

# Walters displays illuminated Scriptures

Its transparent wings beating in a flutter of motion, the locust almost seems ready to jump from the calf-skin parchment on which it is painted. Resting on a delicately arching green leaf, the insect is a physical reminder of a passage in the sacred text that fills the page.

“I sent among you a pestilence after the manner of Egypt,” reads a passage from the Old Testament Book of Amos, handwritten in a meticulous black calligraphy. “Yet you did not return to me, says the Lord.”

The striking combination of beautiful art, fine lettering, artful empty spaces and holy words is a throwback to the ancient tradition of illuminated manuscripts. It’s just one page of 44 from the Saint John’s Bible now on display at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore through May 24.

The Saint John’s Bible is a two-foot-tall book that is being put together by a team of artists and calligraphers under the direction of Donald Jackson, master calligrapher and senior scribe to Queen Elizabeth’s Crown Office in the House of Lords.

Commissioned by Saint John’s Abbey and University in Minnesota, the unfinished work is the first handwritten illuminated Bible to be commissioned by a Benedictine monastery since the advent of the printing press.

Calligraphers and artists have toiled over the book for a decade, illustrating the manuscript by hand with quills fashioned from turkey, swan and goose feathers and handmade paints and inks. The artisans also incorporated silver and 24-karat gold in the illuminations.

“It’s a new book done in a 500-year-old way,” said Ben Tilghman, exhibition co-curator. Mr. Tilghman is also the Zanyvl Krieger curatorial fellow in the Walters’ manuscripts and rare books department.

As part of the exhibition, the Walters is displaying 49 manuscripts and rare books

from a variety of religious traditions. They include a 12th-century English manuscript originally from Rochester Cathedral and a rare 15th-century Quran from what is now Afghanistan.

Pairing the modern Saint John's Bible with ancient texts allows a conversation between the two, Mr. Tilghman said.

Although the Saint John's Bible grew out of an ancient tradition, it is getting some help from modern technology. Mr. Jackson receives the texts on computer disks and uses a digital template to plan the layout of each page. Calligraphers then write each letter by hand. The text is based on the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

The Walters exhibition includes original folios from the fourth and fifth completed volumes of the Saint John's Bible: Prophets and Wisdom Books. Original tools, sketches and materials from Mr. Jackson's scriptorium are also on display.

Museum hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday. Admission to the Saint John's Bible exhibition is \$8 for adults, \$6 for seniors and \$4 for college students and young adults ages 18-25. Children under 17 and Walters members are admitted for free.

For more information, call 410-547-9000 or visit [www.thewalters.org](http://www.thewalters.org).