The Book of Kells

Gorgeously illustrated and informative guide to the Book of Kells

My Personal Review:
Kells' mini hardcovers:
The variety of exquisite little hardcover reproduction volumes are reproductions of parts of the original illuminated manuscripts. They are magnificent, with gold-leaf detailing and sumptuous full-color illustrations, making them a perfect gift for all who cherish the rich legacy of Christian art. The original illuminated manuscript, is permanently on display, since the 19th, in the Library of Trinity College Dublin.
It is one of the most beautiful of the world's most famous manuscript. It contains 680 pages (or 340 folios). Just two of the pages are without ornament, while about thirty folios, including some major decorated pages, have been lost. Two volumes can normally be seen, one opened to display a major decorated page, and one to show two pages of script. A CD-ROM version of all 340 folios from the Book of Kells is available for purchase.

Origin of Book of Kells:
The Book of Kells, was most probably copied by hand and illuminated by monks around the year 800 A.D. Its name is derived from the Abbey of Kells, in the Irish Midlands, where it was kept from at least the 9th century to 1541, it was probably begun on the island of Iona. It is uncertainly presumed, that portions of the book were made at Kells, after Viking raids on Iona forced the monastery to retreat to the isolated location. It contains the four gospels, preceded by prefaces, summaries, and canon tables or concordances of gospel passages. It is written on vellum and contains a Latin text of the Gospels in insular majuscule script accompanied by magnificent and intricate whole pages of decoration with smaller painted decorations appearing throughout the text. The manuscript was given to Trinity College in the 17th century and since 1953 has been bound in four volumes.
Book of Columba:
This same Irish manuscript containing the Four Gospels, is known also as the "Book of Columba", probably because it was written in the monastery of Iona to honour the saint. Some small portions at the beginning and end of the manuscript have been lost, but otherwise it is in a very good state of preservation. It was apparently left unfinished, since some of the ornaments remain only in outline. It is written in part black, red, purple or yellow ink, and it has been thought that the hands of two scribes, neither of whom is known by name, are discernible in the writing and illumination of the manuscript.

Book's Beauty:
This is the most copiously illuminated manuscript of the four Gospels in existence. No words can describe the beauty and splendour of the richly coloured initial letters, which are more profuse in the "Book of Kells" than in any other manuscript. The artist possessed a wonderful knowledge of the proportion of colour and the distribution of his material -sienna, purple, lilac, red, pink, green, yellow, most often used, and the shade tinting of the letters was managed with fine taste and skill. A series of illuminated miniatures, including pictorial representations of the Evangelists and their symbols, the Blessed Virgin and the Divine Child, are worthy of notice. It is no wonder that it was believed that the "Book of Kells" could have been written only by angels (very artistic indeed!).

Composition and Loss:
The date of the composition of the book can hardly be placed earlier than the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century. It is likely that it is to this book that the entry in the "Annals of Ulster" under the year 1006 refers, recording that in that year the "Gospel of Columba" was stolen. According to tradition, the book is a relic from the time of St. Columba (d. 597) and even the work of his hands, but, on palaeographic grounds and judging by the character of the ornamentation, this tradition cannot be sustained. This must be the book reported at Kildare in the last quarter of the twelfth century, described in glowing terms. Later, it was located at the cathedral of Kells (Irish Cenannus) in Meath, a foundation of Columba's, where it remained for a long time, until the year 1541. Archbishop Ussher presented it to Trinity College, Dublin, in the 17th century where it is the most precious manuscript in its library and by far the choicest relic of Irish art that has been preserved.

Manuscript Ornaments & Designs: The most characteristic ornaments of the Book of Kells, as of other illuminated Irish manuscripts of the period, are the coloured representations of fanciful beings, or of men, animals, birds, horses, dogs, and grotesque, gargoyles-like human figures, twisted and hooked together in intricate detail, a system of geometrical weaving of ribbons plaited and knotted together. The versatility and inventive genius of the illustrator surpasses all belief. Lines diverge and converge in endless succession, and the most intricate figures, in lavish abundance and with astounding variety of ornament, are
combined and woven into one harmonious design. In spite of the extent of the work and its thousands of exquisite initials and terminals, there is not a single pattern or combination that can be said to be a copy of another. The artist shows a wonderful technique in designing and combining various emblems, the cross, vine, dragon, fish, and serpent. The drawing is perfection itself. It has been examined under a powerful magnifying glass for hours at a time and found to be, even in the most minute and complicated figures, without a single false or irregular line.

*Most of this review material are from Trinity web & New Advent

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