

# WORD AND IMAGE

BY HEATHER PULLIAM AS TOLD TO SCOTT SISCO

**HEATHER PULLIAM HAS BEEN INTERESTED IN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS SINCE A MEDIEVAL LITERATURE CLASS WHEN SHE WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS IN SCOTLAND.**

From the sixth to the sixteenth centuries, manuscripts were the primary art form in Europe. These books were handwritten copies of works ranging from early versions of the gospels of Christ, to the writings of Augustine, to Latin translations of Greek works from the classical period. The vast majority contained little or no decoration; however, a small percentage of manuscripts included “sumptuous decoration” — large, decorated initials and images which served as bookmarkers in the unnumbered pages, helping the reader to locate specific chapters and passages. Until the thirteenth century, monks and nuns were the primary creators and patrons of illuminated manuscripts. For the monks who created the *Book of Kells*, the act of writing and illuminating manuscripts served to glorify God.

Dr. Pulliam, an assistant professor of art history at Western Kentucky University, began a paper on the *Book*

*of Kells*, and used it as an honor’s thesis. That paper has now become a book, *Word and Image in the Book of Kells*. The *Book of Kells* is important for several reasons. It is a national treasure of Ireland — believed to have been created sometime between 750 and 850 A.D. Additionally, it is one of the greatest European works of art from the medieval period, and because

of Viking raids and the chaos of the time, the *Book of Kells* is one of a handful of surviving artworks from a period of incredibly skilled illuminators and artists.

“Dublin is a pretty popular tourist destination for visitors to Ireland,”

Dr. Pulliam said. In addition to the artwork in the *Book of Kells*, visitors are drawn to the high crosses, carved with images from the Bible and saints lives. Because they have been standing in churchyards or fields and exposed to wind and rain for so long, the images on the crosses are much harder to study.

In preparation for writing her book, Dr. Pulliam traveled to Ireland to study the *Book of Kells* and the high crosses more closely. The manuscript contains about twenty full-page images.

Dr. Pulliam said she thinks researchers have focused on its full-page images for two reasons. First, art history as a discipline traditionally focused upon paintings and sculptures, and when viewing objects of art that did not fall into these two categories, there was a tendency to view them as if they did. Second, the manuscript contains 680 pages and those that were reproduced and available to scholars tended to be those with full-page images.



A high cross in the town of Kells, a small Irish market town 40 miles from Dublin. Kells has four stone crosses and other remnants from the monastic age in Ireland.

Photo courtesy of Manuscripts Department, Trinity College, Dublin

Photo courtesy of Heather Pulliam

Most of the images that have been investigated and reproduced are described as “miniatures” — illuminations that occurred within a frame and looked like a painting. The problem with studying only miniatures is that it takes the image out of its context. Just as it is important to understand Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* within the context of the entire iconographic program of the Sistine Chapel ceiling and its position within the Vatican, imagery within manuscripts — especially sumptuously illuminated manuscripts — has an intimate and essential relationship with the entire cycle of images within the manuscript but also with the text of the manuscript.

“Viewing the images without considering this relationship is a bit like having a film studies course where you study stills from the film and read the screenplay but never actually watch the film itself,” Dr. Pulliam said.

Dr. Pulliam is more interested in the smaller graphics, which she says share many of the same concerns as twentieth and twenty-first century graphic design. There are approximately 2,000 decorated initials that Dr. Pulliam has studied, looking for correlations to the text.

“I did find considerable correlation between the text and the minor decoration or ‘drolleries,’” Dr. Pulliam said. “For example, heads, which I believe portray Christ, appear in those passages of the gospel that describe the visual apprehension of Christ when he returns from the dead. For example, a human head appears within the initial that begins Mark 14:61-62, where the high priests ask Christ, ‘Art thou the Christ, the Son

Copy of manuscript detail by Derek Williams



of the blessed God?’ and Christ replies, ‘I am. And you shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of the power of God, and coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

Dr. Pulliam said these manuscripts have more in common with graphic design than with painting. Much of the “art” of making illuminated manuscripts is a consideration of the overall layout of a page — the placing of words, the choice of “font” style (or in the case of manuscripts “script”), the size of the text, and other design elements. Moreover, like graphic design, there is often a sense of play between the meaning of the words, their shape and the relationship between word and image.

The gospels are written in Latin, but the texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are basically the same in content as most modern English versions of the Bible, which makes translating the text a little easier, according to Pulliam.

Until 1990, there was no color version of the *Book of Kells* available. Even now, a full-color copy costs around \$18,000 and Dr. Pulliam frequently travels to Louisville to see the copy located closest to Bowling Green. Because the manuscript is so old and the way it was made with paints, handling it does contain the risk of a certain level of damage. “It’s virtually impossible to see the manuscript itself,” Dr. Pulliam said.

The manuscript, which is very dear to the Irish people, is kept at Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, under a modern security system. Very few people have been able to examine the manuscript outside of its display case. Bernard Meehan, the keeper of manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, decides who may have access to the manuscripts.



Photo by LaDonna Harmon

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Copy of manuscript detail by Heather Pulliam



Photo courtesy of Heather Pulliam



WKU instructor Hamish Thompson stands in front of a round tower approximately 90 feet tall. Towers were used by the monks to protect themselves and manuscripts like the *Book of Kells* when the Vikings arrived.

“From conversations I had with the security guards, it seems the pages are turned every four to six months. These commitments plus the status of the manuscript — both in terms of a national treasure and as an artwork — make it exceedingly difficult to see the manuscript. I attended a conference a few months before seeing the manuscript, where one scholar claimed to be one of six or seven ‘people alive’ to have had access to the *Book of Kells*, so it’s a pretty rare privilege.”

In 2004 with the help of a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, Dr. Pulliam was granted permission to spend about seven hours studying one of the four books. She was allowed to look at, but not touch the manuscript.

“They turn the pages for you,” she said. “Getting to the manuscript room itself was interesting. You have to walk past a long line of people standing to see the two gospel books that are on display and then go up with a security guard through the ‘long room,’ the Old Library of Trinity College Dublin, which itself is an amazing sight. George Lucas is said to have designed the “Jedi Library” in the Star Wars prequel from it.”

The manuscript was set up in a room for Dr. Pulliam. It travels in its own specially designed carrying case. “When working with the manuscript, you quickly forget the surroundings and take advantage of what is probably a once-in-a-lifetime chance to analyze it,” she said. The clarity of the manuscript surprised Dr. Pulliam. “It also looked as if the decoration was interrupted at some point and the artist who continued it was not as skilled or was unfamiliar with the techniques. For example, in places, someone has covered over the fine under-drawings with blue paint.”

Two of the four gospels are kept on display at all times. A third has been

taken out of rotation. That leaves just one book for scholars to study at a time, Dr. Pulliam said. She was allowed about fifteen minutes to look at the two display books after the area was closed to the public.

Pulliam has studied other manuscripts of about the same age as the *Book of Kells* in other locations. Each setting is different. In France, she



Trier Cathedral

Photo courtesy of Heather Pulliam

studied one manuscript in a small library in the country with children doing their homework at a table next to hers.

She also studied the *Trier Gospels*, a manuscript related to the *Book of Kells*, in Trier, Germany. Trier, which was one of the Northern most cities of the Roman Empire, still has an incredible range of Roman ruins and artifacts. Although created on the European continent, the *Trier Gospels* show the influence of an Irish scribe. They are less sumptuous and certainly lack the sophistication of the *Book of Kells*, but they are one of the few related manuscripts that share a similar number

of decorated initials, Dr. Pulliam explained.

In Trier, the gospels are owned by Trier Cathedral and kept in the cathedral treasury. Professor Franz Ronig, a Catholic priest, who has charge over the cathedral and its treasures, dictates who may or may not see the manuscript and for how long. Sometimes, as is the case with both the *Trier Gospels* and the *Book of Kells*, the keeper of the manuscript will limit the number of pages one is allowed to examine. In some places, scholars are left alone with the manuscript and in others (as was the case in both Trier and Dublin) someone else will turn the pages for the researcher. In the case of larger manuscript collections, there are reading rooms for manuscripts, where no pens are allowed and there is a staff that monitors researchers constantly. Typically in these rooms, readers examining a manuscript that is older (eleventh century or earlier) or that contains a certain amount of illumination (which is vulnerable to flaking) are seated nearer to the library staff.

As an iconographer, Dr. Pulliam strives to “decode” the symbolism of images, using sources such as Bible commentaries written centuries ago, as well as other artworks of the same era. She tries to interpret how the scriptures were perceived in the past. She explains, “The events of 9/11 brought to the surface a renewed awareness of the complexity of religious belief and the need for understanding other religions. My research attempts to add to that understanding.”

Dr. Pulliam’s book, *Word and Image in the Book of Kells*, which was published by Four Courts Press, Ireland’s premier academic press, is scheduled for release in December 2005.