Exhibition on Ancient Bookbinding Opening at Bard Graduate Center

February 23 through July 8, 2018, examines the structural, technical, and decorative features of the major types of codices—the wooden tablet codices, the single-sheeting codices, and the multipage codices. Exhibits 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 books and above, and reveals that the codex was a democratizing, 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 Greek-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 codices, turned from wooden tablets to papyrus and parchment leaves—already used for informal notebooks—and produced the codex, or the book as we know it today.

The transition from roll to codex took place gradually between the second and fifth centuries AD under diverse forces (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, especially, spread the religion from the Middle East to the rest of the Mediterranean and beyond. Ultimately, evidence points to a close relationship between the two technologies employed in making the multipage codices and those used in common objects—woven textiles, baskets, mats, socks, shoes, and sandals.

The Exhibition

The Codes and Crafts in Late Antiquity provides a concise history of the first steps of the codes 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-sheeting notebook-style codices—that informed the multipage codices. Along with replicas or facsimiles of these basic types of codices, two representative antiquities will be on view: an original roll of wooden tablets from the Brooklyn Museum conserved by tablet school exercises and a "kark" or desk-sitting roll with red-figure decoration illustrating the portability of such tablets. The larger gallery receives around the five main processes used to make a bound, multipage codex: the shaping of the gatherings, the attachment of the boards to the book, the shaping of the tablets at the head and tail edges of the spine, the covering of the book with often highly decorative leather, and the additional of fastening strips. All of these processes can be directly related to specific tools that were in active production during antiquity, as will be demonstrated in the exhibition.

The serving used to bind gatherings was adapted from a technique known as cross-leaf looping, which was used extensively in late antiquity, notably for books. The serving of the boards to the book block is based on such basic stitches as the blanket stitch, stab stitch, sutures in various permutations. The serving of the gatherings—the thin strips of fabric 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, stumped, and dyed gatherings on leather covers exactly matches these techniques while the patterns used correspond to those found on other artifacts, such as mosaics and textiles. Finally, the different fastening strips 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 textile fragments—as well as replicas of ancient artifacts. A particular highlight will be the amulet-stuffed and gilded covers of a ninth-century AD Gospel purchased for J. Pierpont Morgan in 1911, which, although well known to scholars, has been rarely put on public view. Along with the Morgan Library and Museum, museums include the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and other major institutions. A handful of makers, including the exhibition’s curator, provided the wood-veneer replicas and facsimiles to view. A digital interactive featuring the curator’s hand-drawn diagrams and a short film showing his working methods will both serve to further explain these early-bookbinding processes and emphasize the work of skilled hands in creating—and reducing—these crafts from late antiquity.

The Codes and Crafts in Late Antiquity is curated by Georgios Boudoulas, Head of the Book and Paper Conservation Laboratory, Museum of Byzantine Culture, Thessaloniki, Greece. Research Fellow, Bard Graduate Center, February-March, 2013, 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 predoctoral 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 process through execution and contribute to each project’s form and content.
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 deco-rate 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 exhibitions. 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 16 West 66th 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.


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