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The St. Francis Missal -- A Relic of Touch



Editor's Note: Since the publication of *Philately-Graphics* began in 1976, there have been numerous articles focusing on manuscripts and manuscript books. The articles were invariably illustrated with stamps whose imagery featured those manuscripts. This article is an exception.

In the current issue of *The Walters Art Museum* magazine the article "A Relic of Touch" captivated me. It told a story so compelling that I thought it should be retold in *P-G*, even though the relic referred to, *The St. Francis Missal*, has never appeared on a stamp. Its namesake, however, St. Francis has appeared on stamps numerous times, as illustrations accompanying this

article attest.

This article is drawn from *The Walters Art Museum* magazine, and is being used here with the permission of the Museum. The photographs of the Missal and its restoration have been supplied by the museum.

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St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) affected countless lives because of his open-minded, inclusive perspective on religion. Devotion to him is worldwide and encompasses all social classes. Many were attracted to his preaching about the need to care for all living things: plant, animal and human—rich or poor. His legacy continues today primarily through the founding of the Franciscan Orders.



The pages of the missal are composed of ink and paint on parchment.

The St. Francis Missal—a legendary 12th-century manuscript and relic of touch of St. Francis of Assisi—is currently having its first dedicated exhibition at the Walters Art Museum in more than 40 years.

One night in 1208, Francis of Assisi, a wealthy young man seeking a more spiritual direction for his life, found himself uncertain when two friends asked what he felt God’s plan for them might be. After discussing it throughout the night, they sought answers the next morning at the nearby church of San Nicolò, where Francis often attended mass. They opened the Missal—a book containing the texts of the Catholic mass—on the altar three times at random hoping for divine guidance. Each time, the text on the page urged renouncing earthly goods and embracing poverty:

Go, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.

-- MARK 10:21

Take nothing for your journey; neither staff, nor scrip, nor bread, nor money; neither have two coats.

-- LUKE 9:3

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

-- MATTHEW 16:24

These passages provided the answers they sought. Francis went on to lead a life of service to the church: he established the Franciscan order and in 1228 was canonized by the Roman Catholic Church. St. Francis of Assisi is now one of the most beloved religious figures in history, serving as a model of humility, kindness, simple living, and protection of nature.

Remarkably, a book in the Walters’ collection of rare books and manuscripts is believed to be the very Missal that Francis consulted over 800 years ago. An inscription in the book documenting its dedication to the Church of San Nicolò places the manuscript in the right place and time. Known today as the St. Francis Missal, the book is considered a hallowed relic of touch by Franciscans around the world.

[The current exhibition tells] the story of St. Francis and the Missal’s afterlife in conservation. The St. Francis Missal exhibition features the book itself and 17 other works including manuscripts, paintings, ivories, and ceramics, as well as photos documenting the Missal’s recent two-year conservation project.

“For those familiar with the Missal’s story, it will be an exciting moment to re-engage



Italy, 1926. One of a set of six stamps marking the 700th anniversary of the death of St. Francis. [Sc181]



Portuguese India, 1946. One of several stamps with this image in different colors and denominations issued in 1946 and 1952. [Sc476]



Austria, 1982. Stamp commemorating the 800th birth anniversary of St. Francis. [Sc1209]

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The St. Francis Missal before treatment, showing the 15th-century wooden cover weakened by wood-boring insects.



During a 19th-century restoration, the old leather cover was replaced with one of poor quality that deteriorated quickly. That cover had to be carefully removed prior to replacement with goatskin leather.



During treatment, it was discovered that the 15th-century binding was reinforced on the inside with parchment waste from an older discarded manuscript.



Removing the parchment waste reinforcement that had been used in the 15th-century binding.

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an important object. For others, the exhibition will shed light on a manuscript that has a unique and fascinating history,” said Lynley Anne Herbert, Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts. “Even beyond a religious perspective, the Missal played a unique and powerful role throughout history and into the modern day. This exhibition [contextualizes] the book and [gives] visitors insight into the ripple effects St. Francis’s encounter with this object had on clergy and everyday people.”

The legendary relic frequently inspires Franciscans to make pilgrimages to Baltimore; it was last a part of a dedicated exhibition more than 40 years ago. But due to

its fragile condition, the Missal has been inaccessible to the public for the past few years.

“The conservation challenge was to stabilize the book without giving it a dramatic makeover,” said Abigail Quandt, Head of Book and Paper Conservation. “Because it is such a revered and historic object, we felt it was important to preserve as much of the original materials as possible while making sure it could be accessible to the public again.”

The Missal’s two-year conservation began with Andrew W. Mellon Fellow Cathie Magee researching new techniques that could be adapted for use in conserving the missal.



New techniques were utilized in conserving the missal.



Missal pages prior to restoration, with cover removed.



The 15th-century sewing had to be taken apart so the damaged parchment could be adequately repaired.



One of the first steps in the current restoration was to remove the beechwood board covers by cutting the leather cover (a later restoration). Cathie Magee, Andrew W. Mellon Fellow, uses a scalpel in the process.



The text of the missal after being repaired and re sewn onto new supports.

“The binding was in terrible condition, and the wooden cover boards were riddled with insect holes,” said Magee. “The entire book had to be taken apart, which is a more extensive treatment than we would normally perform on such a historic object. It really was a once-in-a-lifetime project.”

Borrowing techniques from sculpture conservation, Magee was able to rebuild the wood of the cover boards. Once the cover was stable, she removed the timeworn leather from the spine and cleaned away the old adhesive before laying out the pages individually and repairing extensive tears. Finally, she replaced the supporting straps at the spine and re sewed the folios using a linen thread

similar to what was originally used.

Now fully stabilized for a new generation of observers, the missal is being digitized for the Walters’ manuscript website, Ex Libris.

The St. Francis Missal [is] on view through May 31. The exhibition draws upon the Walters’ world-renowned rare books and manuscripts collection, which spans more than 1000 years and contains over 900 manuscripts, 1300 of the earliest printed books, and 2000 rare later editions from across the globe.