Milton’s poems were often used as vehicles for the self-conscious employment of the book arts. The Arts-and-Crafts Movement pioneered by William Morris encouraged the establishment of a number of private presses committed to developing the arts of the book. In our exhibit, we will see examples of such well-known imprints as the Vale Press, the Doves Press, the Eragny Press, and the lesser-known Nene Press.

The exhibit also traces the tradition of illustrating Milton’s poems, beginning with the first color illustrations of Milton’s poems, painted by Frederic-Jean Schall for the first French translation of Paradise Lost (1792) were based on Hayman’s designs. Later illustrators, such as Charles Ricketts, Arthur Rackham and Bernard Meninsky, among many others, all realized Milton’s scenes and characters in various lights and using different processes.

Alvan Bregman
Curator of Rare Books

List of Works Exhibited


3. Playbill for a production of Comus in 1795, which also featured Mrs. Martyr.


5. L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: The words taken from Milton; set to musick by Mr. Handel. London: Printed for I. Walsh, [1741]. Q784.2 H191 1741. Wickenheiser 343. First performed in 1740, with a libretto by Charles Jennens, with added “Il Needles Green” and “All the world is green” Songs by “L’allegro” (Signora Francesca) and “Il penseroso” (Mr. Beard) alternate until “Il moderato” (Mr. Savage) appears late in the score. The score, engraved throughout, ends with a duet between the two main characters.

6. Lycophron, Alexandra. [Geneva: Exccudate Paulus Stephanus [i.e., Paul Estienne], 1601. 881 L7 1601. The University of Illinois is proud to have two of the ten or so books indisputably known to have been owned by John Milton. This copy is annotated in more than 60 places in Milton’s hand, mainly in Greek, in response to the text he was studying. Here we display the title-page with Milton’s ownership inscription on the facing fly-leaf.


10. Areopagitica. London: Sold by the Eragny Press, and New York: Joles Lane, 1903, with: Prospectsus. Q. 821 M64N6 1903. Wickenheiser 28. This edition was completed on the 23rd day of December, 1904. 

821 M64L16 1904. Bound in vellum; tied with red ribbons. This volume, a product of the little-known Nene Press, is perhaps the most authentic example of the arts-and-craft tradition exhibited here, since it is the work of a provincial craftsman.


Francis Hayman was one of the leading engravers/ book illustrators of the mid-18th century. Shown here is his frontispiece for Samson Agonistes.


Ricketts (1863-1931) established the Vale Press in 1896 and this was his second publication. The Press ceased operation in 1904, after Ricketts threw his type into the Thames, apparently to spite his business partner, William Hacoon. As Cave explains (p. 150), Ricketts could not print at his Vale Press offices in Chelsea, so arranged to have his work done on machines kept at the Ballantyne Press. “From the designs of the watermarks on the paper (which was hand-made by Arnolds), through the types, decorations, wood-engravings, and the bindings, all was the work of Ricketts.”


Plates accompanied by guard sheets with descriptive letterpress. Presentation copy from Rackham to Mrs. Muriel Abramson, with a drawing of a satyr, a variation of the motif found on the title-page. The 24 color illustrations are mounted on brown stiff paper and protected by guard sheets with descriptive letterpress. There are also 37 black-and-white drawings integrated into the printed text.


Long after the end of the fine press movement, artists and publishers continued to use Milton’s poems as subjects for their art. Meninsky was born in the Ukraine, trained in Liverpool and later established himself in London.


The reader of this, the first folio and the first illustrated edition of Paradise Lost, would have been struck by this remarkable image of Satan engraved by Michael Burgers after an anonymous design (ascribed to John Baptist Medina or Henry Aldrich). In contrast to the infinite darkness of John Martin’s Hell, Medina’s fallen angels write in a world of tormenting flame.


The first colored illustrations of PL, and one of the earliest examples of color printing. The stipple-engraved plates were hand-colored for each separate impression, a taxing and time-consuming process. The engravings were made after canvases painted specifically for this project by Frederic-Jean Schall (1752-1825). Schall in turn based his compositions on the well-known illustrations of Francis Hayman, dating from 1749 (cf. Furman).