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The Power of the Personal

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Committee on Illumination and Text, he devised many new ways of representing the religious significance of the Bible text. And as he went along, the motifs he used began to reappear in different parts of *The Saint John's Bible*. So I suppose we could say that, if you follow the development of the manuscript over the years it took to produce, you can trace a growing body of new motifs that began to be used within the book.

That was exciting to watch as the Bible was being made. The illuminations in the first volume that was produced — *Gospels and Acts* — had to be created from scratch. But once the manuscript was underway, new illuminations began to quote motifs from earlier illuminations.

Some examples of these motifs are the use of rainbow colors to represent the divine presence, or the figure of the dark bird that appears in Genesis.

Donald's process of adapting contemporary images to evoke themes in the text reminds me of the early Christian Church taking motifs from late Roman society and adapting them to the new churches they were building around the empire. Some of these images had staying power, and became accepted standards for representing God and the saints in Christian art; some fell by the wayside.

Time will tell whether the imagery Donald created will have the same kind of impact on religious artists.

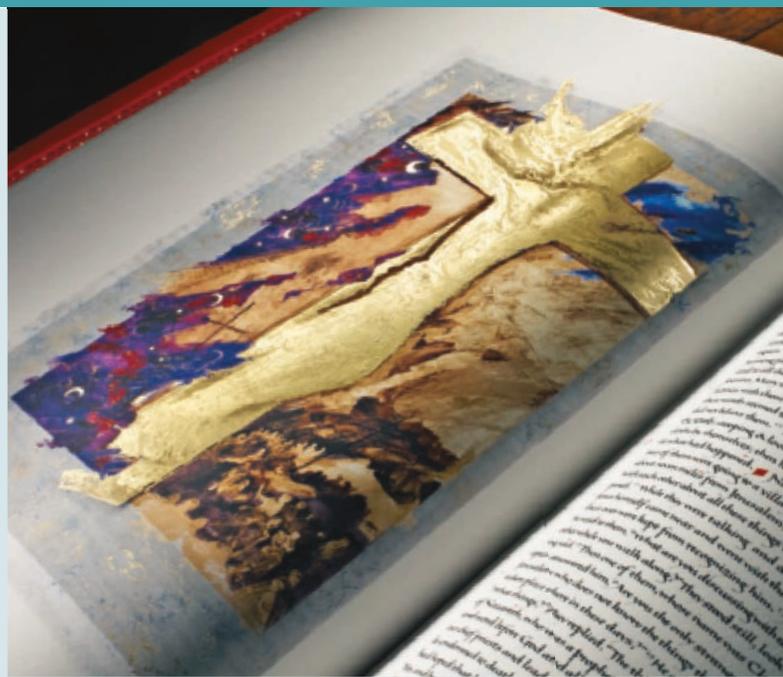
Q: Which motifs struck you as particularly successful for an illuminated Bible of the 21st century?

A: Hard question to answer. I can only really speak of things that personally appeal to me here. I think that as the production of the Bible progressed, Donald Jackson became more confident in his sense of scale. I prefer the boldest compositions, and there are more of these in the later volumes.

One of my personal favorites is "Wisdom Woman," which appears in Wisdom of Solomon. I find the striking photographic image of the wise old woman contrasts beautifully with the hand-work of the gilding and painting. And it's a very fresh take on this figure from the text. In a society that does not value old age, it's a powerful way of envisioning the wisdom of experience.

I'm also very struck by the "Vision of the New Temple" in Ezekiel. On one hand, the image of the temple plan seems so solid, yet it shimmers, suggesting the visionary quality of the text.

Having said I like bold images, I also love looking at the Song of Songs. Donald filled the margins with expressive marks — they look like rose petals scattered across the page. There's a sumptuousness to that treatment that goes perfectly with the imagery of the text. 🏠



Crucifixion, Donald Jackson, Copyright 2002, *The Saint John's Bible*, Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota USA. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Power of the Personal

by Karen Eifler

When the University of Portland received the extraordinary benefaction of the Heritage Edition, I dove heart-first into learning everything possible about it. Books and workshops facilitated by Jim Triggs and Susan Sink fired my imagination about ways to share this gem. My thinking began and ended with how to fill cavernous halls so that the entire Pacific Northwest (why not dream big?) could behold this pinnacle of human accomplishment.

The seats *have* filled. I've found that, given the invitation (and the occasional "Teacher Look"), middle schoolers can engage in contemplative silence as part of a Visio Divina, and that what they behold in the illuminations crackles with insight. A concert of original music inspired by *SJB* images of women was so popular that it has become an annual event. *Psalms*, paraded for three blocks from Temple Beth Israel to St. Mary's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, is the anchor of our Nostra Aetate 50th anniversary commemoration. Portland's zealous calligraphy community filled the room for Fr. Eric Hollas' talk on "Humor and Whimsy in *The Saint John's Bible*," part of a university-wide project touting humor as a sideways weapon against the forces of darkness. So yes, I had the sense of "mission accomplished" regarding ambitions to build a huge audience.

Then I met Jill.

To see a complete listing of
Saint John's Bible events, visit:
saintjohnsbible.org and click on
"See the Bible."

You can also follow the
journey of *The Saint John's
Bible* on Facebook, Twitter and
YouTube. Regular updates,
advance notices of new
publications and photos of new
illuminations can all be found on
these social media sites.



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It was to be a routine field trip for *Gospels and Acts*, a reprise for a faith-sharing group of my standard presentation. Days before the event, Marcia, the woman who had made the arrangements, told me that her dear friends Jill and Dick, fresh converts to Catholicism and members of the group, had just received a devastating diagnosis of Jill's Stage 4 cancer. The talk was cancelled, as members marshaled their energies around Jill and her husband. But Marcia asked if I'd consider bringing *The Saint John's Bible* to Jill in the intensive care unit.

I packed it up one Sunday afternoon and found myself in a room that barely held four people. Alerted to Jill's low energy, fallout from chemo and pain, I focused on "The Crucifixion." Dick and Marcia held the enormous volume up to her so that Jill could trace the indentations of the gold leaf, absorbing

"Dick and Marcia held the enormous volume up to her so that Jill could trace the indentations of the gold leaf, absorbing it all, and asking a few questions in the hushed tones of someone in the throes of wonder."



it all, and asking a few questions in the hushed tones of someone in the throes of wonder. A nurse wandered in and was transfixed; the silence was the warm, gentle kind that marks Divine Presence. Words were superfluous.

Cancer claimed Jill not too long afterward. Their new faith sustained both her and Dick, as he shared at her funeral. But he also relayed the impact of Jill's single encounter with *The Saint John's Bible* and the light it shed on her spiritual journey in her final days. Filling an auditorium isn't the only way to ignite spiritual imagination. Jill, Dick and Marcia convinced me that four is plenty. 

[Karen Eifler is the Co-Director of the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life and American Culture at the University of Portland.]