This exhibit was prepared by Melissa A. Donahue ('89) as her Senior Individualized Project. The exhibit was made possible by the A. M. Todd Rare Book Room Fund, a growing endowment created by friends of the College.

Cover design by Regina R. Sanglier.
The art of book illustration is sometimes regarded as a mere afterthought to the presence of the text, a way of providing a strictly aesthetic pleasure for the reader. Yet book illustration is in fact an informative art whose primary intention is to reflect textual reality. From the crudeness of early woodcuts to the precision of the engraved or etched line, from the lithographic stone to the photographic lens, each era’s techniques and perspectives give the modern observer new insights into this complex and historically rich craft.

For their own purposes, literature, travel, art and science have each used illustration differently. Whether the needs have been practical or creative, the requirements of these disciplines and their historical environments have directed certain trends in illustration. Just as the texts differ in purpose and content, so the illustrations supporting the texts vary in artistic latitude and priority.

Early illustration of literature reached a nearly unsurpassed height of expression in medieval religious works. The illuminated manuscript, with its wealth of color and detail, revealed the text’s symbolism through elaborate design work and aided the reader in concentrating more fully upon the textual message.

With the advent of the printing press, the time-consuming and costly process of hand lettering and decorating involved in illumination was replaced by the use of woodcut illustrations. The woodblocks could be printed on the same press as the text type of a book and were thus a more practical and convenient method of illustration, albeit much cruder and of lesser artistic quality than hand-illuminated illustrations. Still, the
paramount interest of early printed illustration was to make concrete the ideas of the text, not to address an artistic concern; thus, the woodcut remained the predominant form of illustration until the 17th century, when newly developing techniques were employed to meet the needs of a changing intellectual environment.

Though early printed illustration of literary works was relatively limited in its approach, subsequent technical developments and the multi-faceted nature of literature itself have created a wide margin of illustrative interpretation; the illustrator is free to choose among a variety of media and to imbue the designs with personal perspectives. A fidelity to optical reality is not required, and the question of what constitutes a faithful adherence to the text is far more open-ended. A comparison between turn of the century illustrators Arthur Rackham and Aubrey Beardsley effectively highlights this issue: Rackham's characters conjure up the innocence of childlike fantasy, while Beardsley's rather insidious figures embody a decadence which seems more compatible with Art Nouveau. Literature's desire to suggest a mood and elicit an emotional response from the reader enables it to encompass such illustrative diversity, allowing for an artistic explication of the text with as much depth and variance as in the text itself.

While illustration has enjoyed greater artistic freedom within literature, the requirements of the subject matter have narrowed the illustrative scope of travel and exploration books. The accuracy of the illustrations was strengthened by the adoption, in the 17th century, of engraving, which allowed for greater precision, depth and delicacy of line. With engraving, the illustrator was able to provide crucial visual images not supplied by the text. Moreover, engraving resulted in wider dissemination of accurate pictorial images to the general public. Consequently, Captain James Cook's accounts of his voyages to the Pacific and around the South Pole gained eminence as some of the first widely known exploratory works whose illustrations presented correct visualizations of the textual matter to the reader.

Illustrators of art objects and architecture have likewise been concerned with visual accuracy. Frequently, however, the artist's original intention was altered or diminished as it was executed by other craftsmen in subsequent steps of production; the engravers or etchers of the illustrations received their visual information from the draftsmen of the piece, not from seeing the actual work of art itself.

Such disparities often resulted in unreliable historical representation. For hundreds of years, works of art like the *Laocoon* (the Greek Hellenistic sculpture excavated in the 16th century) were known only through differing graphic interpretations. It was not until the invention of lithography in the 19th century, when the artist was able to apply the image directly to the lithographic stone, that the image could be transferred to the printer without any intermediary steps. This technique brought the reader visually closer to the textual subject than ever before and thus brought illustration nearer to being a true image of its subject.

Together with art history and exploration, science also demands authentic visual representation. Moreover, scientific illustration has a special role in that it conveys technical details essential for the reader's application of the text's theories or instructions. A very early example can be found in the numerous and distinctly rendered plant illustrations for Flemish botanist Rembert Dodoens' *Stirpium Historiae Pemptades Sex,*
Sive Libri XXX. The precision of the textual images supported Dodoens’ pioneering theories of plant classification, making this text one of the foremost botanical works of the late 16th century.

Throughout the history of book illustration, the ultimate concern has been to reconcile the written word with the art of pictorial description; each field of study has used a variety of techniques and approaches in an effort to create clear representations of the text’s language. “A picture is worth a thousand words” takes on special meaning in relation to illustration, whose purpose is to reveal the text in a way that clarifies its message. Only pictures have the ability to transcend the boundaries of language in such a way that the connection between reader and text becomes a more immediate and enriching experience.


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