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Falter's Psalters

Matthew Reisz discovers a firm which produces facsmiles down to the last wormhole



Michael Falter comes from the third generation of a printing family. In 1979, looking at the beautiful Hebrew manuscripts on display in the British Museum, he was irritated that they were always kept open on the same spread. This started him thinking that he would like to produce facsimile editions on the antique Columbian press he had inherited from his father. He consulted some scholars in Oxford and this led to an appointment with the late Ron May, Curator of Hebrew Manuscripts at the Bodleian Library. In the very same week, as it turned out, Falter met his future wife Linda, so he asked her, as a second date, whether she would like to accompany him. Thinking he had said 'the Bodley Inn', she warned him that she didn't drink.

Once in Oxford, they got a chance to look at the Kennicott Bible (1476), the most lavishly illuminated of all Hebrew Bibles, to which only 30 scholars have been granted access over the last 200 years. It was then that they decided they wanted to create a facsimile which reproduced the character of this magnificent original as far as was humanly possible. At first the Bodleian refused permission – Oxford University Press

was exploring a similar project but eventually concluded they did not have the resources to recreate a work where the artist sometimes used up to 24 colours per square inch. So, with no track record at all in this kind of publishing, the Falters stepped in where OUP had feared to tread. Their Kennicott Bible took around five-and-a-half years, but it immediately established Facsimile Editions, the company the Falters created and now run together, as one of the leading producers of facsimile illuminated manuscripts in the world.

With the North French Hebrew Miscellany (launched this spring at a price of \$8,995), they have just completed their ninth book. Hebrew illuminated manuscripts are often very revealing about Judeo-Christian relations and artistic contacts as well as the social history of costume, décor and decoration. Each book published by Facsimile Editions comes with a companion volume of technical, historical and artistic commentary. The Parma Psalter (c.1280), once owned by Napoleon's wife Marie-Louise, for example, is overflowing with images of both plausible and grotesque musical instruments, many of them being played by animals. Scholars in the Facsimile commentary draw out the psalter's precious insights into mediaeval music-making. The published facsimiles range in size from the *Me'ah Berachot*, a tiny book of blessings and prayers measuring only >

40x36mm, to the immense Alba Bible (1422-30), the first ever translation into Castilian and the only non-Hebrew text the Falters have worked on. It was commissioned for presentation to the King of Spain and President of Israel at a ceremony to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Boxed up with its companion volume, it is around the size of a television.

In 1980, however, all this lay ahead. To start work on the Kennicott Bible, the Falters sent out specifications, a transparency of a single page and a photograph of the binding to specialist printers all over the world. They were unimpressed with the samples they got back, so they travelled around but still drew a blank. As a last resort, they started leafing through a book on their shelves called *L'Italia Grafica* (a 1967 yearbook for the Italian printing industry). One of the firms they contacted was an art book printer called Grafiche Milani. The managing director, Luigi Canton, was a passionate bibliophile and thought the Kennicott project could be the highlight of his career, so he sent a proof over, asked to come to London and arrived with a rough version of the binder as well.

With a skilled printer keen to come on board, the Falters turned to the problem of paper. All the originals that they have reproduced used parchment or foetal vellum and so they needed to find something which avoided the clinical feel of coated papers and possessed "the unique transparency, presence and feel" (if not the smell) of vellum. Signor Canton raised no fewer than 26 objections to a sample provided by one specialist paper mill (largely due to register issues involved in 11-colour printing in the humid Milan summers), but these were slowly overcome in collaboration with the mill. Each subsequent facsimile has required the creation of a completely new paper or an extensively modified version of an existing one.

Goldfingered

Another key challenge was the laying-on of gold. It is relatively easy to use pressure to apply gold foil to individual sheets, but this results in indentations on the reverse page instead of the flat or raised gilding found in manuscripts. An alternative method is to emboss gold onto two separate sheets and then glue them together, but this too never quite achieves the effect of the original. Luigi Canton was by now so committed to the project that he invented a special machine, in which sheets of gold foil were placed over pages already laid with glue in the right spots. The plan was for brushes to stick down the gold where it was required and rub it away from the remainder. Unfortunately, this proved a total disaster as the vacuum process sent flakes of gold flying round the room – all over people's clothes, into their hair just about everywhere except where it was wanted. High-tech solutions had to be abandoned, and gold is now applied by hand onto raised surfaces in all the books.

The basic production process is now firmly established. It starts with large-format



Michael Falter hand-numbering facsimiles of the North French Hebrew Miscellany

transparencies of the original manuscript, which often require the curators to 'relax' the bindings and employ elaborate devices to protect the original sheets from changes in temperature and humidity. Grafiche Milani, who still work on all the Falters' books, then create high-quality colour separations using sophisticated digital technology that also allows adjustments by hand. The Kennicott Bible used 11-colour printing, but later books have tended to rely on 'only' 9-colour printing. (Most art books and even some facsimiles are only machined four times.) Each stage of proofs is compared with the transparencies on a special daylight-calibrated lightbox to ensure consistency. Linda Falter reckons she walked 65km during the production of the Alba Bible just taking proofs from the press room to a nearby office where a large window gives natural light. Final proofs were then checked again several times against the original manuscripts in Jerusalem, London, Madrid, New York, Oxford and Parma. This iterative process of colour-correction takes so long

that for some books the Falters have had to move to Milan for four months.

Hand-pricked

Even when printing finally starts, it can take up to 24 hours to get the correct balance and register on a single sheet. Books are usually published in slip-cases with their companion volumes, in editions of around 500 copies (although only 360 in the case of the North French Hebrew Miscellany), after which the presses are destroyed to protect the collector's investment. Each copy is discreetly numbered by hand and given a hollow spine (unlike the originals) to avoid overstressing the binding. In every other respect they set out to be scrupulously exact facsimiles. Gilded pages are artificially aged. Every 15th-century wormhole is lovingly recreated. Where the original manuscripts have pricking in the margins – the Rothschild Miscellany (c.1479), which the Falters published in 1989, has around 92,000 holes in all – this too is reproduced folio by folio.

There are many easier ways to publish books, although not to get such splendid results, and only on one occasion did near-disaster occur. With bureaucracy delaying the commission, work on the Alba Bible had to be compressed into a mere 11 months. Books were finished only the night before they were due at the commemorative event and the >

North French Hebrew Miscellany, folio 520b (right). Linda Falter and Luigi Canton check proofs against the manuscript (below)



In order to mimic the parchment and foetal vellum of the originals, they have produced special papers





When Falter invited his future wife on a date in Oxford, thinking that he had said 'the Bodley Inn', she warned him that she didn't drink

Falters were anxious that foggy weather might delay their flight from Milan to Madrid and require a desperate drive half-way across Europe. When this problem was overcome, another arose. The copy to be presented to the King of Spain was to have an elaborate calligraphic dedication pasted into the flyleaf. Since the glue and the ink were both water-based, the ink ran and smudged horribly.

Fortunately Goldie Graham, Facsimile's ever-helpful calligrapher, had other illuminated pages to hand and was able to create a substitute in time for the ceremony. The morning afterwards, however, she phoned them up in a panic: they must get the book back from the King of Spain at once! She was an inveterate doodler and had realised she'd left a sketch of two rabbits copulating in the corner of the dedicatory page! The Falters were about to scream, then breathed a sigh of relief – they had just remembered the date was 1 April. 🐰

Further information about Facsimile Editions – and purchasing their books or sample pages – can be obtained from 40 Hamilton Terrace, London, NW8 9UJ
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Presentation of the Alba Bible facsimile to HRH Juan Carlos I of Spain (above). Rothschild Miscellany, folio 44v (right)



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