

TIMES COLONIST

Centuries-old manuscripts a 'portal' to new worlds

DECEMBER 16, 2016 06:00 AM



*Library donor Brian Pollick and UVic archivist Lara Wilson look at medieval and early modern manuscripts.
Photograph By DARREN STONE, Times Colonist*

Centuries-old manuscripts newly arrived at UVic will open a doorway to a time long past.

The University of Victoria is hosting 21 original manuscripts dating back as far as 1235. They include religious sermons, music scores and colour drawings of heraldic motifs of noble families.

Most of the books are in Latin or Medieval French, some contain Greek, and one was made in Ethiopia.

But Prof. Iain Macleod Higgins, chairman of the UVic English department, said the manuscripts' reach goes beyond their words.

He likened them to the TARDIS, the time- and space-travel machine of TV's Doctor Who. On the outside, the TARDIS is a phone booth, but those stepping inside find limitless room. It can transport the show's characters through time and space.

The medieval manuscripts can likewise act as a "portal" or "doorway," Macleod Higgins said, transporting students to a time when all books were hand-printed by scribes and human knowledge, at least in the West, was just being set down.

"They give a physical reality to the past," Macleod Higgins said, noting that the books have texture, colour — even odour. Some bear fingerprints. "The book may be a little object, but you open it up and it takes you to a whole different world."

The manuscripts are on loan to UVic's special collections through a partnership with the New York-based Les Enluminures firm until May 1. They will be used to teach students in specialties as varied as medieval studies, religious studies and comparative media studies.

Prof. Helene Cazes, of the French department, said UVic is taking an innovative approach to medieval studies, cross-pollinating the subject with ideas and discussion from different subject areas and education levels.

For example, Cazes said she sees computer-science students encountering the manuscripts to learn about pre-digital communication, while music students might be interested in how the notes were printed between lines of text.

"You don't have to be a medieval expert to touch tradition," she said.

The manuscripts were brought to UVic with a donation from doctoral student Brian Pollick.

Pollick, retired after a career in teaching, corrections and private business, said he became interested in the medieval period during a trip to Italy. Since then he has continued at UVic studying and teaching about the medieval period. What he loves most about medieval manuscripts is what he sees as the unspoken, unwritten messages contained in them.

For example, illuminations and illustrations appear to modern viewers as nice designs, but meant much more to people of their time. Books were also living documents — people made small notes on their pages, leaving clues about what they were thinking.

"People of the medieval time would see a whole multiplicity of different messages, and part of what fascinates me is their visual depth," he said.

The manuscripts will be on public display Friday, 3 to 5 p.m. at the Mearns Centre for Learning in the McPherson Library.

- See more at: <http://www.timescolonist.com/news/local/centuries-old-manuscripts-a-portal-to-new-worlds-1.4698630#sthash.UZb7Oczx.dpuf>