

The Illuminated Path to an Illuminated Bible

Donald Jackson is the Queen's scribe, the man--the artist--responsible for the creating England's most important state documents. He's the royal calligrapher, an artist, a past chair of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators, a word so rare my spellcheck red-lines it.

Donald Jackson is a Brit of course, and he carries levels of sophistication capable of leaving Yanks like me stuttering in envy, despite our 250-year-old revolutionary history.

Oddly, however, the story Donald Jackson relishes telling is of a morning walk to a place where the St. John's campus map told him there once was an Indian burial ground. There, in the quiet of pre-dawn, a fawn, spirit-like, stepped out of the woods, simply stood and looked at him until her mother unhurriedly drew her back into cover.

Just then, as the sun rose and a shadow moved across the ground beneath his feet, he looked up to see a crow passing over. It seemed, all of it, right there, to be a vision in the graveyard.

Recreating our spiritual experience is impossible, even for the Queen's scribe. It's as difficult as it has been since human beings began seeing visions; but the Donald Jackson says he felt, right then, in Collegeville, Minnesota, perfectly at one with nature.

He claims he carried that transcendent moment into the meeting for which he'd come to Minnesota, a meeting to determine how this grand idea of his--and others--would come to pass. The highest art for a true calligrapher, he'd long thought, would be a holy scripture. In a newly fashioned but old-fashioned way, he wanted to create a whole new Holy Bible, as the Benedictine monks had done for centuries.

That bible, the *St. John's Bible*, is something unlike anything you've ever seen. It has its own museum on the St. John's campus. As the monks at the abbey like to say, that Bible "ignites the imagination."

With the same dynamic relationship that existed between medieval Benedictine houses and the scribes whose talents they engaged, Saint John's Abbey and University and calligrapher Donald Jackson, in collaboration with many from the wider community, produced a Bible that is a work of art to "ignite the spiritual imagination of believers" throughout the world.

And it does.

It's not quick and easy, and the finished product is huge--two feet tall and three-feet wide. It won't fit neatly into a sport-coat or a motel drawer. It has 1100 pages of paper thicker than anything in your library. Each page is 24 ½" x 15 7/8", which means a two-page spread is three feet wide. You can't pull it out of a backpack at a campfire.

But then, consider this: the only place in the world you'll find its peculiar script is within its pages. Donald Jackson designed its lettering specifically for this volume alone. In addition, the *St. John's Bible* has 160 illustrations, and *illustrations* pitifully understates what's there because those 160 illustrations are individual works of art as striking as they are demanding.

Everything about it is stunning. It is to the making of books what the Sistine Chapel is to ceilings. Protestantism has worked hard to destroy images, but often mistaken sheer grace for idolatry. To a world who seeks it, the St. John's Bible preaches nothing less than ideal beauty.

If you're in the neighborhood of St. John's University, stop by and see for yourself. You can call the trip a pilgrimage if you'd like, because it will be.

Still, the Queen's own scribe can't help but smile when he remembers how, once upon a time in a pre-dawn walk through an Indian burial ground just outside of St. Cloud, he felt himself suddenly totally alive in the eyes of a fawn, the flight of a crow, and the face of a rising sun. That transcendent moment was itself a birthplace, he likes to say.