

**MINIATURE BOOKS**  
**BOUND TO IMPRESS**

**A presentation given by**

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**to the**

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Bookbinders**

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## **Miniature Books – Bound to Impress**

Introduction: What defines a miniature book?

Miniaturisation of text - from a reed stylus to laser micro printing

The development of printing techniques – from Gutenberg to Bryce

Medieval books in miniature – Books of Hours

Incunabula

17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century miniatures – the rise of mass production

The Georgian era – the age of travelling libraries

The Victorian era – growing popularity and availability of miniature books

The 20<sup>th</sup> century – Collectors and creators.

Working today      Book artists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century

## **Intro**

Welcome.

Thank you for showing interest in what has become for me an exciting world of discovery and enjoyment. In the next few minutes I hope to tell you about the world of miniature books, not in its entirety, but with snapshots from the different eras of production. Because of time restraints there will be huge gaps – I *could* talk for hours and bore you silly with the minutiae of the subject, and if the person next to you starts snoring let me know and I'll know I've said enough. However, I hope by the end of my talk you will have heard and seen something that both informs and interests you in the world of miniature books.

Can I first introduce myself, and warn you that I am approaching this talk not as a printer or a binder, though I have a little experience in both, but as a collector. My interest in miniature books began when I took early retirement from a post as deputy head in an Infant and Nursery school, and has grown from a first foray into creating dolls house sized books back in 1998 to becoming involved in the Miniature Book Society, and having the honour to be the current President of the society.

## **So What is a Miniature Book?**

Miniature books, in the collecting world, are generally those that are three inches or less in any dimension. However, if a book has a particularly fine binding, or is special in some other way, then some collectors will allow books up to four inches to be included in their collections. Within this definition, sub categories are made – 3 to 4 inches are **macrominiatures**, 1 – 3 inches **miniatures**, ¼ to 1 inch **microminiatures** and less than ¼ inch (of which there are many) **ultraminiatures**. The legibility of the text is obviously an issue. Most books between 1 and 3 inches do have perfectly readable text, the pride and reputation of the printer being at stake if it is not so. With the micro and ultraminiatures it is a different story. Here, magnifying lenses, and even microscopes are often needed. More on that later.

Of course, there is also another question - what is a book? Does a scroll constitute a book? Does a book have to be able to open along a spine? What about books which are too small to read with the naked eye? These and many other questions have been discussed at length within the miniature book world, the result being that there are almost as many opinions as there are books. Each person can interpret the word 'book' in their own way, and create or collect to their own criteria. My talk today will focus on western books, (no, not cowboys and Indians, and no John Wayne, though there is a miniature book about him), but it has to be recognised that miniature texts and books were produced throughout the literate world from early times.

**Miniaturisation of text** began millennia ago. There are thousands of examples of tiny clay tablets from Mesopotamia dating to the second millennium BC. These were made by pressing the end of a reed into a wet clay block which was then dried in the sun. The tablets vary in size but are usually less than two inches square. The stylus, made of reed, wood or metal was used to make the marks, so the fineness of the point determined the ability to write in tiny letters.

Writing with ink on a medium such as papyrus, animal skins, shards of pottery and later paper was the main successor to clay or wax tablets. Reed pens continued to be used and later on bird feathers were

shaped to create the quill pens so often being seen on films used in completely the wrong way. There is evidence of the outer wing feathers of crows, jackdaws and smaller birds being used to produce the miniature writing in many devotional miniature books.

With the invention of moveable type a new opportunity came to produce small books. At that point the technique of cutting letters small enough to create a miniature book posed a real challenge, but also led to some wonderful typefaces being created, ranging from the original blackletter, with all its variants, to Venetian, which fundamentally changed the style of lettering in the 1400s, and paved the way for the development of many more typefaces. The use of lead type continued throughout subsequent centuries, and the development of typesetting machines made producing miniature texts for books much more simple. Today we have digital and laser reduction of typefaces, which enables even more miniaturisation to be possible, and has given rise to some wonderful new letter design.

### **Clay tablets**

As mentioned before, the earliest forms of miniature text were small clay tablets. The content of the tablets is predominantly administrative, - rules and contracts, - but there are also examples of trading such things as cattle and grain. Many thousands of these tablets are found on archaeological digs throughout Iraq and Iran even today. They give us a good insight into the social and political life 3000 years ago.



### **Early writing in miniature**

No extant copies of miniature books from the Roman period seem to have survived, but it was reported by Cicero that Pliny, who lived from AD 23 to 79, owned a scroll of Homer's Iliad so finely written and small that it fitted inside a nut shell. Interestingly enough, nut shells have been used several times in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to contain texts.



## **Medieval Books in Miniature**

Jumping ahead to medieval times, wealthy nobles or clergy often owned miniature books, the text written using quills made from the wing feathers of crows or other small birds.



One can only imagine the time it must have taken to write such books, and the eyestrain the scribes must have suffered in less than well illuminated scriptoria. Such books continued to be made right up to the advent of printing using moveable type. Whilst we tend to think of illuminated books being mainly produced in monasteries, by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century commercial scriptoria began appearing in large cities such as Paris and Rome and in the Low Countries.

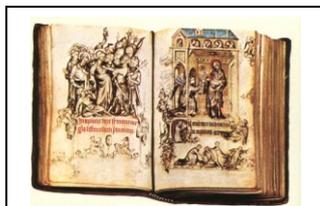


Many examples of small handwritten books have survived from the medieval era. In the main they were Books of Hours, Psalters and the like, and were made for personal use either for priests or the very wealthy who could afford to pay for the production of such a book. If one looks at the skills needed to produce just one book, then it is easy to realise just why they were so expensive. And, of course, once the book was written and illuminated it had to be bound, and many of the books were done so in a very lavish manner. Whilst some were in just a blind stamped leather or lightly carved wooden cover, others were bound with intricate metalwork and gemstones. Many of these examples still exist, and are spectacular to see, when you think they have survived for the best part of six or seven hundred years or even more.

Of course, most books of the time were large copies which enabled texts to be read from a lectern or maybe stood around by a choir, but copies suitable for carrying around began to be popular. I have no intention of elaborating on the way books were made as I am sure you all know far more of that than I do. Suffice it to say that the skill of the scribes, illuminators and binders of the middle ages led the way in developing the modern codex. I have amassed many photos of medieval books, and I would like to share some of them with you, with emphasis on the decorative bindings, and also the wonderful illuminations. All these books would fit within the definition of 'miniature'.



Psalm book, Salzburg,  
late 9<sup>th</sup> century



Hours of Jeanne  
d'Evreux, France c1325



Book of hours,  
Flanders c 1500

### Early Printed miniature books.

The ability of type cutters to reduce the letters and still keep clarity is to be marvelled at. Once the movement away from wooden type to cast type evolved, then the punch cutter, who worked to create the letters in reverse, became the key to the initial clarity of the text. Having engraved his steel punches into a copper base, it was the caster who then had responsibility to create crisp letters which the pressman would transfer onto the paper once the compositor had done his work. All very time consuming and labour intensive, but many of the resulting books are simply amazing in their beauty.

One of the earliest miniature incunabula still in existence is an *Officium Beate Virginis* printed by Mathias Moravius in Naples in 1486. This volume, which measures just 3 inches by 2 inches has survived in remarkably good shape and is now in the Library of Congress in Washington.



### **The 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

The 16<sup>th</sup> century offers a much greater variety of miniature books. Again, many of them were for religious use, or of the classic works of philosophers, but there arose the first examples of calendars or almanacks. Soon after the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 Christopher Plantin in Antwerp produced his '*Kalendarium Gregorianum*'



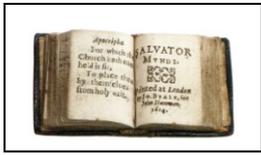
of which only two copies are extant, and which measures a tiny 1 3/8 by 7/8 inches. Many books of the time were published in Antwerp, Paris or Rome, though there were printing houses in most large cities.

The first tiny books which began a long-lasting trend, and were printed in England, seem to have been copies of the New Testament, published by Christopher Barker in 1593 and 1598. These abbreviated bibles gave rise to a whole crop of such books in the following centuries, over 300 different editions are known, whole books having been devoted to the study of them.

The onset of the 17<sup>th</sup> century brought a whole new crop of genuine miniature books, and this was the time when many more academic, literary and philosophical texts were produced in a miniature size. Of course, the vast majority of these books were in Latin or Greek, publications in native languages being slowly introduced throughout the century. Amongst the notable books is '*An Agnus Dei*' by John Weever – a life of Christ in verse.



It was printed in 1601 by V. Sims for N. Lyng and measures a tiny 1 7/8 by 1 3/16 inches. This book ran to at least three editions, though only two or three copies are known to exist today. This was the book that really started the fashion for 'Thumb Bibles', a term used to describe the many books that generally contained précised versions of books from the Bible, arranged usually in verse. Many of them had a number of woodcuts which accompanied the text. Also very important, and in the same style is John Taylor's *Verbum Sempiternum* of 1614.



This genre continued to be published right through the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, culminating in the microminiature complete Bibles of David Bryce, of which more later. There was even a Bible in Shorthand,



a system devised by Jeremiah Rich (Sam Johnson had also devised a system of shorthand). This ran to several editions, probably of small numbers, and within were the names of subscribers who paid up front to purchase a copy.



A notable book of this century, 'Bloem-Hofje' by C. Van Lange, printed in Amsterdam in 1674, and which, for more than 200 years was the smallest book in existence. It measures just 13mm x 9mm (that's 1/2 x 3/8 inches)

It is interesting to note that it wasn't until 1690 that the first miniature book was published in America, a copy of 'A wedding ring fit for the finger' published in Boston by Samuel Green for T. Harris. Very few copies of the original exist today, though it has been published since by other publishers.

I could name a long list of books published in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – but I won't, although John Bunyan's 'Book for Boys and Girls' does deserve a mention. It was subtitled 'Temporal Things Spritualized' although it was advertised in 1688 as 'Country Rhymes for Children'. Time moves on and I want to get to a much more interesting era for miniature books.

### Jumping ahead to the 18<sup>th</sup> century

As printing techniques developed, and literacy became more widespread, so the demand for books grew. The miniaturisation of texts became more popular, and by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century more and more printers

were producing miniature books alongside their regular sized ones. Though Latin was still a prominent language, increasing numbers of books were being produced in native languages, French, German, English, Flemish etc.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century brought a great increase in non-religious childrens' books. In that area perhaps the greatest publisher of books in English was Thomas Boreman in London. He produced a series of ten books for children which were designed to be of interest and educate the subscribers.



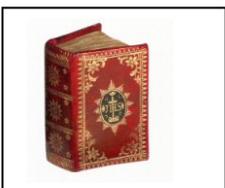
In a time when booksellers and publishers were vying for custom, Boreman had the genius idea to accept subscriptions for his forthcoming book, and then print the names of all the child subscribers in the first few pages. The first edition of the first book, 'The Gigantic History of the two famous giants, and other curiosities in Guildhall, London' had 85 subscribers. It can be seen from the list of subscribers that his books were known abroad as well as in London, as there is a Miss Henny Hitchcock residing in Oporto, Portugal. Of the ten volumes several went on to be reprinted several times.



Other miniature children's books include alphabet books and primers most of which consisted of woodcuts with simple text. They were produced in several countries, each with their own cultural aspects for the texts. The alphabetic primers were designed to be educational, and covered such things as countries and people of the world, flowers, animals and other aspects of nature.

Enterprising booksellers found a way to persuade youngsters to buy a whole series of books was to create special bookcases which would hold all the volumes (just like Del Prado did in 2004 with their Classics collection of 101 books)

A prominent printer in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was John Newberry who published many books and chapbooks for children as well as a long list of regular sized books. He also published, in several versions, miniature bibles which followed the tradition started by Weever back in 1601. These bibles were produced in large numbers from about 1780 – such large numbers that they are not uncommon even today – and appeared in several printings. In fact Newberry 'pinched' the text from an earlier 1778 version by J. Harris, who in turn had more or less copied it from an earlier edition of W. Harris of 1771.



This is a copy published by Newberry's daughter Elizabeth following his death.

On the continent of Europe there were many miniature book publishers, with classical texts, scientific and mathematical and, of course religious content. Examples from all the major cities exist, in many different languages. Of course all these books had to have bindings, and many of them had similarly spectacular bindings to those of earlier times.



## The 19<sup>th</sup> Century

Into the 19<sup>th</sup> century now, and a great flowering of interest in and broadening of content of miniature books. The technological developments of the 19<sup>th</sup> century enabled great strides to be made in book production, not least in the production of miniature books for children. Throughout the century we see improvements, and the development of lithographical printing, combined with the invention of photography enabled the reduction of 'mother books' into miniature versions. Also the enhanced skills of very talented engravers and typesetters allowed for the production of books which are real works of art and beauty.

There was a huge expansion of all types of books at this time, not least in the production of children's books. A successor to John Newberry, John Harris, brought out complete libraries for children in their own specially designed bookcases.



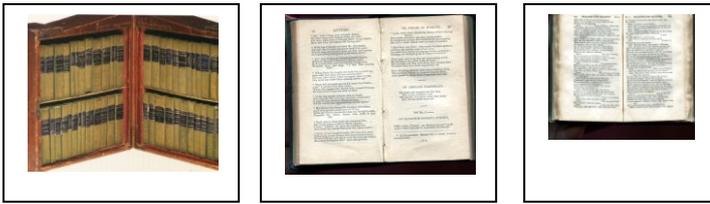
Another prolific publisher was John Marshall who published a sixteen volume series 'The Infant's Library' in about 1800, and reprinted it in 1819 and 1821. He also published in 1801 a sequel to this library, 'The Infant's Cabinet of Various Objects' and in 1802 'The Infant's Cabinet of the Cries of London'. There followed other 'Infant Cabinet' – they must have been bestsellers of his day!

Similar series were published, as previously mentioned, by John Harris, his 'Cabinet of Lilliput' of 1802 is aimed at older children and consists of 12 volumes in a wooden box with a sliding lid. Alfred Mills produced miniature engravings for quite a number of miniature books for Harvey and Darton and for John Harris.



These illustrations became very popular, and were subsequently published in several cities in America. Editions of the books were produced in other countries, and it is interesting that the French versions were produced in a less than scrupulous manner, with some of the illustrations being reversed – showing that they were not produced from the original engravings.

As mentioned before, the tremendous skill of engravers and type casters enabled some really wonderful miniature books to be published. Perhaps foremost amongst publishers of these books were Jones & Co. and William Pickering, both of whom produced a wonderful series of books under the title of Diamond Poets and Diamond Classics.



In these the typeface is super fine at about 3 points in size, and printed well enough that it is easy to read without the aid of a lens. These were very popular in sets as travelling libraries, often being housed in wooden cases and small enough to be carried in a carriage for use on long journeys.

The skill of printers was probably taxed to the maximum in the mid- to late nineteenth century. Henri Didot had developed a machine that would cast 2 ½ point type which was crisp and clear to read. His brother was responsible for the printing, and the books, the first of which was 'Maximes et Reflexions Morales' had 96 pages and was just 2 5/8 by 1 5/8 inches. The copies were bound by some of the best French binders of the time. The miniaturization of type faces probably reached its limit with the use of the 'fly's eye type' used to produce several books including a Divine Comedy.



At approximately 2 points, this reputedly ruined the eyesight of several compositors before it was printed.

The number of miniature books produced around this time was boosted by a prolific upsurge in devotional texts meant for daily use. The Religious Tract Society in London and the American Tract Society in New York produced many of these small books in huge quantities. Perhaps the most well-known today is the 'Small Rain upon the Tender Herb' which was first published in about 1830 and went on to at least 29 editions right up to 1890.



There were many more, however, each one with a quote for every day of the year. Some were directed at adults, others towards children, such as 'Children's Bread; or 'Daily Texts for the Young' or another, 'Dewdrops' which went to 39 editions. These small books were generally bound in cloth, deeply stamped and often gilded. Some, however, were bound in leather with a wrap around case..

An area of miniature books which continued from the Kalendum Gregorianum was the large number of Almanacks which became popular in the late 1680s, and continued in a similar format well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The main publisher of these in UK was the Company of Stationers, and the format they took was usually that of a 'finger book' with different folding formats. They often came in highly decorated slipcases.



Another publisher was Albert Schloss, who produced what we call microminiature almanacks, which came in a presentation box complete with magnifying glass. These are highly collectable today.



Of course, similar items were produced throughout Europe, and there are many examples from Germany, France and Holland.



I could mention many many more of these small books – there are a good number of reference books which deal with them, but I want to move to the man who perhaps had the greatest impact on the miniature book world in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century

David Bryce and Sons of Glasgow, Scotland, was a lesser known publisher who nevertheless went on to create some of the most collected miniature books. He realised the potential of photo-lithography, and the capability of electroplates to create minute books with utmost clarity. He would take a 'mother book' and reduce it to a miniature size. He collaborated with the printers of the Glasgow and Oxford University Presses who printed his tiny tomes, who with their wide reputation no doubt helped Bryce in his marketing.

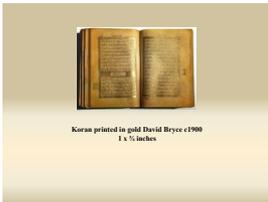
In about 1888 he produced a miniature dictionary just 2 ½ inches tall with 772 pages, printed sideways and sold in various bindings. This was the forerunner of his 'Smallest Dictionary in the World' in the 'Midget' series. These measured just 1 by ¾ inch, and were housed in metal cases which had a magnifying

lens in the front. The dictionaries included English, French and English and German and English. The original of these had sales of over 100,000 according to Bryce.



Bryce's religious texts were also very popular. He produced several versions of the Bible, invariably 1 ¾ by 1 ¼ inches, but in a variety of bindings, often with a magnifier placed in a pocket inside the back cover. He also published a Koran in Arabic, a Gita-Pancha-Ratna in Sanscrit and Kordeh Avesta in Gujurati, each of these just 1 inch tall.

The Koran had the distinction of several copies being printed in gold, and regular copies were given to Muslim soldiers during the First World War, as were Bibles to Christian soldiers.



Bryce's output was prolific, several sets of Shakespeare appeared in 40 volumes, housed in a variety of cases and cabinets, and his books appeared in many different bindings, including tartan cloth – you could select your own tartan – silk, leather, paper, silver and Mauchline. Many of the well known Scottish poets and authors are also in Bryce's publications. Bryce sold his business in 1911, and the miniature books he produced continue to be sought after by collectors all over the world.

### Into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century



The popularity of miniature books continued into 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the Oxford University Press continued, under the editorship of Henry Frowde, to produce miniature prayer books as well as children's books. A notable series of children's' books appeared in the 1920s published initially by Frowde, and subsequently, or maybe simultaneously by Humphrey Milford, sometimes with OUP. These little books were always printed in green, and the binding was peculiar in that the books were held together crudely with two loops of cord which pierced the pages. Many more children's books have been produced in a miniature size since then, right up to the present time.

I have mainly talked about books produced in UK and some in Western Europe, but there was a huge rise in miniature book production in Eastern Europe. With the widespread political changes in Russia and Eastern Europe many hundreds of politically or socially based miniature books were produced in editions of tens of thousands.



These were generally of a uniform size and presented in a slip case and many contained a selection of photographs. They are still quite easy to purchase today.

In the 1930s America people such as Wilbur Macey Stone, Achille St. Onge, James Henderson, Charlotte Smith and Doris Welsh not only began collecting or publishing miniature books but also writing material to educate and inform people about the wonderful little tomes, and we have a wealth of reference material about all aspects of miniature books. Current publications such as the Miniature Book Society Newsletter and the Microbibliophile continue to add to that literature keeping us informed about what is going on today in this fascinating interest.

Many of the miniature books which survived from earlier centuries began to be collected by discerning book people, with the result that some very large libraries of miniature books were created. Many of those collections were either broken up to be sold piecemeal, sold at auction or donated to a major library on the death of their collector. Several current collectors have donated their books to institutions best equipped to maintain and value them as collections representative of the world of miniature books. It is good to know that these collections will be available for research to future minbibliophiles.

Around the 1970s and 80s there was an upsurge in the book arts world, when some extremely imaginative and creative people turned their minds to miniature books. People such as Mayline Poole Adams, Peter and Donna Thomas, Mariana and Bela Blau, Muriel Underwood and others too many to name sought to promote and create miniature books.

Today there are many fine book artists and binders producing miniature books.



In 1998 Mel Kavin commissioned 33 binders from around the world to bind copies of a miniature book by Bernard Middleton which he was publishing. The title of the book is 'You Can Judge a Book By Its Cover'. He gave the binders a free hand in the design, and some wonderful books were created, a catalogue being produced with high quality photographs demonstrating the different approaches to the same task.



A notable collector and commissioner of designer bindings is Neale Albert, who has amassed an enormous collection of Shakespeare miniature books, and I know some of you here will have received his commissions. Here are a few of them. Some are housed at the Grolier Club in New York, some at Yale University Centre for British Arts.



An interesting offshoot of the miniature book world is the ongoing attempt to create the smallest book in the world. This honour was, according to the Guinness Book of Records, for many years held by Ian Macdonald of the Gleniffer Press in Scotland. His book, *Old King Cole*, at 1mm square held that record until the Toppan publishing company in Japan and two Russian publishers began competing for the title. To date the Toppan company is ahead with an ultramicrominiature of 0.9mm square. Novelties they are, but what a long way we have come from the initial hand cut wooden type that was used by Gutenberg.



As a result of a common interest in publishing and or collecting little books the Miniature Book Society was born, in 1983, at a meeting hosted by Miriam Irwin, proprietrix of the Mosaic Press in Cincinnati. From the initial number of sixty seven publishers and collectors the society has grown to a family of over three hundred members from around the world, all with a great interest in the many aspects of miniature books, and there are a growing number of people outside the MBS who have developed an interest in the little gems.

There is so much more I could say, I have glossed over an enormous wealth of material from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but time doesn't allow me to elaborate. If you are interested in finding out more do ask questions, or talk to me later. Thank you for being here, I hope you have not been bored!