

By Les Daly

ART, HISTORY, RELIGION— HUMANITY

Like the glaciers and the rain forests, the paper book is receding. A handwritten letter is a pleasant surprise likely prompting an appreciative response—by e-mail. School boards debate how much attention cursive writing really deserves. It is possible you may already be reading these words in an assemblage of agitated electrons.

Into this denatured world appears *The Saint John's Bible*. It is written by hand, on 1,150 pages of calfskin vellum, every word of it. The script is calligraphic, each exquisite letter and number sipping itself into existence from the tip of a feathered quill. The hand-painted illuminations in this Bible, every one conceived for this purpose and this place alone, shimmer with gold, brought home to the page on a fingertip.

An awe-inspiring example of ancient art retrieved from a medieval monastery? No, *The Saint John's Bible* is a wondrous

view of what imaginative, dedicated men and women can still achieve today, in the twenty-first century. It was completed only a few months ago, in May of 2011, after a near biblical effort of almost fifteen years. It is the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments in seven massive volumes. Yet it is an original, modern work of “art, history, and religion,” in the words of Tom Leech, who might well have added “and humanity.”

Leech is the curator of the New Mexico History Museum's exhibit of twenty-two folios—forty-four pages—of *The Saint John's Bible*, drawn from Old Testament books of wisdom and prophecy. The full Bible will be bound later, after these and other folios have been displayed in other cities. “The medieval book producers tried to incorporate everything they knew about the world of their time,” says Leech. “This is the Bible of our time.”

When spread open, the vellum folios of *The Saint John's Bible* are immense—two feet tall and three feet wide. The size allows the eye to take in at once, in scope and in detail, the perfect columns of precise hand-lettering in a script designed especially





ΑΓΙΟΣ
ΑΓΙΟΣ

SANCTVS

SANCTVS

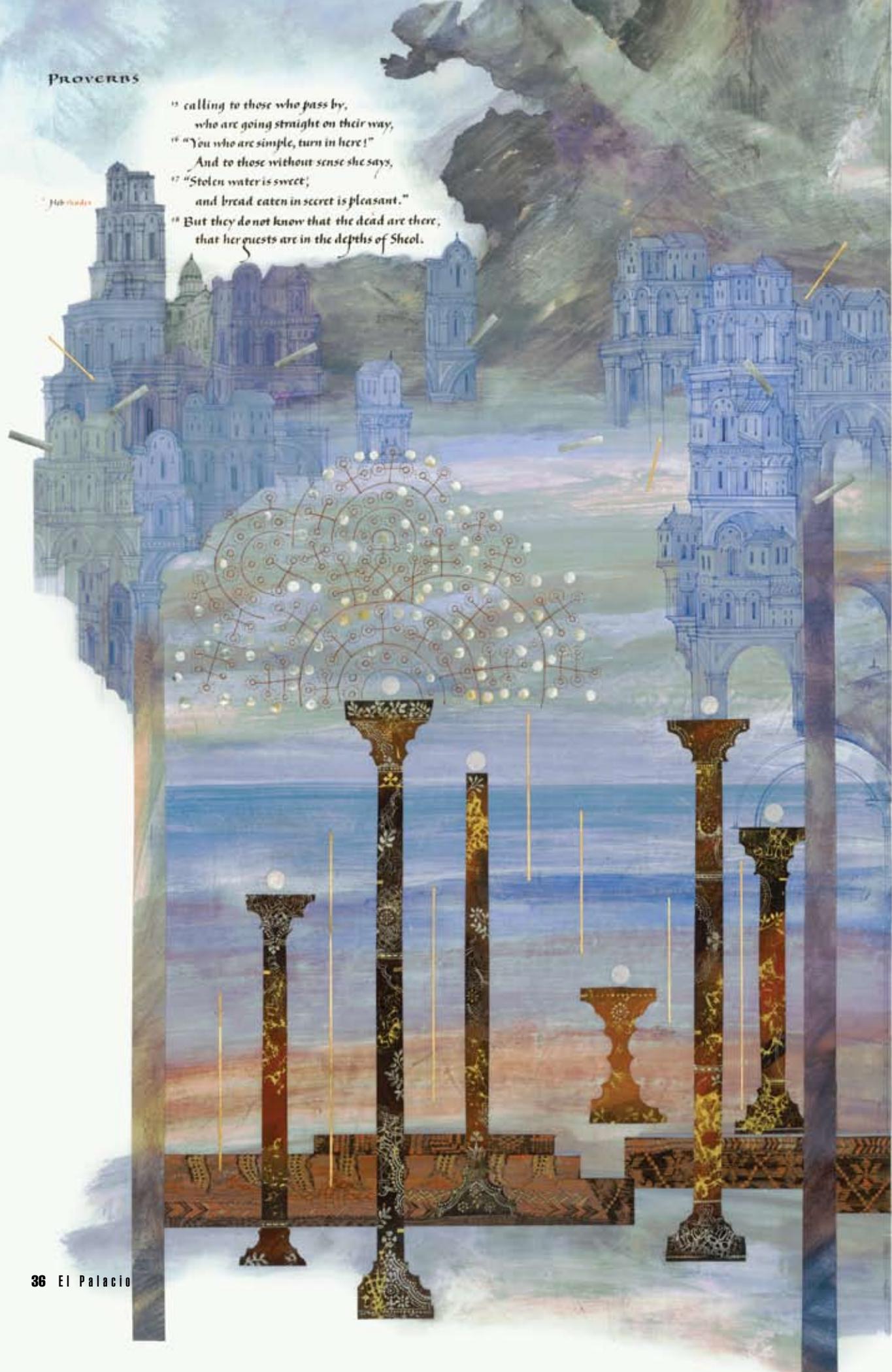
heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of these two smoldering stumps of firebrands, because of the fierce anger of Rezin & Aram and the son of Remaliah.² Because Aram with Ephraim & the son of Remaliah has plotted evil against you, saying, "Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabeel king in it; therefore thus says the Lord God:

HERE
AM I:
SEND
ME!

PROVERBS

¹⁵ calling to those who pass by,
who are going straight on their way,
¹⁶ "You who are simple, turn in here!"
And to those without sense she says,
¹⁷ "Stolen water is sweet;
and bread eaten in secret is pleasant."
¹⁸ But they do not know that the dead are there,
that her guests are in the depths of Sheol.

Job 38:16



for this book, in the company of arresting illuminations. Standing before these glowing pages, it is sometimes difficult to remember this is not a copy, not a fine reproduction just for display from another place and another time. This is new, real, and now, and has all been done by the hand of identifiable men and women, living among us and gifted with the skill and temperament necessary to undertake such a calling for years of their lives.

In the beginning, there was Donald Jackson. It was he who had dreamed since his boyhood in Lancashire, England, of creating by hand a Bible in the tradition of the medieval monks but with a perspective reflective of today. And it was Jackson, attending a conference of calligraphers at Ghost Ranch near Santa Fe in 1984, who, by chance, was asked to produce an illustration of a “dream project.” Inhaling the stimulating serenity of the New Mexico desert, Jackson presented a rough, powerful illumination of the biblical story of Christ in the desert. This was the genesis of *The Saint John’s Bible*.

More than a decade later, in 1995, Jackson was at lunch with the Benedictine monks at Saint John’s University and Abbey in their idyllic outpost near Collegeville, Minnesota. Saint John’s has a deep concern and well-established world reputation for the collection and preservation of ancient manuscripts and rare books. “I asked the priests what they might think of celebrating the upcoming millennium by doing a handmade version of the Gospels,” Jackson recalls, still enjoying a certain level of surprise at what happened next. “After thinking about it, they came back and said they wanted to do the complete Bible.” This would be the first time in some 550 years, since before the invention of the printing press, that a Benedictine monastery would commission a handwritten, illuminated Bible.

Jackson is a good-humored fellow despite the fact that he carries the imposing title of “Senior Illuminator to Her Majesty’s Crown Office of the House of Lords.” Given to sound bites, he likes to say the label represents “just a job, one in which the queen is my

customer.” Now seventy-three, he is considered one of the Western world’s leading calligraphers. The artists on the Bible project call him, without a backward glance at the text they have spent years inscribing, “the god of calligraphers.” Or perhaps in an even less reverent moment, the reverse. He has described *The Saint John’s Bible* as “the Sistine Chapel of the calligrapher’s and illuminator’s art.”

Some of the most far-sighted biblical illuminations and illustrations ever imagined rush at the viewer from these pages, almost overwhelming in their power and innovation and beauty. An illumination may be described in lay terms as an illustration touched by the hand of gold. Those of *The Saint John’s Bible* were overseen by a special committee of theologians, scholars and artists, Christians and Jews, men and women, brought together by Saint John’s to lend their experience and judgment to everything conceived by Jackson and his assembled team. It was a necessary and sometimes difficult education for both sides.

“The Saint John’s Committee of Illuminations and Text is very much a word-based group,” remarks Tim Ternes, the director of the Saint John’s Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. And the biggest challenge for them, he observes, was to learn how to see the scriptures in modern pictures in addition to reading them in sacred words. “Most existing illuminated Bibles rely on pictures to tell what the story is about,” he explains. “*The Saint John’s Bible* invites you to think of the illuminations more as visual-spiritual interpretations.”

Jackson remembers the learning process, too, and the challenge it was, as it always is, for the imagination of a creative artist to be judged by a committee. “When we began, my question to the monks was, ‘Do you really want to do this? Do you want me to make the Word of God come alive?’”

For each page, Jackson had to convey his visual ideas in sketches and words, and the committee had to learn to imagine their words and learning as art—most often with an ocean and half a continent between them. Jackson works in a village in Wales, while Saint John’s is hidden away in a village in Minnesota. “Given that the Bible has so many

Preceding Page:

Donald Jackson,
Vision of Isaiah (detail),
2005. Scribes: **Sally-
Mae Joseph** (poetry),
Susie Leiper (text).
Isaiah 6:1-13 in
The Saint John’s Bible,
Order of Saint Benedict,
Collegeville, MN, USA.
Artists drew inspiration
from many sources.
Jackson copied wings
from an Assyrian sculpture
in the British Museum,
and an assistant
manipulated the
drawing on a computer.
Rubber stamps of these
and other motifs were
used throughout the
work to create continuity.

Opposite:

Donald Jackson,
Seven Pillars of Wisdom
(detail), 2006. Scribes:
Brian Simpson (poetry),
Angela Swan (text).
Proverbs 9:13-11:15 in
The Saint John’s Bible,
Order of Saint Benedict,
Collegeville, MN, USA.

These calfskin vellum
pages of *The Saint John’s
Bible* are 2’ x 3’ and
decorated with hand-
ground ink and pigments,
casein and watercolor,
shell gold and gold leaf
on gum ammoniac/acrylic
medium.



of the Psalms and sacred chants. Those and other modern concepts flow page after page among representations of the faith of man, the fertility of woman, the sheer splendor of nature large and small.

The text of this Bible is the New Revised Standard Version. It was published in this country for the first time only in 1989 and is described as gender-inclusive. While our contemporary society continues still to work through this notion, this Bible might well be called “gender-illuminative.” The majority of artists were, as it happened fortuitously, women. About half the direct Benedictine participants were women. In *The Saint John’s Bible*, male and female figures populate the illuminations; “man” and “woman,” “she” and “he,” share the text. It provides the English-speaking viewer the rare opportunity to contemplate the words of the Bible in her own language and at the same time appreciate the striking new artistic interpretations of the scriptures.

During some three years of planning, Jackson’s creative team was selected, eventually becoming some twenty specialists in the calligraphic arts in the United Kingdom and a few in the United States. The entire Bible was plotted on a computer, using a typeface approximating the size of the script that Jackson would design. Words, lines, and columns were spaced and perfectly adjusted. There are few word or line breaks that might call for a hyphen, and those few are indicated instead by a tiny suggestion of a half moon called, gently, a “wisp.” The size and position of illuminations and substance of the special treatments—sweeping artistic elements to dramatize passages the committee at Saint John’s wished to emphasize—were agreed upon and calculated. The writing tasks were assigned to assure that the work of the same hand would appear on facing pages.

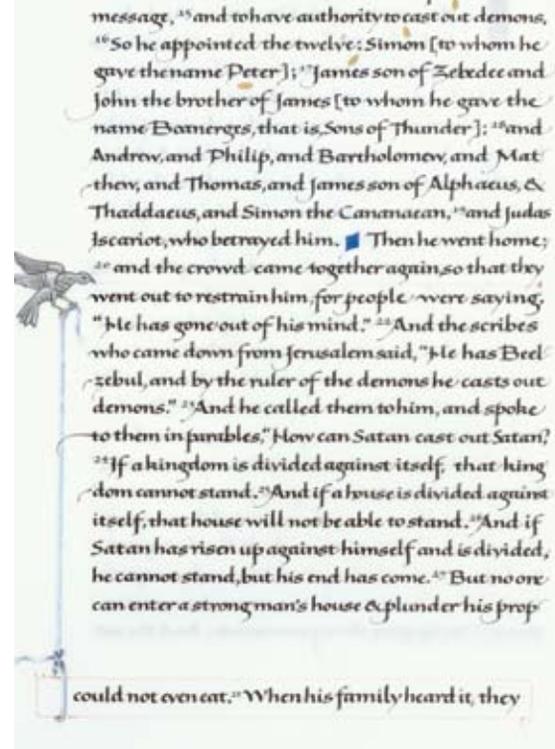
Even so, it took years longer than expected. The project was interrupted several times for “life issues”—births, marriages, illnesses in the extended family of artisans, among other things. Final dates were set and reset. Funds were raised, spent, and raised again, donors given refreshed “opportunities” for what became, in Ternes’s

discreetly nonspecific words, “a multimillion-dollar project.” A four-million-dollar number had been speculated some years ago. “Not even close today,” says Ternes, who, it seems evident, is still counting.

Jackson sought “stick-to-it-iveness,” temperament, artistic vision, and rare skill in each player in his orchestra of experts. In 1,150 handwritten pages only nine identified calligraphic errors remain, without benefit of “cut” and “paste” or “backspace.” In the world of calligraphy, mistakes are still called *errata*, a Latin word, and given fancifully indicated “signs of return”: a missed line of text is written carefully in the bottom margin of the page and “lifted” into place by a bird tugging it up on a string, its beak indicating the between-lines space where it was meant to be. For another, a bee draws a rope over a pulley to return a few errant words home halfway up the page. We are in the presence of unabashed humanity. Mistakes are made, accepted, and become art.

If Jackson has been called rhetorically the “god of this project,” Sally-Mae Joseph may be considered in lay terms to be the mother superior. A career calligrapher and teacher, she helped Jackson organize the undertaking and build a team to achieve it. “This Bible is about teamwork, individual artists willing to set aside their own particular style to put their creativity to work together for an important spiritual purpose,” she remarks. “The overriding feeling I have is that it speaks that way to many of the people who view it. They seem so moved.”

Joseph worked with Jackson on the design of the script, and with the computer specialist on the “physicality” of the pages. She and Jackson traveled to the countryside vellum purveyor to select the calfskins of the highest quality and uncommon size that would become the large folios. (The calfskin, it should be noted, is a byproduct of



Above: Sally-Mae

Joseph, *Gospel of Mark, Error Correction* (detail)

2002. Mark 3:20-2 in *The Saint John’s Bible*, Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, MN, USA. Mistakes occur in any painstaking human effort but, as in the medieval tradition, artists take the occasion to turn errata into fanciful art. The bird’s beak points the missing line home.

Opposite:

Donald Jackson, *Job Frontispiece and Incipit*, 2006. Scribes: **Brian**

Simpson (poetry) and **Susie Leiper** (text).

Job 1:1–2:5 in *The Saint John’s Bible*, Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, MN, USA.



CALLIGRAPHERS
ARE SOLOISTS
WHO
MOST OFTEN
WORK ALONE.
AS MEMBERS
OF THIS
BIBLICAL
ORCHESTRA,
HOWEVER,
EACH HAD
TO EXCEL IN HIS
OR HER OWN
DISTINCTIVE
PHRASE AND
LISTEN
CAREFULLY
TO THE MUSIC
OF OTHERS.

the British food chain. As the saying goes, no animals were harmed for this vellum.) Then she sharpened her quill and with her colleagues began to write her assigned “many thousands of words.” She produced special-treatment illustrations and gilded illuminations, usually touching a single piece of art many times in many ways for particular effects. As illumination artists do, she gave her very breath through a bamboo reed to lightly moisten the special glue (gesso) that affixes the gold leaf, her fingertip quickly bringing it to the page before the glue dried—560 shining fingerprints for Psalms alone—and then gently nurtured it to bring out its fullest light. “We were told not to work for more than about forty minutes or an hour without a break,” she said. “But once you get into something it is sometimes difficult to stop.”

Joseph, a spirited mother and grandmother, speaks almost mystically of her relationship to the organic materials at hand, the contact between the scribe and the substance of the book from which Gutenberg, whatever his undeniable accomplishments, led us away. “I love working with vellum, it has this wonderful way of taking the paint and holding it, and with the quill in my hand I can feel the affinity between the natural products, the skins and quills and the tools and the mediums I use. It’s something I’m very passionate about.”

Most of the team worked together in Jackson’s scriptorium in the tiny Welsh village of Hendre, as well as at home in their own studios. It was half a millennium away from the conditions described by a twelfth-century predecessor:

If you do not know what writing is, you may think it is not especially difficult. Let me tell you that it is an arduous task: it destroys your eyesight, bends your spine, squeezes your stomach and your sides, pinches your lower back and makes your whole body ache. . . . Like the sailor arriving at the port, so the writer rejoices on arriving at the last line. *De gratias semper*. [From the colophon of a twelfth-century Beatus manuscript from the Spanish monastery of

Santo Domingo de Silos, quoted in *Writing: The Story of Alphabets and Scripts*, by Georges Jean.

Fortunately, Jackson’s scriptorium, a converted workshop across the lane from his home, had electricity, heating, and modern lighting, and big windows to allow the scribes to enjoy an abundance of plants and trees and the sound of singing birds. And there were eyeglasses.

“And we had lovely tea breaks, many of them,” Susie Leiper says laughingly in her Scottish burr. “I made twenty-one train trips, seven or eight hours each, from my home in Edinburgh down to the scriptorium in Wales,” recalls Leiper. In some six years of intensive work she wrote “about 170 pages,” nearly 15 percent of the Bible. More than any of the Apostles. “Donald was a taskmaster,” she says admiringly. “When we arrived with our pages he would comment on the work. Sometimes our writing was becoming too heavy or too small, or it began to slope. Sometimes our s’s or our t’s weren’t very nice, and he would help us. “And sometimes he would wave his hand over the page and say, ‘Oh, the mastery of it. That is how I would have liked to have done it.’”

The team enjoyed the newest adjustable drawing boards and comfortable chairs. But they practiced their craft with the implements of another era. They are surrounded by pots of 100-year-old black ink powders drawn from the soot of Chinese lamps, and exotic ingredients evolving into deep, rich colors; rare brushes, and quills of goose, turkey, and swan feathers, each for its own purpose; and specialized tools with a history for precisely shaping and cutting the quill tips.

“Left-handed scribes use the outer feathers of the right wing of the goose, and a right-handed person uses the left-wing feathers,” Leiper explains. She is serious. For the calligrapher it is a matter of the natural curve of the quill fitting the shape of the fingers and thumb. After writing about half a column, the quill has to be sharpened again. After writing for as long as four or five hours a day, the scribes have to be sharpened too. “I did yoga,” says Leiper. Sally-Mae Joseph visits an osteopath every month.



Calligraphers are soloists who most often work alone. As members of this biblical orchestra, however, each had to excel in his or her own distinctive phrase and listen carefully to the music of others. Diane von Arx is a native Minnesotan and one of a handful of American calligraphers on the project. She produced several special-treatment illustrations for pages written by five different calligraphers and is humble about the sense of responsibility she felt to them. "I would get sheets of vellum with all their beautiful work done, hundreds of words hand-inscribed on both sides of the pages. There is a computer-prescribed space for me to put in an illumination or a special treatment. If I make a mistake I ruin a whole sheet of vellum, four pages of text and all the work that the scribes had put in. It's a thought that is with you all the time. You work hard and do your very best, and then ratchet it up a little more, give it 110 percent, as the sports guys say." She would

spend nearly 100 hours on a single illustration. It is exhausting simply listening to her.

"There have been many struggles, but the love that has gone into this Bible transcends those struggles," Sally-Mae Joseph reflects feelingly. "That is what people who view it tap in to, as well as the text and the sheer scale and beauty of it. The project—for me it is about that love."

After years of planning and preparation, Jackson wrote the first words for *The Saint John's Bible* on March 8, 2000, at the scriptorium in Wales. He wrote the last word there on May 9, 2011. "Amen." The event was cause for celebration. Champagne was in order. And why not? Champagne is another perfection for which we can give thanks to the monks of the Benedictine order. ■

Les Daly's work on diverse subjects has appeared in the *Smithsonian*, the *Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, the *Reader's Digest* and other national and international publications. None has been handwritten.

Donald Jackson,
Wisdom Woman, 2006.
 Scribe: **Brian Simpson.**
 Wisdom of Solomon
 8:17-10:13 in *The Saint John's Bible*, Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, MN, USA.
 A photograph of a Palestinian woman was used to create this image of wisdom as a female face. The round mirror frame depicts the twenty-eight phases of the moon, another association with femininity. The four corner paintings are based on images from the Hubble Space Telescope.

