

A is for Acquisition, B is for British Library, C is for Conservation

30 July 2009

The British Library has acquired the *Macclesfield Alphabet Book*, a rare medieval English 'model' or 'pattern' book dating from c.1500, with support from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF), independent charity The Art Fund, Friends of the British Library and National Libraries and other individual donors.

Image



Letters L, M, N and O, formed of figures and animals copied after the Flemish '1464 Grotesque Alphabet'

The manuscript had been in the library of the Earl of Macclesfield since around 1750, and until recently its existence was completely unknown. From today (30 July), it will be on free public display in the Sir John Ritblat Gallery: Treasures of the British Library.

The manuscript contains 14 different types of decorative alphabets. These include an alphabet of decorative initials with faces; foliate alphabets; a zoomorphic alphabet of initials, and alphabets in Gothic script. In addition there are large coloured anthropomorphic initials modelled after fifteenth-century woodcuts or engravings, as well as two sets of different types of borders, some of which are fully illuminated in colours and gold.

Dr Kathleen Doyle, Curator of Illuminated Manuscripts at the British Library, said: "The acquisition of the Macclesfield Alphabet Book is tremendously exciting, as it is the most complete set of designs for manuscript decoration known to have survived from late-medieval Britain. The 'abcs' are wonderfully illustrated - including letters formed using animals and people - and I hope that those who go to see it on display at the British Library will be captivated by its inventiveness, and that researchers will begin an interesting debate on its origin, models, and function."

Carole Souter, Chief Executive of the National Heritage Memorial Fund, said: "The exquisite and intricate Macclesfield Alphabet Book provides many clues about life in medieval Britain. The National Heritage Memorial Fund's contribution towards its acquisition will help ensure generations of scholars and visitors to the British Library continue to be enchanted by the 500-year-old story it has to tell."

Andrew Macdonald, Acting Director of The Art Fund, said: "This recently discovered alphabet book is a gem of British cultural history and its acquisition for the British Library's public collections is wonderful news. The vivid colours and imaginative designs make the book instantly attractive and offer a fascinating insight into the creative spirit of medieval Britain."

The manuscript may have been used as a pattern book for an artist's workshop for the transmission of ideas to assistants, or as a 'sample' book to show to potential customers.

Only a handful of these books survive and as a result, the discovery of the Macclesfield Alphabet Book, filled with designs for different types of script, letters, initials, and borders is of outstanding significance and will contribute to a greater understanding of how these books were produced and used in the Middle Ages, as well as aid the study of material culture and art history.

Notes to editors

The British Library

The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest research libraries. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The Library's collection has developed over 250 years and exceeds 150 million separate items representing every age of written civilisation. It includes: books, journals, manuscripts, maps, stamps, music, patents, newspapers and sound recordings in all written and spoken languages.

The Art Fund

The Art Fund is the UK's leading independent art charity. It offers grants to help UK museums and galleries enrich their collections; campaigns on behalf of museums and their visitors; and promotes the enjoyment of art. It is entirely funded from public donations and has 80,000 members. Since 1903 the charity has helped museums and galleries all over the UK secure 860,000 works of art for their collections. Recent achievements include: helping secure Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* for the National Galleries of Scotland and the National Gallery, London in February 2009 with a grant of £1million; helping secure Anthony d'Offay's collection, *ARTIST ROOMS*, for Tate and National Galleries of Scotland in February 2008 with a grant of £1million. In February 2009, The Art Fund gave the British Library a grant of £18,000 towards the acquisition of a rare metal book, *Parole in Libertà*, created by Italian Futurist artists Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Tullio D'Albisola. In 2005, The Art Fund gave £500,000 towards another important illustrated manuscript, *The Macclesfield Psalter* (c1330), which was acquired for the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge after being export-stopped.

Further information

Julie Yau, Arts Press Officer, British Library
Phone: 020 7412 7237 Email: julie.yau@bl.uk