

*The Illuminated Gospel of St John*

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Page size: 210 x 270mm, Page extent: 160pp

Hand-drawn Calligraphy in a French Bâtarde style by Jane Sullivan

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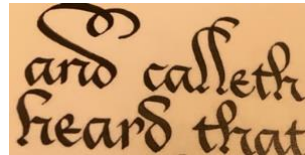


Over the past several years there has been an upsurge in the publication of books concerned with the history of illuminated manuscripts. Chief among these are Christopher de Hamel's *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, Mary Wellesley's *Hidden Hands* and, most recently, Sara J. Charles's *Medieval Scriptorium*. Meticulously researched and accessibly written (and thereby, neatly bridging the scholarly/popular divide), these publications shed light on what was involved in the making of illuminated manuscripts including what might have constituted the inventory of the typical monastic scriptorium. Greater attention has also been paid to the humble scribe and artist (they were rarely one and the same person) whose manual dexterity and artistic prowess rested on a spiritual foundation. Expensive to produce, labour-intensive and singular, the elegant script and gorgeous miniature paintings which were the defining features of such manuscripts were generally commissioned by wealthy patrons for private devotion or public worship.

Amid such renewed interest in the illuminated manuscript, the specialist department charged with responsibility for the printing of Bibles and prayer books at Cambridge University Press made the bold decision to publish an original illuminated edition of St John's Gospel. A year in the making, this unique and beautifully produced edition of the gospel is the work of Jane Sullivan, a gifted artist and calligrapher whose academic and professional path took her from her native California to Cork followed by Cambridge and finally, France where she has lived since 2014. Robustly bound and printed in the Netherlands with a cream cover upon which title and ornate designs have been superimposed, the gospel measures 210 x 270 mm. At first sight, its dimensions might suggest what, since c. the C18<sup>th</sup> century, has been known as a 'coffee table book' which roughly translates out as an attractive book intended for ornamental display within a domestic setting rather than a work intended for serious reading or study. This, however, would be to miss the point. The size would have been determined not solely as a means of setting off its [the gospel's] visually exquisite content but by the demands such a work might exact upon a C21<sup>st</sup> century reader. Used to the bland uniformity of contemporary texts – print and electronic versions – this edition of St John's Gospel which has been painstakingly copied out in a C15<sup>th</sup> calligraphic script demands that it be read patiently and deliberately. This allows the text to be received meditatively much along the lines of the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* whereby meaning is revealed in a slow, progressive tempo.

Arguably freer and less restrained than a commissioned edition may have been, this is a work of striking originality. This can be evidenced in the choice of script, visual display of illuminated chapter letters, artistic tableaux and motifs – many of which recall the playfulness present in medieval versions. Also of note was Sullivan's preference for the King James Version of the gospel rather than one of the more recent translations singled out for greater accuracy and clarity. Her decision, based on the beauty and musicality of its language – which is at once poetic and haunting – was to prove fortuitous. The rights to the King James Version are vested in the Crown and letters patent and Cambridge University Press is the King's printer and publisher of the KJV.

The Artist's Afterword to the gospel tells us something about Jane Sullivan's background including having spent four years producing a limited edition of the Psalter at the invitation of the monks at the Abbey of St Martin in Ligugé. We are also told what, for this present work, influenced her choice of gospel and her preferred calligraphic script. The decision to use French Bâtarde stemmed from its being a more adaptable and softer script than some of its predecessors. Having originated in the C15<sup>th</sup> and the progeny of Gothic script, it allows for more elegant flourishes, especially in the ascender strokes, giving the calligrapher greater freedom. Another aspect to single out is that of words broken off at unexpected junctures and the ends of some words straying vertically up the page – an addition forming a visual bond between the presence of words and images in this work since both are bound up in a capacity to surprise and even, enchant.



*Example of French Bâtarde Script*

Artistically, there are conventional to more fantastical images to delight the eye. In the second chapter of the gospel, for example, we find a Holy Spirit crowned with a very ornate gold nimbus, reminiscent of a crest. Elsewhere, among the 160 pages that make up the gospel, we meet winged dragons and rabbits (one of which has dived into a hollowed-out tree trunk, its identity sealed by its scut), spouting volcanoes, winged horses hovering in mid-air and even a pair of unicorns engaged in locking horns. One quibble with the publication was the lack of a coloured ribbon marker both for its aesthetic value and to signal that it is a sacred text meant to be read in more than one sitting. However, the lack of ribbon marker as bookmark is mitigated by the fact that historically, illuminated chapter initials were intended to serve as visual memoranda so that places left off could be easily found again. Chapter initials include one depicting Nicodemus, strikingly framed against a blue-black night sky lit by crescent moon and stars, holding on tightly to a fragile tendril. Other images include a quartet of variously positioned cats cradled between an embrace of words. Elsewhere, there is a visually stunning 'T' with an angelic harpist set against a bright red background. And in this most spiritual and mystical of gospels with its theological unfolding of signs and implorations to see, the symbolic has its place. Take, for instance, the account of the raising of Lazarus. In this version, the allusion to resurrection lies in the presence of delicately coloured butterflies fluttering up and down the pages.



Sullivan's gorgeous range of colour extends beyond chapter letters to the choice of colours for the naming of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – in this case, spelled out in blue, red (for its association with Jesus' sacrificial death) and shimmering gold – and moving onto a pacific green 'Peace'. Of artistic note, too is the recurrence of Celtic design and interlace, a visual reference point to postgraduate study in Ireland where she first came under its spell.

In an age dominated by digital content, the possession of a C21<sup>st</sup> edition of an illuminated manuscript unmediated by technology has a special appeal. In spite of greater accessibility of rare and precious manuscripts by means of digitisation, there remains a place within the contemporary, material world for works such as this in answer to our human need for that which, through its very materiality, can be held, worked through and prayed over.

*Susanne Jennings*

