

*Interview with Susannah Helman / re the 'Handwritten' exhibition at the National Library of Australia in Canberra*

Katherine: Over the next two weeks, I'm going to take you to a special exhibition that's being held in Canberra at the National Library of Australia. The exhibition is called 'Handwritten' and it features ten centuries of manuscript treasures. I went along to the exhibition and spoke to curator Susannah Helman, particularly about some of the manuscripts relating to the Bible.

Susannah Helman:

The exhibition, called 'Handwritten: Ten Centuries of Manuscript Treasures' starts with texts from Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. These are hundreds of manuscripts from Germany's largest library, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. It's about the history of Western thought basically.

The earliest manuscript we have dates from the 9th century and the most recent dates from 1985. So it's about, really I suppose, the history of Western thought - many aspects of life; invention, achievements, science, religion, literature, music. We've got some fantastic medieval Renaissance illuminated manuscripts. We've also got, at the end of the exhibition, some really great highlights of the musical tradition, all the big names: Mozart, Bach, Brahms, Beethoven, Schubert and quite a few more. And so it's really fantastic. It's really about, I suppose, what people have been able to achieve over these thousand years in the West.

Katherine: Tell me about some of those pieces that you've got in the Renaissance, the medieval period, particularly interested in some of the religious texts that are in the exhibition.

Susannah Helman:

Sure. I suppose it's samples of variety of manuscripts that were produced between the 9th century and 1500 and of course amongst this are works that were used in religious contexts. We have, for instance, the earliest manuscript is a 9th century - oh actually it was produced in a monastery- but it was actually a copy of Virgil's Aeneid.

The latest manuscript dates from 1500 and it's a Book of Hours which was really, I suppose, the bestseller of that period, particularly between the 13th and the 15th centuries. Books of Hours were private prayer books for the layperson. We've got two Books of Hours in the exhibition. They're beautifully illustrated. One is that one that dates from 1500. It has 15 full-page miniatures; really lavishly illustrated, it's Flemish and really comes from that peak period in the production of illuminated manuscripts.

The other Book of Hours, is a smaller, travelling Book of Hours and the illuminated initials are decorated in 'grisaille', which is a technique that was popular around the time that this manuscript was produced. It's where the colours are all in shades of grey. We also have quite a number of different other works.

We've got a Psalter. Psalters were - you know the Book of Psalms. They were really popular before as the main illuminated, illustrated manuscript before the Books of Hours took over in the 13th century. We also have works by great figures, great writers of the church like Bede and Augustine.

We've actually a leaf that has been inserted into a copy of Augustine's 'City of God'. The leaf is by Bede and it's actually from his work 'De Temporum Ratione' on the reckoning of time, which was used to help work out when Easter was. And obviously Augustine, one of the great fathers of the church, his work on the 'City of God' is there. We don't know why or how this leaf actually was inserted into this very large volume of Augustine.

We also have a Paris Bible. It dates from 1250-1275. In the 13th century, Paris was really the centre in the West of theological scholarship and the commercial book trade. Around this time saw the adoption of a fairly standard form and order of the books of the Bible and that took place in the - was encapsulated in this Paris Bible. It's actually in the Paris Bible that you see the structure of the Bible that's quite similar to the modern Bible. It's a single volume, and so for the first time they saw a single, portable volume. The letters are very small; they have running titles across the top of the pages and the technique, the letters that were used were all fairly recognisable, so if you see one manuscript you'll be able to recognise it in another.

We also have Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons or commentaries on the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is often considered one of the most beautiful books of the Bible, and Bernard's commentaries on them have lasted the test of time and are often considered to be, I think, one of his most important works.

Katherine: That was Susannah Helman from the National Library of Australia, talking about the 'Handwritten' exhibition that is on till the 18th March. Tune in next week to hear us continue the conversation about some of the manuscripts in that collection.