

Contemporary Collectibles: Lilliputian lit

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Picture a Bible no larger than a thumbnail, or a 2-inch-high volume of nursery rhymes, and you'll have some idea of the awesome fascination inspired by miniature books. Made for more than 4,000 years, this category of book collecting is the very definition of the phrase, "Good things come in small packages."

Not surprisingly, the very first examples were painstakingly hand-lettered by monks and scribes on vellum, in particular books of hours for use by royalty and the aristocracy (unless you count as books the much earlier small cuneiform tablets of the ancient Mesopotamia). Once movable type was invented by Johann Gutenberg, they could, of course, be printed in larger editions.

A classical scholar named Aldus Manutius formed the Aldine Press, which became the most important producer of early miniature books toward the end of the 15th century. From then until now, thousands of titles have been printed, covering the full range of subject matter - Greek and Roman classics, Bibles and other religious books, children's books, almanacs and other references, fiction, poetry and history, travel and science.

Particularly popular were what was known as thumb Bibles, minuscule abridgements, the earliest of which were written in rhymed couplets. Among the many other items of interest is a series known as the smallest English almanacs in the world (three-quarters by one-half inch), issued annually from 1836 to 1843, with engraved text and portraits of literary lights of the period by Albert Schloss.

The minibooks genre is roughly defined as comprising books of less than 3 inches - the current world record for the smallest specimen being a 1932 edition of "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam" of Naishapal, measuring five-sixteenths by five-sixteenths inch. These tiny books were a splendid vehicle for the bookbinder's art - meticulously crafted examples have employed chased silver and gold, mother-of-pearl and elaborate needlework, as well as the finest leathers dyed in rich tones, usually ornamentally gilded and sometimes embellished with jewels. One smaller than 2-inch 1670 Venetian "Book of Hours," for example, is bound in chased silver with the raised figures of the Madonna and child on the front cover.

Miniature books have played a role in the lives and careers of a number of important historic figures. One of Henry VIII's wives, Anne Boleyn, carried to her beheading a tiny gold-bound book of Psalms that bore a portrait of the husband who had ordered her execution, and Queen Elizabeth I had her own minivolume printed in 1570, with six of her poems translated into four languages. Napoleon traveled with a large (small) library on his military campaigns; Benjamin Franklin issued a miniaturized edition of "Poor Richard's Almanac" for easier carrying; the Bronte sisters, as young girls, constructed books in miniature; and Abraham Lincoln carried a scaled-down prayer book on his travels as a circuit lawyer.

During World War II, miniature books played a role in both sides of the conflict: President Franklin D.

Roosevelt formed an extensive collection of them in his Hyde Park library, while Adolph Hitler published a large series of illustrated books during the same period.

A new book on the subject, far from commensurate in size, is the sumptuous "Miniature Books: 4,000 Years of Tiny Treasures" by two experts in the field, Anne V. Bromer and Julian I. Edison (Abrams), produced to accompany an exhibition of hundreds of extraordinary examples at New York's prestigious Grolier Club through July 28, then traveling to several other cities.

Copiously illustrated, it covers the full range - medieval and Renaissance manuscripts to modern examples, and includes fine leather, metal and jeweled bindings (including a striking Dutch one bound in 22-carat gold), dollhouse-scaled books made for adults, tiny treasures illustrated by Miro and Picasso, and a number of innovative novelty books.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

Contemporary Collectibles: Lilliputian lit by Linda_Rosenkrantz