University of Aberdeen

Special Libraries and Archives

Beyond Words: Illustrated Books in Aberdeen University’s Historic Collections

Castle of Huldenberg in the Low Countries with its formal gardens,
Plate 58 from Brabantia Illustrata (London,1702)

An Information Document

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Engraved title page from Andreas Vesalius, De Corporis humanis Fabrica ('Of the structure of the human body') (Basle, 1543) [p 611 Ves]. The plates of this anatomy textbook are celebrated as one of the finest achievements of Renaissance engraving.
Illustrated books constitute some of the greatest treasures of the Historic Library Collections in the University of Aberdeen. Indeed, our holdings in this area are so richly representative of all styles and periods that only a fraction of them can be shown or described here.

The first library at King's College (founded in 1495) held illustrated and coloured printed books, part of the progressive and reforming agenda of its founder, Bishop William Elphinstone. Among the earliest donations to Marischal College (founded in 1593), the other constituent college of the modern University, were the illustrated medical and scientific works given by Duncan Liddell, the cosmopolitan humanist and surgeon. From that time until the present day, these Collections have been continually enriched with a diversity of illustrated works originating from all over the known world, and reflecting in their woodcut, engraved, or colour-plate illustrations the wonders of that world and all that it contains.

As the confidence of the illustrators grew in the Renaissance, and as the more precise technique of copper-engraving was added to the simple woodcut and more complex wood-engraving, the possibilities of the illustrated book extended to the limits of the known world, beginning the great age of the engraved atlas and of books depicting the cities of the world and the costumes and manners of their inhabitants. Our holdings in this area are particularly fine, including a wonderful hand-coloured set of the ‘Cities of the World’ published at Cologne in the 1570s and 1580s. Illustrated books were also used to transmit depictions of botanical discoveries, in this the great age of the herbals, and also to convey a breathtaking range of new discoveries and technologies in every field of human exploration and endeavour. Not only the territories and people of the New World were depicted, but also new technical and surgical processes in every area of scientific endeavour from mining to hydraulics.

The internationalism of the colleges of Aberdeen is indicated by the fact they were consistently acquiring these new works, both by purchase and donation, across a broad spectrum ranging from the engineering of garden fountains to the latest works on the treatment and dressing of wounds.
Inhabitants of Virginia from Thomas Harriot, *Admiranda Narratio fida tamen de commodis et incolarum ritibus Virginiae* ('A wonderful but true report of the commodities and customs of the inhabitants of Virginia') (Frankfurt am Main, 1590) [p f 9 (735) Har]. These detailed engravings of the new world are thought to have been known to Shakespeare when he wrote his last play, *The Tempest*. 
Some of the greatest artists of the Renaissance, most notably Albrecht Dürer, embraced the artistic and commercial possibilities of the illustrated book, bringing the art of the fine wood engraving to its highest point of refinement – as can be seen in this intricate depiction of an ingenious lattice and squared paper to enable an artist to copy the reality before his eyes more efficiently. As the Renaissance turned to the baroque, the art of the copperplate engraving reached new heights of detail and finish. At this point the subject matter of the illustrated book becomes ever wider, including everything from the fashionable clothes of the day to the archaeological discoveries of the remote past which were just beginning to be a subject of wide interest.

Our holdings of these substantial and superbly-designed large books is extensive, again reflecting the outward-looking and wide-ranging interests of an institution with a complex network of academic, trading and political connections with the centres of fine book production in Italy and the Netherlands.

As two university colleges which paid no small part in the fostering of the Scottish Enlightenment, King’s and Marischal also collected widely (and were the recipients of generous gifts and bequests) in the new generation of illustrated books which now added skilled hand-colouring to their ever-finer engraved and etched illustrations. This was the century of the encyclopaedias, of the re-description of the world and the re-investigation of the past on a heroic scale. An Aberdeen Professor, William MacGillivray, played a part in the production of Audubon’s great Birds of America. Constant archaeological discoveries, in the buried cities of southern Italy and in the remoter provinces of the former Roman Empire, all found an international public in lavish, large-scale folios, many of which were composed by Scottish scholars.

These discoveries were no academic exercise. Robert Adam’s records of ancient Roman buildings served as blueprints for the fashionable houses rising in Georgian Edinburgh and London; James Stuart’s austere plates of primitive Greek architecture fostered a Classical revival across northern Europe from Scotland to Russia; and the descriptions of Egypt published in the wake of Napoleon’s military campaigns added a new style to European architecture. Complementing these architectural masterpieces were garden books which took advantage of a new printing technique: colour lithography, a process which enabled printing in colour and, for the first time, freed colour printing from the expense of hand-colouring.
We have a particularly fine nineteenth-century edition of Euclid on geometry where the coloured diagrams have become works of art in themselves.

As the nineteenth century developed, illustrated books reached an ever-wider market: chapbooks (pedlars’ books) with simple woodcut illustrations had long been sold widely, but now machine printing and commercial techniques of etching and engraving on hardwood put illustrated books within the reach of almost all. Aberdeen is particularly fortunate in having had the right of copyright deposit through much of this period, and therefore has a wonderfully miscellaneous collection of mass-produced illustrated works, particularly fiction. Two of the greatest British artists are among the book-illustrators who worked in the generation before the development of the mass-market novel. Thomas Bewick, working mostly as an illustrator in the field of popular natural history, brought the engraving on hardwood to a degree of refinement seldom attained before; and William Blake made a set of vastly-influential woodcuts to illustrate a school Latin text, a pristine copy of which was only very recently discovered in the collection here at Aberdeen.

We are also fortunate in holding extensive collections of satirical works – the great commercial books of the Victorian era – and the first issues of Dickens’s novels in their monthly parts. The late nineteenth century produced something of a reaction against the increasingly slick and skilful illustrated books produced for the mass-market. Small-scale publishing was re-invented by such writers and artists as William Morris, whose Kelmscott Press produced a series of illustrated books which hark back to mediaeval illumination and to some of the achievements of the earliest illustrated books of the Renaissance.

Once photography had become the most practical method of documentation and instruction, the book-illustrators of the twentieth century ranged back over the whole history of the illustrated book to imitate the best examples of a technique which had become a branch of the fine arts. Joan Hassall looked back to Thomas Bewick; and Eric Ravilious to William Blake. In our own time, the Scottish poet and garden-designer Ian Hamilton Finlay has made extraordinary contemporary use of the techniques of the whole history of the illustrated book, and of the combination of word and image, and it is with one of his patterned poems that this survey of five hundred years of illustrated books comes to an end.
Additional Illustrations

Map of Scotland from Gerardus Mercator, Atlas (the 4th edition, Amsterdam, 1613) [pi f12(00) Mer 2]. Mercator was at the centre of the group of northern European scholars who developed the science of cartography.
Martyrdom of St. Thomas Becket from Jacobus de Voragine, Legenda Aurea (The Golden Legend) (Westminster: Caxton, 1487). Note the attempt at erasure of the illustration, following Henry VIII’s suppression of the cult of the rebel archbishop. [Inc. 225]

LEFT: Diagnosis by urine from Hortus Sanitatis (‘garden of health’) (Mainz, 1492) [Inc. 3]. This is a rare example of an early printed book with hand-coloured illustrations throughout.

RIGHT: The Wall of King Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem from a Latin Bible with commentary by Nicolaus de Lyra (Basle, 1498) given by William Elphinstone in 1512 [Inc. 180]. This is the kind of work on which Bishop Elphinstone drew for the architecture of his new College.
The City of Innsbruck from Georg Braun and Frantz Hohenberg, Civitates Orbis Terrarum ("Cities of the World") (Cologne, 1577-81) [pi f91(00) Bra]. This coloured plate is particularly successful in conveying the perspective of the city in its mountainous setting.
Construction of the human figure on mathematical principles from Albrecht Dürer, De Symmetria ('Concerning Symmetry') (Paris, 1557) [pi f743 Due]. This illustration demonstrated Renaissance interest in proportion and fascination with mathematical analysis.

Woodcut of camel from Ambrose Paré, The Workes (London, 1649) [pi f6102 Par]. Ambrose Paré was a practical doctor with a particular interest in the treatment of wounds: his work had all too much application in a century of religious wars. A digression within the text provides an opportunity for this beautifully-designed cut of what was then an exotic animal.
Woodcut illustration of mining operations from Georgius Agricola, De Re Metallica (Concerning metals) (Basle, 1561) [pi 8669 02 Agr 2].
This is a fine example of the transmission of technological advance through the medium of the illustrated book.
Comic and tragic stage settings from Sebastiano Serlio, De Architectura (Venice, 1569) [p. 17202 Ser 1].

These designs for stage settings were imitated throughout Renaissance Europe.
Title page from Brian Walton (ed.) SS. Biblia Polyglotta 'The London Polyglot' (Oxford, 1657) [Sb f. 224 Wal 1]. This was the first edition of the multilingual bible issued in a protestant country and its lavish production was a matter of religious as well as national pride.
Kircher’s great folio volumes are in themselves a kind of Baroque encyclopaedia, covering music, Egyptology, subterranean exploration and numerous arts and sciences.

This is one of the most unusual and engaging colour-plate books in the collection, an illustration of the costumes of the many Catholic religious orders in the early eighteenth century.

Etruscan tomb from James Byers, Hypogaei or Sepulchral Caverns of Tarquinia (London, 1842) [LibR ff 87:913 (375) By]. James Byers, Jacobite Laird of Tonley in Aberdeenshire, passed most of his life in Italy where he made his pioneering investigations of Etruscan tombs, published posthumously in this fine volume.
Ruins of Pompeii from Sir William Hamilton, Campi Phlegraei, (Naples, 1776) [SB 1655.121.458 Han].

Hamilton used his time as British resident at Naples to make serious archaeological studies and collections, including the recently-excavated ‘buried cities’ of southern Italy.
Right-hand part of a prospect of Split (Spalatro) in Dalmatia, from Robert Adam, The Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian at Spalatro (London, 1764) [SB 682:283 Asia 1]. This survey of what was then a remote site was made possible by the protection of a Scottish officer, General Graeme, commanding the Venetian forces in the Adriatic.
The Erectheum at Athens, from James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, The Antiquities of Athens (London, 1837) [88:913(385) Stu]. This refined reconstruction of an early Classical temple was vastly influential on European architecture in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Temple of Tentyris, from Dominique Denon, Description d’un voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte (planches) (‘Description of a journey through Lower and Upper Egypt during the campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte’) (Paris, 1802) LibR ff91(62)Den.

This lavish illustrated description of Egypt was undertaken by a scholar attached to Napoleon’s armies during his Egyptian campaign.
‘Before’ (above) and ‘After’ (below) folding plate showing the view from the author’s cottage in Hare Street Village, Essex, from Humphrey Repton, Fragments on the theory and practise of Landscape Gardening (London, 1816) [LibR fRep71]. Repton exploited the device of the folding illustrated plate in his works in garden and landscape design.
Four woodcuts of rural scenes by William Blake from Virgil, The Pastorals...adapted for schools by R.J. Thornton (London, 1821) [SB 87315 B.T.]. These engravings, among William Blake's last works, have been described as 'among the most important works of English Romantic art.'
William Hone, The Political House that Jack Built. 34th ed. With thirteen cuts [by George Cruickshank] (London, 1819) [Herald 150/1]. This satirical view of 'the vermin' that plunder the wealth includes Cruickshank's incisive, vigorous caricatures of politicians like Lord Sidmouth.

LEFT: Engraved title page by 'Phiz.' (Hablot K. Browne) from Charles Dickens, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (London, 1837) [WN 13.132]. These skilled wood-engravings formed an integral part of the serial publications of Dickens's novels.

RIGHT: Illustration of 'The Lady of Shallot' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti from Alfred Tennyson, Poems (London, 1859) [LbR 82181 2]. These illustrations are closely related to the large-scale paintings which the Pre-Raphaelites made on themes derived from contemporary poetry.
LEFT: Egyptian ornament (plate 4) showing the plants from which decorative elements are derived, from Owen Jones, The Grammar of Ornament (London, 1868) [Lbr 1745 Jon g]. This superb example of colour lithography traces ornament from remote antiquity to the present for the use of artists and architects.

RIGHT: The hero and heroine beneath the sea, wood-engraved illustration by Joan Hassall for Eric Linklater’s Sealskin Trousers and other stories (London, 1947) [CH Lin S]. Joan Hassall was the most able twentieth century engraver within the tradition of Bewick. This illustration is for a supernatural fantasy by Eric Linklater, Scottish author and donor of fine pictures to the Aberdeen collections.

Wood engraving of an ideal landscape by Eric Ravilious illustrating a Christmas pamphlet of Harold Munro’s poem ‘Elm Angel’ (London, 1929) [Chp Monr e]. Ravilious was a prodigiously talented designer and landscape painter in the era between the wars. The influence of Blake’s woodcuts is very clear.