

Book of Kells with Mallory Melton

Lisa: Dia dhuit! This is Podcrawl Podchroal, the podcast from the McClelland Library. I am your host Lisa, the Librarian. At a lunchtime lecture, Mallory Melton presented “Illuminated! A Closer Look at the Book of Kells.” Mallory has a background in medieval studies, as well as experience working with rare books and manuscripts with the Rare Book Room collection at the Burton Barr Central Library. Here’s a clip of the lecture about the most famous medieval manuscript in the world, the Book of Kells.

[Monks]

Mallory: Everyone involved in its creation would therefore have been a monk. Monks, who were conscriptorians of their monastery, which means a whole room dedicated just to copying and reading texts, they would spend almost all of their time writing and copying texts, apart from any time that they spent eating, sleeping, and praying. That was their whole life, really. Uh, once considered their work to be an act of prayer itself, uh, a form of service to God. So, uh, as a result, because they were given themselves as servants, most of their work was done anonymously. We don’t actually know their names. Um, and it would be several centuries before there would be scribes among the laity who would actually be anonymous. So we actually don’t know who was responsible for copying and transcribing the Book of Kells.

Over the years, researchers have been able to make some informed theories, uh, in how many people have been involved. So, scholars have identified four separate handwritings. Today, we’re going to look at four individual scribes. Again, we don’t know their names. Um, we know nothing about them except that they were monks. Uh, so, scholars refer to them as Hand A, Hand B, Hand C, and Hand D. Differences in the writing of the four manuscripts are very subtle. All of the scribes used manuscripts as scripts in copying the text of The Book of Kells.

This script is now referred to as insular majuscule. This is the most common script used throughout the insular period of manuscript art. It’s the first part of its name. The term “majuscule” refers to the fact that this script was written in a larger format than other medieval styles of writing and would often result in a much longer manuscript that could certainly be worded on the page.

Since the Book of Kells itself was created for the purpose of being displayed, the use of majuscule makes sense. The text would give you a view from a distance, and it could also allow for larger, more compelling effects than the illustrator. So now we will talk about the illustrators. Scholars have identified three separate illustrators who worked on the Book of Kells.

[Illustrators]

It’s entirely possible that the illustrators were also scribes. Uh, it could have been just different people- we have no way [of knowing]. The differences in the style of the illustrations are a lot

easier to see in my opinion than, uh, which is within the text. Uh, and these can lead to specific nicknames that in some of the illustrators have been given.

So, the first one then comes in from here. Gave them the very creative nickname of the illustrator. So, the illustrator is the artist responsible for many of the scenes with the Book of Kells. This scene here is the Temptation of Christ. Uh, you can see the black spider looking guy who's actually supposed to be Satan. Uh, and just like an illustrator for, uh, a modern children's book, for example, the illustrator would be showing characters and events from the text in the gospel that was being portrayed, uh, in the text.

Now, the next illustrator is known as, well, let's see. So, uh, the Goldsmith, named for the extremely intricate and, uh, often very gold tone illustrations present in the text. This page in particular is known as the Chi Rho page. This is one of the most famous pages of their time. If we had a magnifying glass, we could take it up to the manuscript, and we would see some of the most minute detail present within any medieval manuscript from the entire medieval period. Uh, and one of the things that's very noteworthy is that, uh, within the Goldsmith illustrations in particular, there are a lot of, uh, motifs and, uh, imagery that would have been used in metalwork at the same time.

And then the final illustrator was known as the Portrait Painter. So, the Portrait Painter, as you might have guessed, is responsible for a lot of the very biggest portraits. Within a manuscript. This image here is the Portrait of Christ, one of the Portraits of Christ that are in fact set within it. Um, we also have done the Symbols of the Four Evangelists.

Um, there are some other, uh, illustrations. Uh, I think I showed earlier the Madonna and the Child. Um, those all would have been in Portrait Painter. So, once all the text was copied, the manuscript would be bound. Now, some scribes and illustrators would have known how to do the binding themselves. Oftentimes, there was a separate person who would have done the binding.

[Binding]

There is, unfortunately, a lot of information that remains unknown about how the Book of Kells was originally bound. By the time the Book of Kells enters into verifiable historical record, the original binding had been lost. The book has been redone several times, including several attempts that are now referred to as disastrous.

These attempts saw pages of the manuscript framed down so that there is no more evidence of any original writing at all. Uh, and therefore, Uh, scholars today have very, very little information to go on asking questions. We do know the common techniques for, um, finding out the time, and therefore we can assume that most of these would apply.

So the first thing was that four pages at a time would be gathered together and folded in half. This would result in 8 leaf pages with each folded sheet containing two folios. And if this is

sounding confusing, that is why I put that in there. It's really not. Uh, so the term folio refers specifically to the front and back of one page. Uh, so the front would have been known as the verso. The back would have been known as the recto. In most cases, the quires, uh, which, uh, would have been the four double sheets all together. Uh, they can be formed before the text and illustrations were completed as part of the layout process that I talked about earlier.

There are examples though where this might have been done, uh, after all the pages were appointed and illustrated. There were other methods of forming quires that were more complex, but were typically more general, like pages, a lot of folding, and you have to cut the pages, and it's very complicated.

However, larger displaying manuscripts, like the Book of Kells, were typically used as a simpler method. Uh, it was a lot easier with, uh, manuscripts of this size to cut the sheets of vellum to a uniform size. So, usually this method of, uh, four pages forming a quier would have been okay. Um, the more complex methods would have been used for smaller books that were intended to be a lot more functional and less sturdy. Once the quires had all been completed, they were sewn together.

Once everything had been sewn together, a cover would have been added to the manuscript. The original cover of the Book of Kells was lost for centuries, so we don't know definitively what it would have looked like. This cover is from a different Insular manuscript, and it was one of the only surviving covers from an Insular manuscript. Most likely, the cover for the Book of Kells would have been made from wooden boards. They would have been cut just slightly larger than the size of the pages. And, um, would have been covered in leather or fabric. The leather or fabric would then have been lavishly decorated. It would have been gilded with golden jewels. Um, so part of the reason why this is one of the only Insular Manuscripts covers that we still have. Anyone want to take a guess? Anyone know? Robbery, yes! Vikings. ... So, this is probably why we are missing pages from the Book of Kells. The Viking raiders might have seen the cover, and they were like Ooh, I'm gonna take that, that looks valuable. They would have ripped the cover off, taken some of the pages with it, and went on their way. Thankfully, they did not take the whole manuscript with them. Yeah. So, uh, now we will talk about the Book of Kells as it relates to us here at the McClelland Library.

[Library]

So, uh, a number of reproductions to the Book of Kells have been made over the years. Reproduction is a term that can refer to, uh, any attempt to recreate a manuscript. So, uh, the same methods of creation, uh, making the development parchment, mixing the pigments, uh, hand, like, hand copying everything very painstakingly, that was one form of reproduction. So, uh, a number of the introductions to the Book of Kells have been made over the years. Reproduction is a term that can refer to, uh, any attempt to recreate a manuscript. So, uh, the same methods of creation, uh, making the development parchment, mixing the pigments, uh, hand, like, hand copying everything very painstakingly, that was one form of reproduction.

Uh, it wasn't until 1986 that the Irish government permitted official reproductions to be made. And this was because any attempt to recreate the manuscript would have risked damaging it. Uh, by 1986, uh, the technology at the time had evolved to a point where it was possible for scholars to start looking at ways of digitally recreating manuscripts without harm.

So from 1986 to 1990, the Swiss publisher Faksimile-Verlag worked with the Irish government to create 1,480 full color facsimiles of the book. These remain the only official facsimiles that exist. So, a facsimile is specifically a reproduction that is created with the intention of making the manuscript exactly as it looks at the moment it's copied.

So, this, uh, would retain any damage that was present in the manuscript. It would have shown how the colors faded over time. Uh, facsimiles are extremely useful tools for researchers. Uh, because they will be able to study these flaws, these, uh, uh, various segments and how they've updated, um, to any distinction effect, and there are distinction effects, but the scribes made it a bit more correct.

So the Verlag facsimiles were made visually. High resolution images were being taken at each leaf in the manuscript and then printed on a high quality paper. And as it happens, for anyone who does not know, one of the Verlag facsimiles is found right here in the McClelland Library. When it was first announced that the official reproductions were to be made, Sean and Janet Lee, who are two of the founding members of the Irish Cultural Center and hailed from the town of Kells, county Meath. So their copy is on permanent loan here on the first floor at McClelland Library.

Lisa: Thank you Mallory for your presentation, and thank you all so much for listening. We hope to see you soon at the McClelland Library! Slan!