History

Back in the 1990s, renowned calligrapher Donald Jackson observed the monks of Saint John's Abbey processing with their Book of the Gospels for Sunday Mass, and he recognized the importance of “their book.” From childhood, Jackson had dreamed of creating a hand-written, illuminated Bible. He communicated that ambition to Eric Hollas, OSB, a monk at Saint John's Abbey and then-director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, in 1995. Father Eric brought the idea to the monks, and they embraced Jackson’s dream.

In 1998, Saint John's Abbey and University commissioned Jackson to produce a hand-written, hand-illuminated Bible. In Wales, at Jackson's scriptorium, and in Collegeville, Minnesota, among a community of monks living according to the ancient Rule of Saint Benedict, the dream of a masterpiece in art and biblical scholarship took shape.

To create a Bible that would capture the beauty and tradition of centuries of liturgy and carry it into the future—that is the vision that united a calligrapher in Wales with a group of Benedictine monks in Minnesota. Under Jackson’s direction, this international team of calligraphers brought together the ancient techniques of calligraphy and illumination with an ecumenical Christian approach to the Bible rooted in Benedictine spirituality. The result is a living document and a monumental achievement. The Saint John's Bible is both a work of art and a work of theology. It unites the Benedictine tradition with the technology and vision of today, illuminating the Word of God for a new millennium.

Layout & Design

Initial Design
A computer is used to size text and define line breaks. The two-foot by three-foot pages of each volume are laid out in full-size spreads. This enables scribes to work on pages simultaneously, maintain consistency and avoid awkwardly breaking words.

Calligraphy
The script used in The Saint John's Bible was designed by Donald Jackson with three qualities in mind. The text had to be readable, modern, and appropriately dignified for the Bible. Subtle differences in the final script mark the work of the six individual scribes on the project.
**Illuminations**
A schema put together by Donald Jackson and the Committee on Illumination and Text tells which passages will be illuminated and designates the size of each illumination. Many illuminations are commissioned to artists or the result of collaboration between Donald Jackson and additional artists.

**Vellum**
The pages of The Saint John's Bible are made of calfskin vellum. The skins are soaked in lime, dried, scraped or "scratched," and sanded smooth. The final product is nearly translucent, with a "hair side" and "smooth side."

**Tools & Materials**

**Quills**
All the script is written using quills hand-cut by the scribes. Only the largest flight feathers, called "primaries," are used: goose quills for the main body of text, turkey and swan quills for heavier letterforms.

**Ink**
The script is written in lamp black ink from nineteenth-century Chinese ink sticks. The ink sticks are ground in an ink stone with distilled water.

**Pigments**
Vermillion, lapis lazuli, and other cakes and powdered pigments are used for color. The materials are mixed with egg yolk and water to make paint that is thicker than the black ink and loaded onto the quills using brushes.

**Gold Leaf**
Gold leaf makes the manuscript truly illuminated. Using the moisture of breath imparted through a bamboo tube, the artist activates the glue binding agent in gesso until it bonds with the gold leaf. Burnishing tools and brushes finish the gilded image.

**Stencils and stamps**
Stencils and stamps are used to apply paint and gold powder throughout, creating a rich visual vocabulary. Stencils and stamps are made from computer images and provide recurring elements within and across volumes of The Saint John’s Bible.

**The Heritage Edition**
The original manuscript of the Saint John's Bible is curated at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota. The Heritage Edition here displayed provides public access to this timeless treasure. As you move through the exhibit you will experience first-hand a set of full-size, museum-quality reproduction volumes produced in a limited edition for collectors and institutions. Using the highest quality printing techniques and materials, beautifully bound and embossed with metallic foils, this edition is itself a work of art. Under the direct supervision of Donald Jackson, only 299 sets of the Heritage Edition have been produced. No further sets are planned. What you experience here is genuinely a limited edition.
Meet Chief Calligrapher and Project Coordinator Donald Jackson

Donald Jackson is one of the world’s foremost Western calligraphers. At the age of 20, Jackson was appointed a visiting lecturer at the Camberwell College of Art, London. Within six years he became the youngest artist calligrapher chosen to take part in the Victoria and Albert Museum’s first International Calligraphy Show after the war and appointed a scribe to the Crown Office at the House of Lords.

As a scribe to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, he was responsible for the creation of official state documents. In 1985, he received the Medal of The Royal Victorian Order (MVO). Jackson is an elected Fellow and past Chairman of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators, and in 1997, was named Master of the 600-year-old Guild of Scriveners of the city of London. He is the author of The Story of Writing. Jackson and his wife Mabel live and work in the Hendre, a converted town hall and outbuildings in Monmouth, Wales.