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Exhibition on Ancient Bookbinding Opening at Bard Graduate Center

FEBRUARY 8, 2018 10:43 AM

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The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity, a Bard Graduate Center Focus Project on view from February 23 through July 8, 2018, examines the structural, technical, and decorative features of the major types of codices—the wooden tablet codex, the single-gathering codex, and the multigathering codex. Exhibited alongside surviving artifacts, documentary, and iconographic evidence, handmade replicas are used to explore the craft processes that were applied in the making of these early books. The exhibition presents the codex not as an invention but rather as an innovation that depended on techniques already widely used in the creation of everyday items such as socks and shoes, and reveals that the codex was a fascinating, yet practical, development.



Background

The codex, which appears to be a result of Roman ingenuity, is one of the most important innovations in the history of civilization. Throughout Greco-Roman antiquity, the standard format for an extended written text had been the papyrus roll. Literary evidence suggests that the Romans, following the structural and functional principles of the tablet codex, turned from wooden tablets to papyrus and parchment leaves—already used for informal notebooks—and produced the codex, or the book in the format we know it today.

The transition from roll to codex took place gradually between the second and fifth centuries AD under conditions long debated. Based on surviving evidence it seems that in the early centuries the new book format was not often used for Latin and Greek literary texts, for which the roll continued to be used. Rather, it was apparently the whole-hearted Christian adoption of the codex that is often credited with establishing it as the standard format of the book, as monks and scholars helped spread the religion from the Middle East to the rest of the Mediterranean and beyond. Ultimately, evidence points to a close relation between the craft technologies employed in making the multigathering codex and those used in common objects—woven textiles, baskets, mats, socks, shoes, and sandals.

The Exhibition

The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity provides a concise history of the first steps of the codex book format from a technical and technological point of view. Specifically it focuses on the different techniques used to turn leaves of papyrus or parchment into a functional book that could be safely used and preserved.

The first section looks at the precursors—the wooden tablets and single-gathering notebook-style codices—that informed the multigathering codex. Along with replicas or facsimiles of these two basic types of codices, two spectacular antiquities will be on view: an original set of wooden tablets from the Brooklyn Museum containing school exercises and a "kylix" or drinking vessel with red-figure decoration illustrating the portability of such tablets. The larger gallery revolves around the five main processes used to make a bound, multigathering codex: the sewing of the gatherings, the attachment of the boards to the book block, the sewing of endbands at the head and tail edges of the spine, the covering of the book with often highly decorative leather, and the addition of fastening straps. All of these processes can be directly related to specific crafts that were in active production during antiquity, as will be demonstrated in the exhibition.

The sewing used to bind gatherings was adapted from a technique known as cross-knit looping, which was used extensively in late antiquity, notably for socks. The sewing of the boards to the book block is based on such basic stitches as the blanket stitch, ubiquitous in fabrics since prehistoric times. The sewing of the endbands—the tiny strips of fabric visible at either end of the spine—can be directly related to the different techniques used for finishing the edges of textiles and mats and for strengthening as well as decorating them. The cut, stitched, stamped, and gilded decoration on leather covers exactly matches shoe-making techniques while the patterns used correspond to those found on other artifacts, such as mosaics and textiles. Finally, the different fastening straps used with these books are identical to those used in sandals and belts.

To illustrate these relationships, a limited number of original artifacts will be displayed—book covers, shoes, sandals, wooden tablets, and tunic fragments—as well as replicas of ancient artifacts. A particular highlight will be the intricately stitched and gilded covers of a ninth-tenth-century AD Gospels purchased for J. Pierpont Morgan in 1911, which, although well known to scholars, have been rarely put on public view. Along with the Morgan Library and Museum, lenders include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and other major institutions. A handful of makers, including the exhibition's curator, provided the modern replicas and facsimiles on view. A digital interactive featuring the curator's hand-drawn diagrams and a short film showing his working methods will both serve to further explicate these early bookbinding processes and emphasize the work of skilled hands in creating—and rediscovering—these crafts from late antiquity.

The Codex and Crafts in Late Antiquity is curated by Georgios Boudalis, Head of the Book and Paper Conservation Laboratory, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece; Research Fellow, Bard Graduate Center, February-May, 2015; and Visiting Professor, Bard Graduate Center, September-December, 2016. The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated book, which will be available in the Gallery and the Store.

About Bard Graduate Center Focus Projects

Focus Projects are part of an innovative program organized and led by faculty members or postdoctoral fellows through seminars and workshops that culminate in small-scale, academically rigorous exhibitions and publications. Students, assisted by the Center's professional staff of curators, designers, and media specialists, are closely involved from genesis through execution and contribute to each project's form and

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content. The Focus Project promotes experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media, reflecting the Center's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

About Bard Graduate Center Gallery

The Gallery organizes pioneering exhibitions on decorative arts, design history, and material culture with leading scholars, curators, and institutions worldwide. We provide opportunities for faculty and students to gain experience in exhibition making. Our projects and publications break down traditional barriers between academic and curatorial forms of inquiry.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail public.programs@bgc.bard.edu.

Exhibition Tours

Group exhibition tours are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212.501.3013 or e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu.

Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday and Friday through Sunday 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Wednesday and Thursday 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Suggested admission is \$7 general, \$5 seniors and students.

For information about Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu/gallery.

Image credit: Modern facsimile of 5th-century PD Glazier codex (Morgan MS 5.67). Wood, leather, bone, parchment. Made by Ursula Mitra. Photograph: Bruce White.

Categories: Exhibit

Tags: Bard Graduate Center, bookbinding, early books, exhibition

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