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Medieval manuscripts illuminate Pitt-Greensburg course on the history of books



JEFF HIMLER | Wednesday, August 10, 2022 11:01 a.m.



LILLY KUBIT | TRIBUNE-REVIEW

This Book of Hours, dating from about 1480, features intricate detailing surrounding the text, along with illustrations.

Some dragons popped up in the latest summer course led by history instructor William Campbell and two colleagues at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg.

The fanciful creatures are among decorative figures that caught the eyes of his six students when they got an up-close look at some illuminated medieval manuscripts.

“One of the things we found on the first day of class is we didn’t get through anything like the

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Among eight centuries-old writings the students were able to page through was a German book of Psalms dating from 1250.

“There are about a half-dozen illuminated initial letters in it, and three of them have dragons,” Campbell said, noting that wasn’t a typical choice to illustrate such a work.

“The students were excited to see so many dragons in it,” he said. “It’s been a dream to get the students in a room with the manuscripts, where they can turn the pages and observe little details and unexpected elements. It’s not the kind of thing you normally bring in a classroom.”

There were many novel aspects to the course, which Campbell said involved two years of planning. The Pitt-Greensburg students and instructors gathered twice a week this summer in Pittsburgh to study the manuscripts in the archives and special collections department at Pitt’s Hillman Library.

The manuscripts were on loan from Les Enluminures, a firm with offices in Chicago, New York and Paris that deals in such historical documents.

Though it’s the first time Pitt has participated in the program, the firm has been providing manuscripts for university students to study for nearly six years.

“Every time we renew the program, it is ‘sold out’ with a waiting list within 24 hours,” said Sandra Hindman, Les Enluminures founder and president. “Handling something made and used as much as a thousand years ago is a moving, and potentially life-changing, experience. It was for me.”

Campbell said most of the students in the class were upper-level history majors with little or no knowledge of Latin — the language used in most of the manuscripts.

That’s not a problem since the students weren’t trying to translate the text. Instead, they were studying the techniques that were used over time to create written works and how those works reflect evolving cultures and art forms.

The texts are written on parchment, which was made from animal skins.

“It’s very durable stuff,” Campbell said. “These books will still be around when everything printed in the 19th century has turned to dust because of the high acid content in the paper.”

Contrary to what one might expect, white gloves aren’t used to handle the antique manuscripts.

“If you wear gloves, you lose sensitivity and you’re more likely to cause damage because it’s hard to turn the pages carefully,” Campbell said. “When we turn the pages, we’re supposed to touch them away from where the ink, gold leaf and illustrations are.”

To prepare for viewing the manuscripts, the students washed their hands well with soap and water. Hand sanitizer was not an option because the alcohol content can cause damage.

Examining manuscripts was just one hands-on element of the course.

In a Pitt makerspace lab, the students tried some of the techniques that have been used to create books through the years — including the painstaking application of gold leaf.

“You have to hold your breath when you work with gold leaf,” said course co-instructor Amber

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In other exercises, the students made writing quills from feathers and tried their hand at physical typesetting. The course wrapped up Aug. 4.

While the original manuscripts used in the course were mostly geared toward religious practices, third co-instructor Stacey Triplette, who teaches Spanish and French, had the students read from other types of medieval works. The reading list included Dante's "Inferno," which was completed in 1314.

"For us, as three instructors, to be in the classroom together, there's a lot of opportunity for us to interact with one another," Campbell said. "The students can see, 'This is how these things relate to one another.'

"We're looking forward to how we can do future collaborations."

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