The Beauty of Sacred Texts
Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

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Walsh Library Gallery • Seton Hall University
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The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary this year. At the center of the celebration is the work of Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher (1904-1993), the founding Director of the Institute. Msgr. Oesterreicher was one of the architects of the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on “The Bond between the Church and the Jewish People,” which was promulgated on October 28, 1965 as section 4 of the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate). In the 1978 agreement between the Institute and Seton Hall University, Msgr. Oesterreicher called for the exploration of themes that show where the Jewish-Christian dialogue intersects with the other world religions.

When the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies was founded in 1953, the State of New Jersey was home to Christians (Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants) and Jews, many of whom had been living in the state for at least two generations. Now, fifty years later, New Jersey has a much larger and more diverse population, including representatives of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religions. To foster understanding and amity among the religious groups living in New Jersey as well as to honor the ecumenical outlook of Msgr. Oesterreicher, Seton Hall’s Walsh Library Gallery presents an exhibit of sacred texts of four of the world’s faiths—Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

The goal of the exhibition is to demonstrate the centrality of texts to these religions. Indeed, common to all is that a “supreme” sacred text or a body of sacred writings is the source of religious doctrine, ritual, and appropriate conduct. The exhibition also makes it clear that the high regard in which sacred texts are held by the faithful is manifested in the care and attention given to their production.

Drawing on public and private collections in New Jersey and New York, this exhibition brings together examples of sacred texts, as well as related ritual objects. Highlighting the aesthetic aspects of sacred texts, it shows how beauty, in all cultures, served as the handmaiden of religion. Thus, to paraphrase Nostra Aetate, the exhibition focuses on what is beautiful, true, and holy in religions.
CHRISTIANITY

Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in Galilee and died in Judea about 30 CE, was declared to be God's Anointed One (Messiah in Hebrew, Christ in Greek) by his followers. Their faith became known as Christianity. Springing from Judaism, it accepts the inspired nature of the Jewish Scriptures, which Christians called the Old Testament. This body of texts was completed by twenty-seven books, known as the New Testament. Together they are known as the Christian Bible (from the Greek word biblia, for "books").

The oldest extant copies of the New Testament, the biblical books that record Jesus' life and contain his teachings and those of his followers, date from the 4th century CE. They are written in Greek characters, though they were probably produced in Egypt. Manuscript production of Bibles flourished both in Byzantine Eastern Europe and the West throughout the early and high Middle Ages. The invention of printing had a direct effect on Bible production. The famous Gutenberg Bible was the first major work to be printed with movable type. Book printing was an important aid to Christian missionary efforts as it made possible the printing of large numbers of Bibles in many different languages.

Two Greek Orthodox Gospels
Open: published by Anesti Konstantinidou, Athens, Greece, 1899
Printed on paper, 13" x 10"
Loaned by Father Dimitrios Antokas, Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Westfield, NJ
Closed: Published by Michael I. Saliverou, Athens, Greece, 1899
Leather and silver binding, 13½" x 10½"
Loaned by Father John Theodosion, St. George Orthodox Church, Piscataway, NJ

Gospels are books that contain the texts of the four gospels. The closed gospel shown here features the portraits of the four evangelists surrounding an image of the crucifixion.

Bible - English Translation of the Vulgate
Thomas Kelly Publishers, New York, 1879
Curved leather binding with metal clasps and gilded cross on cover, 12" x 10"
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Rare Book Collection)

In 384, Pope Damasus I commissioned his secretary, later known as Saint Jerome (332-420), to create a new Latin translation of the Bible. Jerome opted to use the vulgar Latin spoken by the people rather than the classical Latin used by the literati of the day. His translation became known as the Vulgate.

Page from the Gutenberg Bible
Mainz, 1455
Printed on paper, 10" x 12"
Loaned by the American Bible Society, New York, NY (Gift of Dr. Gilbert Darlington)

In 1455, Johann Gutenberg (c. 1398-1468) issued the first book printed from movable type, a beautifully executed folio-size Latin Bible. Some 160 to 180 copies were printed, a quarter on vellum, the rest on paper. This leaf came from a copy broken up and sold individually by its owner, New York dealer, Gabriel Wells.
German Bible
Published by Anton Koberger, Nuremberg, Germany 1483
Printed on paper with hand-colored illustrations, 16" x 11\(\frac{3}{4}\)"
Loan by the American Bible Society, New York, NY

Anton Koberger (c. 1440-1532), the godfather of the famous artist Albrecht Dürer, was one of the best-known early printers in Nuremberg. His 1483 Bible was the ninth edition of the Bible in German. The text was printed from moveable type, the images from separate woodblocks, which were colored by hand.

Ethiopian Psalter in a carrying case with strap
Ethiopia, 18th century
Coptic binding and wood, 12" x 12"
Loan by American Bible Society, New York, NY
(Gift of William H. North)

This book was copied by hand more than three hundred years after the invention of printing. At the time, it was almost impossible for people in Ethiopia to get a printed copy of the Bible in their own language. To spread God's word, traveling priests and preachers had to manufacture their own Scriptures, which they carried around in a leather case.

King James Bible
Published by Sternhold and Hopkins, London, 1619
Stamped leather over oak board. Center brass studs and metal corners attached on an old chain. 12" x 14"
Loan by the American Bible Society, New York, NY

The King James version of the Bible was one of the first officially sanctioned Bible translations in any language. It was produced by a committee of scholars in 1611. The practice of chaining Bibles to lecterns or columns in churches became widespread in the 16th century as books were expensive and precautions needed to be taken against possible theft.

Massachusetts Bible
Published by Samuel Green, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1685
Contemporary brown Morocco binding with gilt stamping, 7\(\frac{3}{4}\)" x 5\(\frac{1}{2}\)"
Loan by the American Bible Society, New York, NY

This is the second Bible published in America. Printed in the Algonquian language, its text was copied from the Bible's translation into that native American tribal language by Puritan minister John Eliot (1604 – 1690), first published in Cambridge in 1663.

Polyglot Bible
Baltimore, Armstrong and Berry, 1842
Flat case leather binding, 5" x 3"
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Rare Book Collection)

Polyglot Bibles feature the biblical text in several languages, such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English, generally printed in corresponding columns. They were meant for study and analysis. This Polyglot Bible was designated for use in Bible classes or Sunday school instruction. Its small size and flat case leather binding made it easy to carry around.

Book of Hours
Flanders, 1450
Latin manuscript on vellum, illuminated, 6\(\frac{3}{8}\)" x 11\(\frac{3}{8}\)"
Loan by the American Bible Society, New York, NY

Books of hours were devotional books for the laity that included psalms, hymns, prayers, and readings, arranged according to the canonical hours of the Divine Office.
The history of the Jewish religion as it is known today begins with Moses, who led the "Children of Israel" out of slavery in Egypt around 1240 BCE and to the "Promised Land." When they reached Mount Sinai, in present-day Egypt, God gave Moses a set of rules that the people of Israel should live by. These included the Ten Commandments, the foundational principle of Judaism.

Judaism has two sacred books, the Bible and the Talmud. The first is divided into the Torah, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa or Writings. The Torah comprises the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch of "five volumes"), which embody the laws of Moses. The reading of the Torah is central to the synagogue ritual. Prophets contains the Historical Books, which recount the history of the Jews from the time they arrive in the Holy Land, and the writings of the major prophets. The Hagiographa contain all other biblical books, including the Book of Esther, which is at the root of the Jewish festival of Purim. The Talmud, which comprises the Mishnah and the Gemara, is a book of ethics and law. Though today most Jews no longer think of it as divinely inspired, for centuries it was considered a holy book, the study of which was considered an essential devotional activity.

While archaeologists have found fragments of sacred Hebrew texts that date back before the Common Era, the first complete extant Jewish Bible dates from the 11th century CE. The production of sacred Jewish texts flourished in the Middle Ages. The arts of calligraphy and illumination were the only creative outlet of Jewish artists, as they were not allowed the join the guilds and thus were barred from the practice of most arts and crafts. The decorative procedures in Hebrew sacred texts were centered on calligraphy, a form of art in which script is used as a decorative element. In Europe, Hebrew books other than the Torah might be illustrated with pictures. In Islamic lands, however, figural art was not used for religious purposes and Jews in these countries did not decorate their prayerbooks with figural images, as they did in Christian Europe. After 1475, the craftsmen who created the manuscripts also contributed to the development of printing by designing the typefaces and decorating the works.

Torah with Crown, Shield, and Pointer or Yad
Torah: Czechoslovakia, 19th century
Ink on parchment, 14 ¾" x 4 ½" x 3 ¾"
Crown: 19th century
Silver, 16" height, 10" diameter
Shield: Israel, 20th century
Silver, 15" x 11"
Yad: 19th century
Yemenite silver filigree, 10 ½" long
Loaned by Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ

*The Torah scroll is the most important object in the synagogue and the only one to be intrinsically holy. Detailed regulations govern its preparation: It must be handwritten in black ink by a specially trained scribe on one side of parchment made from the skins of kosher animals. The text is written in a special Hebrew script called keter, used exclusively for the Torah. The sheets are sewn together with sinews to form a long scroll which itself cannot be touched. Its ends are tied to two wooden rollers called atzei hayyim. In the synagogue, the torah is crowned with a silver crown and protected by a shield. As it cannot be touched by human hands, a silver pointer or yad is used to mark the lines.*
Panel from Torah Scroll.
Eastern Europe (Ashkenazi tradition), 19th or early 20th century
Parchment in black ink
Loaned by the family of Dr. Susan Kriegel Leshnoff

Individual Torah “panels” are extremely rare as Torahs must remain intact. Only in the concentration camps of World War II were Torahs sometimes dismembered and individual panels hidden under the prisoners’ clothes. It is possible that this is such a panel, brought home by a Holocaust survivor. The text from Leviticus is written in the Eastern European Ashkenazi style of writing, black ink in a vertical block script. The decorative “crowns” (Hebrew: “tagim”) attached to the Hebrew letters are used exclusively as an embellishment in “Ashurit,” the Hebrew calligraphy used exclusively for the Torah text. Torah scrolls of Spanish (Sephardic) origin are written with brown ink in a more cursive style.

Yad
Israel, 20th century
Silver with some Yemenite filigree
Loaned by the family of Dr. Susan Kriegel Leshnoff

This yad was used in the reading of the Torah by Rabbi Alter Kriegel at the Jewish Community Center of Verona (now Congregation Beth Ahm of West Essex) until his retirement in the mid 1970s.

Illustrated Jerusalem Bible
New York, 1964
Bound in silver and turquoise treasure binding, 9” x 6”
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Gov. Richard J. Hughes Collection)

Written in English and Hebrew, this Jewish Bible is divided into the Pentateuch, Prophets, and Writings. It is clasped into a treasure binding that is designed to be transferable from book to book. Treasure bindings were introduced in the Middle Ages but became rare in subsequent periods. This binding was probably custom-made to serve as a gift to Governor Richard J. Hughes from the Morristown Jewish Center in 1964.

Haggadah shel Pesah (Passover Haggadah)
Illustrated by Arthur Szyk. Published by Beaconfield Press, London. 1939
Ink on vellum, 11 ½” x 20 ½” x 1 ½”
Loaned by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, NY

The Haggadah is a Hebrew text recited during the Passover celebrations. This one is illustrated by the well-known illustrator Arthur Szyk (1894-1951).

Scroll of Esther
Basel, 1816
Printed on paper, 9” x 120 ½”
Loaned by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, NY

Scroll of Esther in Wooden Case
Jerusalem, 20th century
Scroll, hand-printed on parchment in wooden case, 14” long
Loaned by Family of Dr. Susan Kriegel Leshnoff

As the Book of Esther does not contain the name of God, it is a cherished but not sacred text, commonly found in Jewish homes. Two stylized images are carved into the case. One is a stylized brick wall, identified as “Kotel Ma-arvi” (Western Wall), a reference to the extant western wall of the Second Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem. The other represents, according to the inscription below, the tomb of Rachel (“Kever Rachel Imanu”).

King David and King Solomon Micrograph
Meyer Rabinowitz, New York, 1876
Ink on paper, 23 ¾” x 17 ½”
Loaned by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, NY

One of the most characteristic forms of Jewish calligraphy was micrography, a minute form of writing arranged in geometric shapes or used to form outlines of objects, animals or humans.
Islam is a monotheistic religion revealed to the Prophet Muhammed (d. 632 CE) in early 7th-century Arabia. It is the youngest of the world religions, and among the most widespread. At its core is the belief that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammed is his prophet.

The most sacred scripture of Islam is the Qur’an. Muslims believe that it contains the very words of God, which were received by Muhammad in a series of revelations. Next in importance to the Qur’an, at least for some Muslim sects, are the Hadiths, or Traditions of the Prophet. The number of separate Hadiths has been estimated in the hundreds of thousands. Most of them are claimed to be genuine sayings of the Prophet or stories about him.

The arts of the book were highly developed throughout the Islamic lands because of the primacy Islam accorded to the written word. Early manuscript Qur’ans mostly took the form of codices with a distinctive horizontal format. Qur’ans and other sacred books were elaborately calligraphed in a variety of scripts and decorated with non-representational, mostly geometric ornamentation. As Moslems adhered more strictly than Jews and Christians to the second commandment, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven images, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters,” figurative decoration was restricted exclusively to non-religious texts.

The art of papermaking was developed to a high degree in the Islamic world, which was responsible for the transfer of this technique from China to the West. Paper-related techniques such as marbling and papercuts were also turned into arts. Manuscripts and albums of calligraphy and painting were enclosed in fine bindings of leather and pasteboard, which were often stamped, cut, painted and gilded. Although block-printing was used sporadically, the manuscript tradition long remained vital; printing with movable type was introduced only at a relatively late date.

Oversized Qur’an
Published by Dar Elsfqa, Cairo, Egypt, 1994
Printed on paper, 26” x 19”
Loaned by the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, Monmouth Junction, NJ

*The Qur’an is the sacred book of Islam. It contains God’s message to the Prophet Muhammed, revealed at different times during the Prophet’s life at Mecca and at Medina. The Qur’an began as a body of recited texts. It was not compiled in a single written volume until after the Prophet's death.*
Single-Page Qur’an
Cairo, Egypt, 1998
Printed on paper, 35” x 24”
Loaned by the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, Monmouth Junction, NJ

Single-page Qur’ans are a common decoration in Muslim homes.

Qur’an in Leather Case
Morocco, 19th century.
Egyptian leather binding, 5” x 7”. Leather case 5” x 7½”
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Francis Monroe Hammond Collection, Gift of Bertha Hammond)

Verse of the Qur’an in Calligraphy
Saudi Arabia, 1993
Ink on goat skin, 42½” x 30”
Loaned by the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, Monmouth Junction, NJ

The Qur’an gives the art of writing a special place in Muslim thought and life, as it states that God “taught man by the pen.” The standard writing instrument was the reed pen. The best reeds came from Iraq, Egypt, and Shiraz in Iran. The preparation of ink was often a trade secret. Frequently, it was made of soot; it could be washed easily off the goat skins on which much of the writing was done. Today, calligraphy has become the most revered art form in the Islamic world because it links the literary heritage of the Arabic language with the religion of Islam. This calligraph of verse 255 of the Qur’an (“Verse of the Throne”) shows an early type of writing, known as Kufic, named after Kufa, a city in southern Iraq and a major intellectual centre in the first centuries of Islam.

Prayer Rug of the Masjid Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem
Saudi Arabia, 1998
Wool and silk pile on cotton, 45 ½” x 25”
Loaned by Dr. Mohammad Chaudry

The prayer rug is placed so that it is directed towards the Kaaba in Mecca. Muslims kneel on the rug to say their prayers. In this particular prayer rug, the dome of the Al Aqsa Mosque should be facing Mecca.

Photograph of the Kaaba in Mecca
Photograph by Ahmed El-Ritty, QEMA Agen, Mecca, Saudi Arabia, 1993
Poster, 34” x 36”
Loaned by the Islamic Society of Central Jersey, Monmouth Junction, NJ

Mecca is the holiest city in the Islamic world. It is there that Prophet Muhammad received his first revelations around 610, while meditating in a cave. Located in modern Saudi Arabia, it is situated about 50 miles from the Red Sea. Muslims believe that the city’s most sacred site, the Kaaba, was built by the Old Testament patriarch Abraham and his son Ishmael, to whom Arab people trace their descent.
BUDDHISM

The Buddhist religion is based on the teaching of Gautama Siddhartha, a Hindu spiritual leader who is thought to have lived from 563 to 483 BCE. Buddhism originated in India and gradually spread to large parts of Asia, including Tibet, Sri Lanka, China, Korea, and Japan. In different places and times, Buddhism took on many different forms.

Gautama Siddhartha was the son of a king. At age twenty-nine he gave up his family and privileged life in search of answers to the problems of old age, sickness and death. Rather than following the teachings of the early Hindu holy men, who believed in purifying the soul by enduring pain and sorrow, he practiced meditation. He found that in so doing his mind attained enlightenment and as “Buddha” or the “enlightened one” he was free from the troubles of the world.

The sacred texts of Buddhism are called “suttas” or “sutras,” literally “strings” [of words]. Sutras are doctrinal works in which the teachings of the Buddha are explained and deliberated. The Tripitaka or Pali Canon, which is the central text of the Theravada school of Buddhism, is generally thought to contain the earliest surviving record of the Buddha’s teachings. But the body of Buddhist canonical writings is enormous as each of the many different sects has their own sacred scriptures.

Sutras are written in many different languages and scripts, as well as illustrated in dramatically different styles depending on the country where they were produced. They may be written or printed on paper, mounted on a scroll or bound in book form; or their texts may be inscribed on leaves, pieces of bark, or slats of bamboo.

Manuscript of Lama Zhang Tsondru Dragpa’s Secret Teaching in a Skull Cup (Kapala)
Tibet, Late 15th century
Book: flat back leather binding and paper, 3 3/8" x 4 3/8"
Skull cup: human bone and silver, 5" in diameter
Loaned by Mr. Gene Smith (promised to the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, New York, NY)

This fifteenth-century manuscript copy of a collection of religious practice instructions by Lama Zhang Tsondru Dragpa (1123-1193) is small in size so that it fits the skull cup that serves as its holder.
Collected Writings of Third Chesho, Incarnation JangchubChesho Trulku

Jangchub Tenpai Dronme (1861-1934)
Kumbum Monastery, Qinghai Province, China, 20th century
Woodblock-printed book with pages made of the inner bark of a tree from the Daphneum family, 4 ½” x 21 ½”
Loan by Mr. Gene Smith (promised to the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, New York, NY)

This book contains the collected writings of a famous Mongolian Lama, which survived the Cultural Revolution. The Buddhist canon is distinguished from that of most other major religions in that it is open rather than closed. In principle, anyone can become enlightened and deliver new and authoritative sermons that may be added to the canonical writings. In the beginning, the Buddhist teachings were transmitted orally, but around the 1st century CE they began to be written down.

A Leaf from a Japanese Sutra
Japan, 1703
Woodblock print on lotus leaf, mounted on rice paper, 10 ½” x 15”
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Herbert Kraft Collection)

This is a leaf from a Japanese block-printed sutra, a four-volume collection of Buddhist texts printed in pure Chinese characters.

Instructions for the performance of the Tsheshb and Mgon-po Sgrub-chen dances
Published by Shri Ram Press, New Delhi, 1985
Facsimile of a manuscript in the Rod-rodzon Monastery in Kham, China, wrapped in red cotton, 14 ½” x 3”
Loan by Latse Contemporary Tibetan Library, New York, NY

This text contains the instructions for the performance of two sacred dances with accompanying cylindrical percussion notation. These dances were performed every 10th of the month in the Khams-pa Sgar Monasteries in Eastern Tibet.

Chos-spayed Sna-tsogo
Labrang Tashi Kyil Monastery, China, 1990’s
Woodblock print on rice paper wrapped in yellow cotton, 11” x 4”
Loan by the Latse Contemporary Tibetan Library, New York, NY

The Chos-spayed Sna-tsogo is a student text containing miscellaneous religious instruction and prayers. Like most student canons, it is small in size. In the Himalayan region, sacred texts traditionally are wrapped in fabrics of different colors, which represent the various religious sects. The colorful tabs on the end of the canons contain the title and volume number of the works.

Painting of the Buddha Shakyamuni
Tibet, 1700-1799
Ground mineral pigment on cotton, 22” x 16”
Loan by the Shelly and Donald Rubin Foundation, New York, NY

The historical Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha, was born into the Shaka clan in the sixth century BCE. After his enlightenment he became known as Buddha Shakyamuni ("enlightened sage of the Shaka clan"). Buddha is not a god but a being that is fully awakened and completely enlightened.

Page of Mongolian Manuscript
Late 17th century - early 18th century
Ink on inner bark of mulberry tree, 12 ½” x 4”
Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University (Herbert Kraft Collection)
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Torah Crown, Loaned by Congregation Beth El, South Orange, NJ