

Insular Gospel Books of Ireland and the British Isles (c. 600-900 CE)

A multi-frame picture postcard exhibit

The exhibit describes Insular Gospel Books, masterpieces of Irish art and some of the greatest treasures of medieval Europe.

In Insular Gospel Books, scribes and artists combined their talents to produce Latin translations of the Four Gospels by the Evangelists - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – in colorful and imaginative manuscripts. Insular Gospel Books were handwritten in a script invented for the purpose and illustrated in a distinctive ‘insular’ style which Irish monks spread through Ireland and the British Isles while converting local populations to Christianity. [‘Insular’ is Latin for ‘island.’] Eventually insular style, with its blend of Celtic and Christian imagery, reached continental Europe where it lingered until superseded by late medieval and renaissance illuminated manuscripts.

Postcards are exhibited because 1) there are few postage stamps depicting art of Insular Gospel Books and 2) stamp images are too small to see fine details that distinguish these fabulous works of art. Two types of postcards appear: Real Picture Postcards (RPPC) and Chrome-era cards (1939-present). Postcards are in mint condition unless otherwise noted.

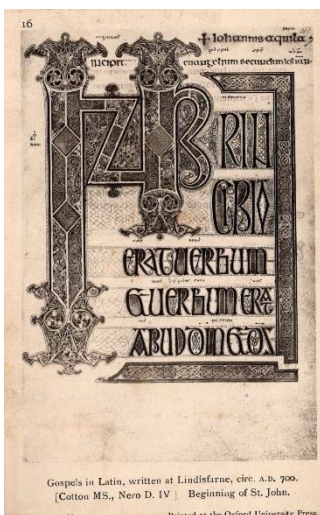
Three books dominate the exhibit. They are the most famous and have been heavily promoted and merchandised by their institutional owners; hence, they are most often found on postcards:

- *Book of Durrow* (Trinity College, Dublin)
- *Lindisfarne Gospels* (British Museum, London)
- *Book of Kells* (Trinity College, Dublin)



BOOK OF DURROW, fol. 192v

Book of Durrow, carpet page



Gospels in Latin, written at Lindisfarne, c. A.D. 700.
[Cotton MS., Nero D. IV] Beginning of St. John.
British Museum. Printed at the Oxford University Press.

*Lindisfarne Gospels,
ornamental text*

The Exhibit

1. An *Introduction* provides historical background about Insular Gospel Books on the assumption that many viewers, like my test audience, will be unfamiliar with them. Most Insular Gospel Books cannot be dated with sufficient accuracy to present a precise chronology; therefore, the two-page history focuses on the three main books listed above, using generally accepted dates compiled from literature searches and online resources. The *Introduction* also defines terms used in the exhibit when referring to a manuscript.

2. *Elements of Insular Gospel Books* illustrates the main types of decoration encountered in an Insular Gospel Book: full-page illustrations (e.g., portraits, carpet pages), ornamental text, decorated initials, line fillers. Examples are included from the *Book of Durrow*, *Lindisfarne Gospels* and other manuscripts.

3. *A Close Look at the Book of Kells* focuses on details. *Kells* is considered the epitome of insular art with its prolific number of illustrations. Many publishers have only issued postcards of the *Book's* best-known full-page illustrations (some of which are in the exhibit). Many of those publishers were never identified and the postcards are simply attributed to Trinity College, its Library or its Board of Directors.

However, noteworthy postcards by British publisher Thames & Hudson (T&H) play an important role in the exhibit. In 2012 T&H published a scholarly text by Bernard Meehan heavily illustrated with new color photographs of pages from the *Book of Kells*. Many of those photographs were subsequently incorporated into a set of postcards. The T&H postcards differ from other issues because they include many details of *Kells's* decoration not usually published, e.g., inventive lettering, line fillers, decorated letters, and combinations of complex interlacing, animals and human figures.



Book of Kells, full-page illustration

4. An **Epilog** describes post-900 CE spread of insular gospel books, threats to their survival and where they are on display for public viewing.

The storyline is based on personal study of existing literature sufficient to trace development of early insular gospel books and discuss their art. Insular Gospel Books are treated to a colorful, eye-catching exhibit analogous to a museum or art gallery.

Wikipedia articles provide sufficient information to evaluate the exhibit.

Insular Art

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Insular_art

Book of Kells

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Kells

Lindisfarne Gospels

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lindisfarne_Gospels

Book of Durrow

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Durrow

Insular Gospel Books of Ireland and the British Isles

c.650 - 900 CE

A three-frame postcard exhibit about early medieval illuminated manuscripts produced on the islands of Ireland and Great Britain known as 'Insular Gospel Books.'

- ♦ Handwritten and illustrated books of the Christian New Testament Gospels of Evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- ♦ Created by Irish monks on the islands of Ireland and Britain ['Insular' is Latin for 'island.']
- ♦ Noted for their combination of dazzling decorations and Latin text using intricate geometric designs, vibrant colors and masterful calligraphy to define Insular Style.
- ♦ Of the twenty-eight Insular Gospel Books and fragments that survive, the *Book of Durrow*, *Lindisfarne Gospels* and *Book of Kells* are most famous, most-often reproduced and a central focus in the exhibit.

PLAN

1. Introduction
2. Insular Style
3. A Closer Look
4. Epilog

NOTEWORTHY ITEMS

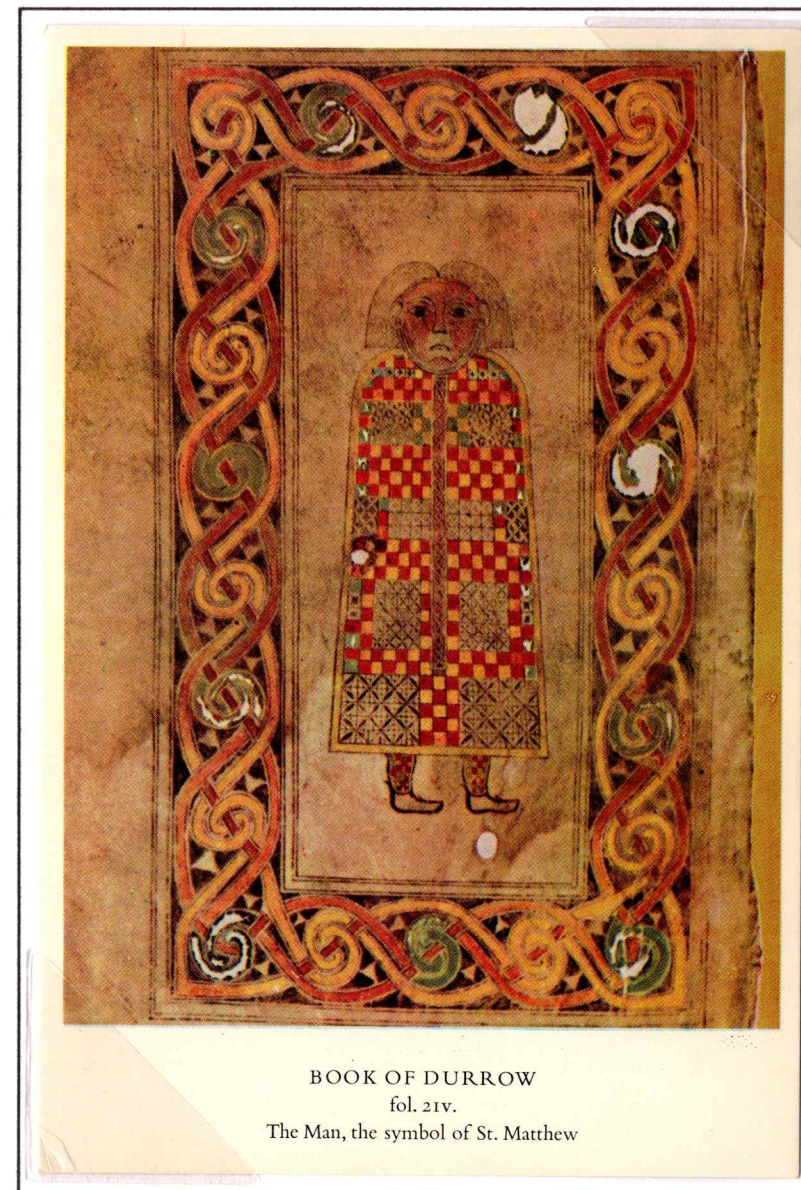
Explained in text or caption

KEY

Main storyline Captions

Deltiologic / philatelic information
RPPC = Real Photo Post Card

Symbols of the Four Evangelists in the *Book of Durrow*, c.700 CE (Common Era)



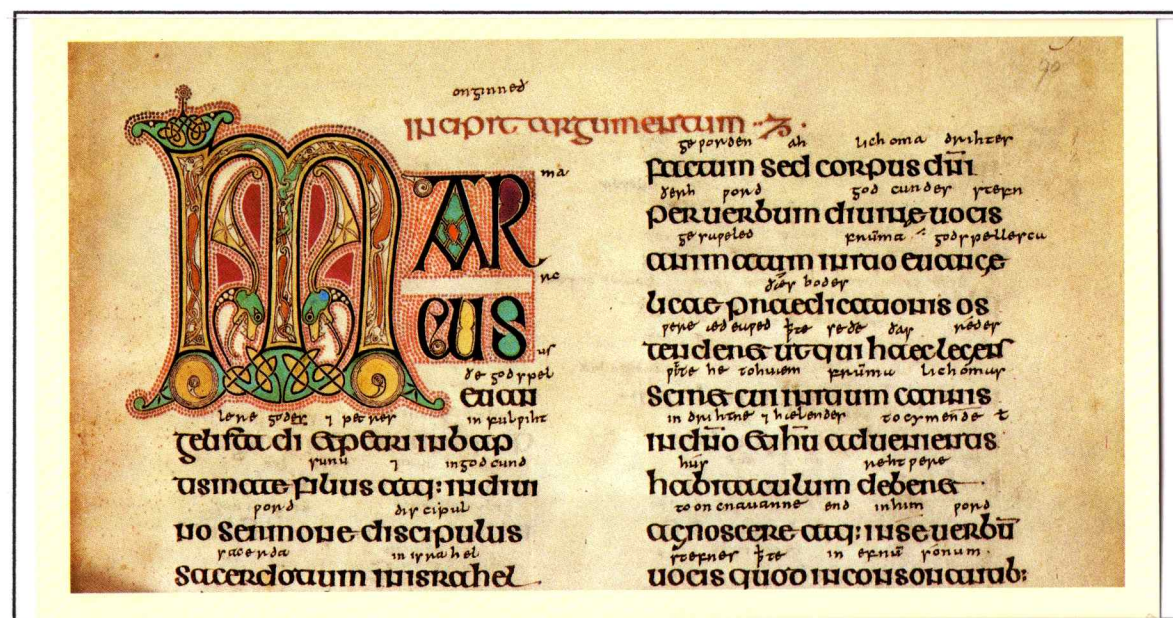
BOOK OF DURROW
fol. 21v.
The Man, the symbol of St. Matthew



BOOK OF DURROW
fol. 84v.
The Eagle preceding St. Mark's Gospel

The Man, Symbol of Saint Matthew (f.21v)
Unusual image with robe tightly enveloping his body, both feet pointed to the right and carpetlike decoration.

Eagle of Saint Mark (f.84v)
Associated with John the Evangelist in later Gospels. Represents Jesus' Ascension into Heaven.



Lindisfarne Gospels, 715-720 CE (f.90r detail)

Decorated initials from Saint Mark's Gospel by a monk named Eadriht.
Postcard: Printed in England by P.J. Reproductions, Ltd., London.

Postcards: produced for Trinity College Library, Dublin, by Edmund Ross, Ireland.