of the Manesse family of Zürich, presumably by Rüdiger II Manesse (born before 1252, died after 1304). The manuscript records the imagery of mediaeval courtly love, with each illustration made to accompany a song in the *Minnesang*, the tradition of lyric and song writing in Germany, extolling the virtues of chivalry and devotion, which flourished from the 12th to the 14th century, a tradition similar to that of the French troubadour.

The *Manesse Codex* is an anthology of the works of a total of about 135 *Minnesingers*. For each poet, a portrait is shown, followed by the text of their works. The entries are ordered approximately by the social status of the poets, starting with the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VI, down through dukes, counts and knights, to the commoners. In the portraits, some of the nobles are shown in full armour with their heraldic

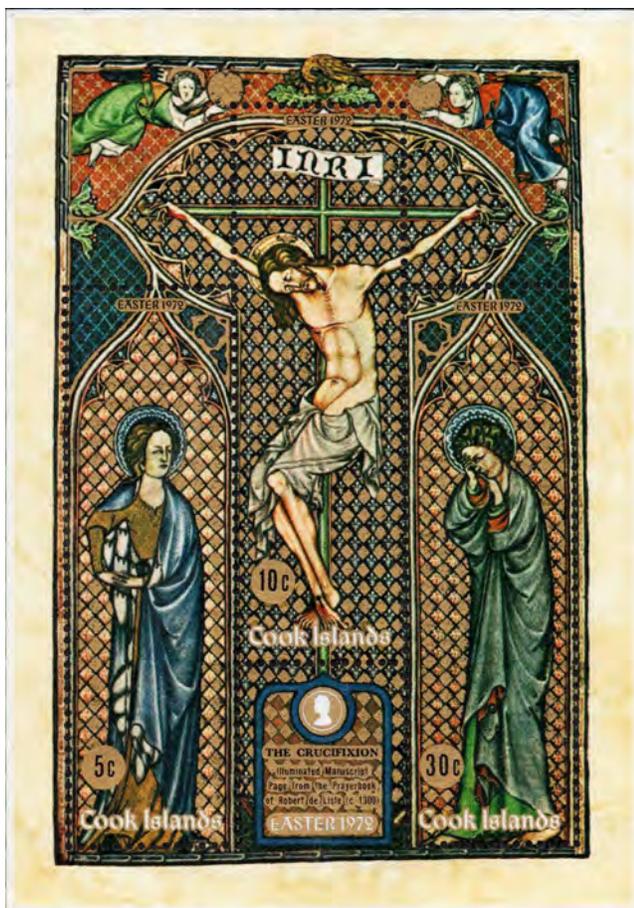


Fig. 11: Cook Islands, Sc318a, a souvenir sheet issued on 6 March 1972, along with a set of three depicting the same illuminations: St. John (5c), Christ crucified (30c), and the Virgin Mary (30c).



Figs. 12 (left) & 13 (right): Both Fig. 12, Liechtenstein, Sc471a, issued on 27 August 1970; and Fig. 13, Germany, ScB456, issued on 5 February 1970, depict Wolfram von Eschenbach (1170-1220), regarded as one of the greatest epic poets of his time. As a *Minnesinger*, he also wrote lyric poetry.

colors and devices (therefore with their faces hidden), often shown as taking part in a joust, or sometimes in single combat with sword and shield. Occasionally they're depicted in actual battle, such as the German knight and poet, Wolfram von Eschenbach, depicted in the 30-rappen value from Liechtenstein (Fig. 12) and the 20 + 10-pfennig



Figs. 17 & 18: Dominica, Sc2252a (left) issued as one stamp on a sheet of 17 on 31 December 2000 to commemorate "Highlights of the late 14th century," features an image of Konrad von Altstetten, as does Liechtenstein, Sc365 (right), issued in 1961. The picture shows the minstrel in the lap of a lady with a falcon on his fist.

instance, is shown in a thoughtful pose which exactly matches the description of himself in one of his most famous songs (Figs. 14; 15, and 16).

Liechtenstein featured the codex in a series issued over three years (Sc359-367, Sc381-384, and Sc471a-d), Germany (ScB455-B458) and West Berlin (Sc9NB70-9NB73) used it once, and Switzerland issued a set in 1988 (ScB542-B545). A single stamp was featured in one of many "Millennium" sets from Dominica in 2000 (Fig. 17) and Liechtenstein earlier (Fig. 18). One can see why these images would be attractive to a stamp designer:



Fig. 14 (left): Austria, Sc634, issued on 17 June 1958; **Fig. 15 (center):** Liechtenstein, Sc366, issued in 1961; and **Fig. 16 (right):** Germany, ScB458, issued on 5 February 1970 (the surtax was for the "benefit of young people") all depict Walther von der Vogelweide (ca.1170-ca.1230), perhaps the most celebrated of the Middle High German lyric poets

value from Germany (Fig. 13).

While some images are motivated by the biography of the person depicted, others draw their motif from the poet's name, while still others draw on imagery from their lyrics. Walther von der Vogelweide, for

ground, they work well on a small scale.

This article only features those manuscripts I have identified as appearing on issues of more than one country. It does not claim to be comprehensive and I would

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be delighted to hear of any other examples of multiple issues. To enjoy these images in greater detail, you can view them online at Wikimedia Commons and other sites; use your favorite search engine to search on the manuscript's title—*Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, *De Lisle Psalter*, etc.—to locate specific sites to view.

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Ancient Manuscripts, Just a Screen Away Reported by Nicole Winfield, Supplemented by Bruce L. Johnson

Access to the 42-line Bible and other printed and manuscript books has recently become easier. The *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* (Vatican Library) and Oxford University's Bodleian Library put the first 1.5 million pages of their collection online in early December 2013, bringing those parts of their collections to a global audience for the first time.

The two libraries announced a four-year project in 2012 to digitize some of their most important Hebrew manuscripts, Greek manuscripts, and incunabula. These materials have been chosen for their scholarly importance and for the strength of their collections in both libraries; they will include both religious and secular texts. For the launch of the project, however, the two libraries focused on a smaller group of Bibles and biblical commentaries, each of which has been chosen for its particular historical importance.

Among the first works up on the site are two-volume Gutenberg Bibles from each of the libraries, an illustrated 11th-century Greek Bible, and a 15th-century German Bible, illustrated with hand-colored woodcuts. Since many of the books being digitized have deteriorated bindings and leaves of parchment and paper that require very careful handling, ordinary mass-digitization equipment, such as the high-throughput automated scanners used by Google to digitize 18th- and 19th-century books, is out of the question. The materials being dig-

itized also require high-quality images, as scholars are interested in every aspect of the physical page. In order to record minute details, and to showcase illuminations, woodcuts, and other illustrative material, full-color, high-resolution images must be captured in every instance. While the existing digitization departments of the Bodleian and the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* are used to working to these high standards, it is virtually unprecedented to do so on such a large-scale project.

To adhere to these high standards, yet stay on schedule, the Bodleian and the *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* assembled a combination of highly trained staff and state-of-the-art equipment. The Bodleian's imaging tool of choice is the Conservation Copy Stand 6545, known as the Grazer Conservation Cradle (Fig. 1). This formidable Austrian-made device stands 8.9 feet high and combines a 60-megapixel overhead camera with an adjustable book cradle and a suction device to hold the pag-



Fig. 1: Adjusting the Grazer Conservation Cradle

es flat. The Bodleian now owns two Grazers, which will be used primarily for fragile or illuminated items. For smaller printed books, they will be using the Atiz Book Drive Pro, which has a cradle with a fixed opening of roughly 100 degrees and two 22.1-megapixel cameras, meaning that both verso and facing recto can be captured at once (Fig. 2).

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