

Priceless medieval manuscripts illuminate Melbourne

Between March and June this year more than 110,000 people visited the State Library of Victoria's first major international exhibition *The Medieval Imagination: Illuminated Manuscripts from Cambridge, Australia and New Zealand*.

The largest exhibition of Medieval art ever seen in Australia, this extraordinary event drew together priceless illuminated manuscripts from Cambridge University and collections in Australia and New Zealand spanning 800 years of European history.

The Medieval Imagination was the first collaborative exhibition of manuscripts on this scale in Australia, bringing together collections from 19 different institutions. It exhibited some 90 hand-made books from the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance, including the oldest European book to ever visit our country.

Exhibition curator, celebrated medieval scholar, Emeritus Professor Margaret Manion AO, Professorial Fellow in Art History Melbourne University, believes that The Medieval Imagination was the most ambitious exhibition of its kind to be mounted in the southern hemisphere.

'This was an extraordinary collaboration and a major logistical undertaking for the State Library, Cambridge University and other participating institutions. The manuscripts exhibited in Melbourne were unique and irreplaceable. Because of their fragile nature we may never see an exhibition like this in Australia again,' she said.

Dating from the 8th to the 16th centuries, the manuscripts included examples of deluxe book production from Byzantium, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain.

Among the rare works displayed was the exquisite Gospels of St Luke and St John, an early 8th-century book from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. Pre-dating the Book of Kells, it has illumination closely related to that of the famous Lindisfarne Gospels. From Trinity College, Cambridge, came a 14th-century illuminated Apocalypse with over 90 illustrations, together with 24 coloured drawings of the life of St Edward, added in the early 15th century.

An important contribution from the State Library of Victoria's own collection was a history of the Roman emperors which was made for renowned Florentine arts patron Lorenzo de' Medici. It features Lorenzo's arms and insignia on the opening page, and over 80 medallion portraits of the emperors. A splendidly illuminated Gospel Book from 12th-century Constantinople was lent by the National Gallery of Victoria. A treatise on music by Boethius, illuminated in the 12th century and once belonging to the medieval library of Christ Church, Canterbury, was lent by the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington. Loans from the Auckland City Libraries included a richly illuminated Breviary from Renaissance Perugia.

The exhibition was presented by the State Library of Victoria Foundation with significant assistance from twenty-one sponsors and supporters, enabling the exhibition to be presented free of charge, and to have an extensive and far reaching publicity campaign.

Twenty events were held over the life of the exhibition and all were fully booked with a total attendance of more than 5,000. These included a music series led by Professor John Griffiths from the University of Melbourne, and lectures by many experts on aspects of medieval life, culture and books. On Sunday 20 April, the Library forecourt came to life with a Medieval Faire involving many community and re-enactment groups and shared by a delighted crowd of over 10,000. An international conference Imagination, Books and Community in medieval Europe was held between 29 and 31 May with the keynote public lecture delivered by Professor Jeffrey Hamburger from Harvard University.

School students participated in 246 separate sessions, with nearly 7,000 young people learning about the books and the medieval world that made them. This included supported programs for disadvantaged schools, giving many students completely free access to the exhibition including the transport to and from the Library. The Library also hosted two professional development evenings for teachers and developed an online learning kit to accompany the exhibition http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/pdfs/programs/mi_education_resource.pdf

CEO and State Librarian, Anne-Marie Schwirtlich highlighted the importance of the lending institutions and exhibition supporters to the success of the exhibition:

'I find it extremely gratifying that this great collaborative effort brought such marvellous treasures together for the first time and made them freely available for all to see. It would not be possible without the goodwill that exists between all the contributing institutions and generous support of the Library's Foundation and exhibition sponsors.

For 82 days the State Library of Victoria was able to give every visitor the chance to see some of the World's great book treasures. It was an opportunity taken up by many people and I am very glad it was.'



Book of Hours (Fragmentary)
courtesy of State Library of Victoria

Matthew van Hassett
Media Relations Co-ordinator
mvanhassett@slv.vic.gov.au

The State Library Victoria gratefully acknowledges the generous support of the lenders to the exhibition:

Cambridge

Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Syndics of the University Library, Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College

New Zealand

Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Auckland City Libraries, Dunedin Public Libraries, John Kinder Theological Library, St John's College, Auckland

Australia

New South Wales

State Library of New South Wales, University of Sydney Library, The Franciscan Friars - Province of the Holy Spirit

Australian Capital Territory

National Library of Australia, National Gallery of Australia, The Classics Department at the Australian National University

South Australia

State Library of South Australia

Victoria

Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, University of Melbourne, Baillieu Library

Rare books boring – never: attaining a Charles Eaton rarity

Who said dusty old books were boring!

They may not have many pretty pictures and their covers may be uninspiring – but sometimes they hide incomparable treasures! Especially the unrecorded ones!

Not finding a work in any standard or specialised bibliography is unusual – and defines the work as being extremely rare. Add to that experts, publically doubting the item's existence even though it is listed in the National Library of Australia's Booksearch (wants list), and idle curiosity turns to something more concrete.

One such item was the first hand account of the Charles Eaton massacre written by survivor John Ireland. One of the most violent and bloodied incidents of its time, the Charles Eaton was forced aground in July 1834 in the Torres Strait. Most of the crew and passengers aboard were subsequently massacred by the Indigenous inhabitants. The rescue of three survivors including two children in 1836, was the stuff of sensationalism and was front page news in nineteenth century Sydney, London and the United States.

When the publication trail revealed another Australian origin with the first published accounts of the tragedy by two rescuers Brockett (Sydney, 1836) and Phillip Parker King (Sydney, 1837) then the excitement became palpable. But of the Ireland account, there were only two known to be in existence worldwide and none held in Australia. Armed with that knowledge the Library decided that it must buy a copy of Ireland's account of the tragedy for the nation.

So what is this account and why did it get lost in the mists of time thus making it such a rarity?

It is the London ed. [1838] of:

The shipwrecked orphans: a true narrative detailing the shipwreck and sufferings of John Ireland and two little boys George and William Doyley, who, with their father and mother and thirty-two other persons, were wrecked in the Charles Eaton in the year 1834, on an island in the South Seas, inhabited by savages / written by John Ireland [1838]

Written for children, John Ireland, the ship's steward and survivor, wrote the only first hand account of the event and is the true source for all publications relating to the Charles Eaton tragedy.

The Ireland work was known from its various Connecticut editions (1844, 1845) and it had always been surmised there must have been an earlier edition most probably published in London, as Ireland and the boy survivor William Doyley returned there in 1837.

Because of the great interest in the story in Sydney the Brockett and King accounts were published in London in 1837 and here the publication trail becomes even more exciting – as conjecture and coincidence collide!

William Doyley the boy survivor (the other rescued boy George died) had Thomas Wemyss write a second hand account on his behalf which was published in London in 1837. These three accounts were published in the same year and the public's reaction might have spurred John Ireland to write and publish his account around the same time.

At this point the work disappears strangely from view. Perhaps only a few copies were published. Perhaps being a children's book it suffered at the hands of children and copies perished. Perhaps the Ireland work wasn't a bestseller and copies were pulped! Perhaps the publisher was having problems!

The work re-surfaces in the United States in the 1840s some six years later being published by S. Babcock in New Haven. These editions are identical to the London ed. even down to the same plates. Perhaps the American editions are pirated ones. Perhaps John Ireland went there. The mystery may one day be solved.

To add to all this hoo-ha the Library had to place a bid at auction. It could not be known whether the work would attract great numbers of antiquarian collectors, investors with lots of money but the antiquarian market was certainly quite excited about this unique find.

Was the estimated price a realistic one or not? How much should the Library bid? All these questions needed answering as the auction date drew near. A bid was placed, fingers were crossed, and breaths were held waiting the verdict.

The Library was successful! We had the Ireland and it was the third known copy in the world, the first copy in Australia and the first in the southern hemisphere!

All the work and sleuthing was worth it – and who said rare books were boring!

Wanda Horky
Australian Collection Development
whorky@nla.gov.au