

The Book of Kells

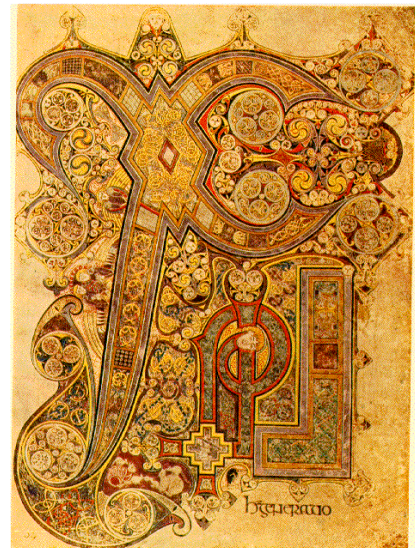


A Swiss publishing company has announced that it is preparing for publication a \$15,000 copy of the Book of Kells for general sale. What is there about this medieval Irish manuscript which makes a Swiss publisher think that there is a market for an expensive facsimile?

The Book of Kells is one of the finest examples of illuminated manuscripts from the era of great manuscripts, 650-800 A.D. As to be expected, the story of the Kells manuscript is shrouded in the mist of history. Students in the field speculate that the Kells book was probably started in the monastery on the island of Iona in the late 8th century and moved to the monastery at Kells in County Meath in the 11th century. The

move was provoked, we are told, by a desire to protect the manuscript from the invading Vikings. One story has it that the Vikings had the book in their possession, tore off the jewel-encrusted cover, and threw away the text of what became one of the most famous illustrated Gospels in the world.

Since the 17th century, the Book of Kells has been in [Trinity College](#), Dublin. The visitor to Dublin can see the original manuscript under conditions which are designed to protect the book rather than to display it to its best advantage. The Book of Kells is shown under bullet-proof glass closely guarded by a security person. On a crowded day, the line of visitors is expected to keep a steady pace past the display so as not to deny the queue its few moments to view one of the great treasures of Irish culture. Perhaps a book lover irritated by a rushed view of Kells broached the idea of using modern technology to make Kells more readily available for study throughout the world.



Written on calf vellum, the Book of Kells is a Latin copy of the four Gospels. The text is interspersed with large illuminated pages, animated initials, beasts, grotesque figures, and brilliantly colored ornaments. The text is written between two ruled lines, which accounts in part for the remarkable steadiness of line in this hand-written manuscript. The monks who worked

on Kells did not use gold leaf, commonly used in manuscripts of this kind, but they did use ultramarine, a color which, because of its scarcity, was as costly as gold in the 8-9th centuries. Perhaps the most compelling feature of the Book of Kells is the illustrations. There are decorations at the start of each paragraph and within some sentences. There are agile little animals here and there indicating a "turn-in-the-path," a correction or an addition to the text. So many of the open letters (B,O,P,R) are filled with color that a viewer of Kells can imagine the monk being like so many of us, fillers of open letters.



A fortunate visitor to Trinity College on a day when a viewer can study Kells will have a feast of illustration. The book contains portraits of the four Evangelists, the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and scenes from the New Testament, such as the Arrest and Temptation. The illustrations are lavishly ornamented with animal and bird figures, snakes, human bodies in contorted shapes, animals eating their tails, eyes and beaks of birds, busy, intricate scrolls. The illustrators seemed to want to fill every open space on the page and the result is a book of great beauty, mystery, and intricacy. The illustrations in the Book of Kells are of such intrigue, they have found new life in jewelry and other decorative pieces.

The Book of Kells reminds us of the distinguished place Ireland has in the propagation of the Gospels, the art of calligraphy and design, and the preservation of and dissemination of knowledge. At \$15,000, the Book of Kells is a bargain.

(written by John Walsh & originally printed in 1987)

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