

Introduction to *The Saint John's Bible* Exhibit

The Saint John's Bible is the first manuscript to be produced by a Benedictine monastery in over 500 years. It is a one-of-a-kind modern masterpiece of old-world calligraphy and contemporary art, created over 15 years by the world's finest scribes, calligraphers and iconographers. The exhibit at the Biggs features 70 original pages from the Bible, which is written on calfskin and decorated by hand, making it the first illuminated Bible commissioned since the invention of the printing press.

The Bible was created using historic, illuminated manuscript techniques and is open to a wide array of interpretations of the text and images. Its presence here in Delaware offers an incredible opportunity for you and your students to actively engage with the manuscript's images and symbolism, gain an understanding of traditional writing and painting techniques, and see a didactic example of the ways that literature, science, and the world's religions can converge through the arts.

Pre-Visit Discussion

In order to gain the fullest understanding of *The Saint John's Bible*, there are some questions that could be helpful to review with your students before your visit.

What is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of sacred texts used in Judaism and Christianity. In Christianity, the Bible consists of 66 books divided into the Old and New Testaments. The books in the Old Testament are primarily drawn from the Jewish sacred text known as the Torah. The Old Testament begins with the birth of the world in the Creation story and the New Testament begins with the birth of Christ. Christians and Jews consider the text to be directly passed down to humanity from God through the writers of the various texts. The text in *The Saint John's Bible* is taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible and its portrayal and interpretation of the theologies behind religious text could be beneficial in any level of religion class.

What is an illuminated manuscript?

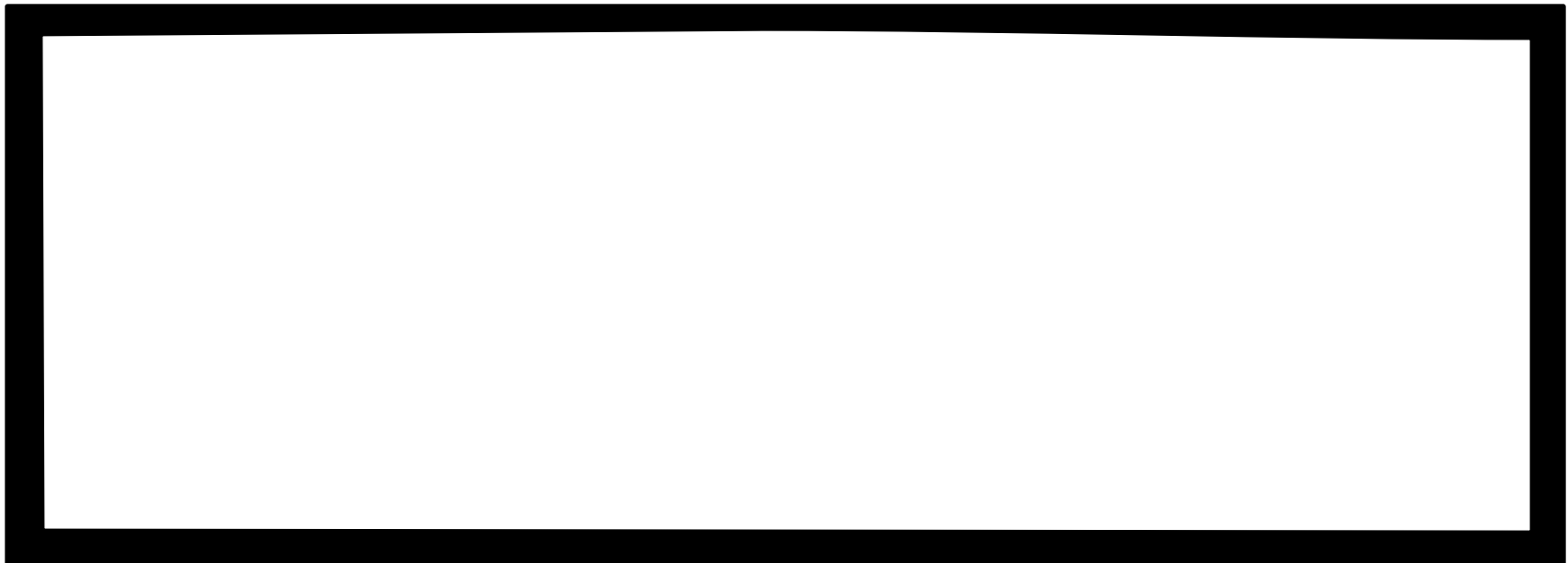
An illuminated manuscript is an illustrated book that is one-of-a-kind and entirely handmade. The word “illuminated” is used to describe these books due to the frequent use of gold-leaf within the texts. The practice began in the Middle Ages and was primarily carried out in monasteries. After their completion, the illuminated manuscripts would have been used for a wide-array of purposes and to serve a diverse audience. Depending on the size of the manuscript, it could have been used to read from aloud in church, or in the case of smaller books, as portable prayer books for wealthy patrons. Manuscripts were traditionally a collaborative effort between the people who made the parchment or vellum, the scribes, and the illustrators. *The Saint John's Bible* follows closely in this collaborative tradition, with 23 artists and calligraphers working internationally to complete the manuscript. The way that *The Saint John's Bible* functions within the larger context of historic book making and written traditions could be integrated into social studies classes.

How are visual symbols used in illuminated manuscripts?

Visual symbolism – or iconography – was used in illuminated manuscripts in a variety of ways. Images of specific objects could be used to convey certain meanings and interpretations of the text. For example, the presence of white lilies was often meant as a reference to Christ's mother Mary and a shepherd frequently referred or foreshadowed Christ as the Good Shepherd of his flock of Christians. In *The Saint John's Bible*, the artists and scholars have included several modern day symbols and we strongly encourage our students to interpret these in relation to the text and their own lives. The profusion of symbols in *The Saint John's Bible* and their interpretation can be connected to reading and writing lessons on symbolism and close analysis. The pre-visit and in-museum activities both relate to the interpretation of images.

Pre-Visit Activity Worksheet

The Saint John's Bible is filled with images that carry a lot of meaning, or symbolism. On the lines below, write a sentence describing something that is important to you. Then, in the blank space draw an image of an object that reminds you of what you wrote about. For example, if you write that school is very important to you, you might think to draw a book or a backpack.



In-Museum Activity

The following is a sample of the activity we provide to your students during their museum visit. This activity can be guided by the instructor or one of our guides, depending on your group's needs. Following this page is an educator's guide, should you choose to do this activity on your own. It offers specific explanations of the symbols, though there really is no "right" interpretation, so if your students develop alternative symbolism, we encourage a discussion of that as well. It also offers specific locations and pages that contain each image, though many can be found throughout the book, and we encourage those discoveries as well.

In this tour, you have learned how to interpret different images. Below is a list of some specific images in *The Saint John's Bible*. Find these images in the pages in our exhibit and then write your interpretation of the symbolism behind each object.

Object	What do you think this object symbolizes?
Image of the Earth	
Skulls	
Gold wings	
Black bird	
Butterfly Wings	
Face of an old woman	
Snake	
Rainbow	

Educator's Guide to In-Museum Activity

Object	Location and how this was interpreted by the artists of the Saint John's Bible
Image of the Earth	<p>Acts, 1:8 in the section of the show that addresses the Gospels.</p> <p>This image represents the vastness of our planet, while also referencing its place in the larger universe. Small crosses throughout these two pages represent the spread of Christianity throughout the world after Christ's death.</p>
Gold wings	<p>Isaiah, 6: 1-13 in the section of the show that addresses the Book of Prophets</p> <p>In this passage, these wings represent the seraphim that accompanied God when they appeared to Isaiah. They also make reference to the time the passage refers to – the Babylonian exile (598 – 538 BC) – in that the design of the wings came from images found on Assyrian reliefs now in the collection of the British Museum. The artist of the book, Donald Jackson, felt that a dream or vision like the one Isaiah experiences in this passage would be informed by the images surrounding him in his conscious life. Given that the passage takes place during the Assyrian reign, it made sense to pull from sources like those Isaiah might have actually seen.</p>
Black bird	<p>Ecclesiastes 1:1 – 2:11 in the section on the Book of Wisdom; Genesis 1: 1-2:4a in the first section</p> <p>The large, black bird is a recurring motif throughout The Saint John's Bible and it can represent different things depending on the passage it accompanies. In the Bible, the raven is a messenger. It also appears in the Bible as a companion to those traveling from life into death.</p>
Butterfly Wings	<p>Ecclesiastes 1:1-2:11 in the section on the Book of Wisdom, Genesis 3:8 – 6:9 in the first section</p> <p>Butterflies and butterfly wings recur throughout The Saint John's Bible. They can represent the beauty of creation, act as messengers between worlds, and the places in which The Saint John's Bible was created (Wales and Minnesota) since many of the species depicted can be found in both areas.</p>
Face of an old woman	<p>Wisdom of Solomon 8:17-10:13 in the section on the Book of Wisdom</p> <p>This section of <i>The Saint John's Bible</i> characterizes the feminine side of God with a prolific use of silver. Wisdom is often associated with women, particularly older women, so this section also features a page with several images of an older woman.</p>
Snake	<p>Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a (Creation) , Genesis 2:4b – 25 (Adam and Eve) both in the first section</p>

	<p>A snake appears in the Creation page in the 6th column, which is meant to portray the creation of humankind. In this image, it makes reference to the Adam and Eve story and the same snake can be found in that illumination in the same room. The snake symbolizes the end the innocence that Adam and Eve had before the entrance of sin into the world. It is also traditionally seen to be a sign of evil.</p>
Rainbow	<p>Ezekiel 37: 1-14 in the section on the Book of Prophets, Revelations 21: 16-27, Revelations 1: 1 – 2: 29, Corinthians 12: 1 – 14:9 all in the section on the Books of Letters and Revelations</p> <p>Rainbows appear throughout The Saint John's Bible. The meaning of the rainbow in each recurrence varies slightly in relation to the passage, but in general rainbows typically represent the presence of God.</p>