

All that glitters... you can touch!

Story Judith Wright Photos DR Bindle

David Bindle has one of the best jobs in the world: buying rare and beautiful books. He's a librarian at the University of Saskatchewan's Archives & Special Collections. His job is to acquire, preserve and help to make the University's rare books and manuscripts accessible.



The medieval collection is small but it's wonderfully “touchable.”

David also curates, catalogues, and evaluates submissions to the library's other collections. “We seldom get to buy original medieval manuscripts, but I do buy one or two reproductions each year,” says David.

High quality reproductions can run from \$3000 to \$20,000 for a single copy. One of the University's most valuable reproductions is the famous Voynich manuscript. The Voynich became known in the early 1920's when it fell into the hands of a Polish rare bookseller named

Voynich. “The Voynich is one of the most famous codices because it’s a cipher that has never been broken,” David explains.

The 600 year old manuscript is full of drawings and symbols, and is written in an unknown language by an unknown author. It has stumped medievalists, linguists, cryptologists, and computer scientists for over a century. The facsimile edition, published in 2018, is acknowledged by experts to be a most accurate reproduction—a virtual clone.

High quality reproductions like the Voynich facsimile replicate each detail of the original manuscript. The binding, the collation of page gatherings, even the discoloration along the edges of the pages from handling is reproduced. “It’s a fusion of digital hi-tech and hand craftsmanship,” says David.

The photographic equipment to make these reproductions is often moved right into the museum’s secure environment—rather than have the book leave the specialized climate and protective space. Specialty publishers even make their own paper, to give the pages the same feel and look of vellum or parchment. Gold foil illumination is often applied by hand, just as in the originals.



Facsimiles, as these reproductions are called, are expensive, but nowhere near the price of an original manuscript. The University owns a few valuable originals, like the Brendan Missal, from the mid-15th century. This liturgical service book is no beauty, but was used by the priest to conduct daily Mass in Germany. Curious knots of leather are glued along the edges of the Missal's pages. "They're bookmarks," says David, "and they're rare, because they usually fall off over the centuries."

With limited funding, universities often can't purchase expensive originals, and David has been keen to build a broad collection, so reproductions are a good option. "It's good to have comparative material. Over the years we've acquired reproductions of three Apocalypses and two Bestiaries." An Apocalypse is a manuscript with imagery and text from the Book of Revelation. A Bestiary is an encyclopedia on animals of the earth, some fantastical, some accurate. "The artist was usually drawing from a description, and the text often includes a moral lesson," explains David.



Another kind of text, common to medieval collections, is the Book of Hours, small devotional pocket-books that people carried around to recite prayers throughout the day. "The text for the Hours of Maria Stuart was created with an incredibly fine

quill," says David, pointing to an unusually tiny book, one inch by one and a half, propped behind a magnifying glass in the library's display case.

The collection includes pages from oversized Psalters too, “large because several singers, even a whole choir, sang from them,” says David. And here are two reproductions of religious texts belonging to Henry the Eighth. The originals are in the Morgan Library in New York. A few years ago, when David visited the Morgan Library, he and the librarian studied the originals alongside their modern reproductions. They were both bound in red velvet, with identical fly-leave, clasps and metal hasps. “They were really remarkably alike,” says David. “We examined them page by page, flipping the pages with a bone spatula, and I asked if I could touch one. The parchment was still surprisingly supple, even after 500 or more years.” The only difference between the original and the reproduction was that the velvet on the original had a few more wrinkles.

So did Henry VIII actually use these books in daily devotion? David laughs. “Well, in spite of his character flaws, we know he actually did read this one because he wrote his comments, here in the margins, where he agrees or disagrees with the text. He had his spiritual concerns ... a bit of a conscience showing here.”



It is easier to find medieval religious material than non-liturgical material, but he recently acquired a 15th century children’s book, made for the young Phillip the Fair, meant to help him learn about his family history. Another rare find is an early book of health and hygiene, the *Tacuinum Sanitatis* or “Tables of Health.” It’s a text on healthy lifestyle, and includes anti-aging remedies. Books like these give insights into the daily life of a European medieval village. *Le Livre de la Chasses* (The Book of the Chase) is one of David’s favorite codices. It’s

about the art of hunting with dogs, and is elaborately illustrated with 87 miniatures. A wealthy hunting aficionado, Gaston Febus, authored the text in the 14th century. The book covers everything from the care of the dogs to different hunting techniques. The text was copied many times, and this particular manuscript, produced in the early 15th century, would sell for millions of dollars today. “If the National Library of France were ever to sell it, that is,” says David.

Buying original manuscripts isn’t possible for many universities—a fact that one Cleveland art historian and curator, Otto Ege, well knew. Back in the 1940’s, Ege (pronounced Eggy) wondered if universities could afford to purchase single pages from different manuscripts. He dismantled a selection of his own medieval manuscripts, took dozens of separate leaves from each manuscript and assembled them in 40 portfolio boxes. He wasn’t the first “book-breaker” to sell off fragments of medieval manuscripts leaf by leaf. The cost per box in 1957 was \$750. A bargain. The University of Saskatchewan acquired one such box through a donation of the local Walter Murray Chapter of Daughters of the Empire.

If one of these boxes was to come on the market today the price would be exponentially higher. Each original leaf is unique. “We know where most of the boxes ended up,” David says. “A few have disappeared, and some of the leaves actually show up from time to time on eBay.”

About fifteen years ago, then English Department Head, Dr. Peter Strocheff, and his English class decided to hold a conference for institutions that owed these boxes. They all came together to compare their pages. There was even an attempt to digitally reconstruct a complete manuscript. “Unfortunately,” says David, “a lot of Ege’s manuscripts were fragments to begin with. He had a financial stake in selling them this way. I don’t think we know today if it was a good idea or a travesty.”

People today say an original manuscript would never be cut up, but, as David said, we don't really know the original condition of Ege's manuscripts. The University's Ege folio pages are carefully kept in acid-free folders in a climate controlled vault, but David takes them out regularly for university classes, or visiting scholars and high schools. "They always inspire further questions," he says. "Each page makes you want to know more the period and the people who used or created them."

He believes examining manuscripts and reproductions helps people form a connection with the past. "They give us a glimpse of philosophies of the day and the nature of scholarly work. They also help to explain how great classical works made their way into the printed works we buy today." People have always been interested in rare and beautiful objects, but the study of medieval manuscripts tells us a lot about the world.

Most of what we know about early history and art—what was worth recording, for example, translating, and interpreting—has been learned from these manuscripts. "Individual ownership conveyed wealth, piety and devotion, even intellect—if you were one of the fortunate who could read," says David.

While the handling of original Ege leaves is reserved for researchers, you *can* handle many of the University's beautiful reproductions in the Special Collections reading room—and you don't have to have scholarly credentials, or be a student.

“I’ve never known someone to hold one of these objects without having more questions,” says David. “These books make us curious, and inspire the reader to use their imagination.”

