

PRESS RELEASE

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SOTHEBY'S LONDON TO SELL THE OTTHEINRICH BIBLE IN DECEMBER 2007



SOTHEBY'S IS DELIGHTED TO ANNOUNCE that it will offer for sale **The Ottheinrich Bible**, the first illuminated manuscript of the New Testament in German, in its sale of Western Manuscripts in London on Tuesday, December 4, 2007. Written *circa* 1430 in Bavaria, almost 100 years before the seminal Bible translation by Martin Luther, the unusually large manuscript is incomparably the grandest surviving manuscript of the German vernacular Bible, as well as one of the most ambitious books of the northern renaissance. The spectacular manuscript takes its name from one of its earliest owners, the Count Palatine Ottheinrich (1502-1559), Prince of Neuburg, Elector Palatine, soldier, pilgrim, reformer and art patron, who in the 16th century commissioned an artist to complete the work. The Bible is expected to fetch in excess of £2 million.*



Produced as a vast single book in the 15th century, the manuscript was later rebound into eight more manageable volumes. Sotheby's will be offering five of these enormous volumes for sale; the remaining three were sold to the Staatsbibliothek in Munich in 1950 and were published in complete facsimile in 2002.

The manuscript is being sold by the Ducal Saxe-Coburg-Gotha Art Foundation, a non-profit foundation, set up in 1928 to care for the art property which had been formerly owned by the Ducal House. The proceeds of the sale will go to the Foundation and be used to acquire other works of art, in accordance with the Foundation's statutory obligations.

The Ottheinrich Bible's more-or-less unbroken line of provenance in private hands since the day it was written - along with its extensive, exceptional and sumptuous illustration - are the attributes that make the manuscript so unique and special. The Bible has spent most of its life in the possession of two noble families, with a brief period in between when it was owned by the ruling Duke of Bavaria and the King of Sweden and perhaps a pope, and it has never before been sold, or even changed hands by any method other than succession, since 1632. The impeccably accurate and detailed documentation for this 500 year provenance is virtually unprecedented.

Dr Christopher de Hamel, Consultant to the Western Manuscripts department at Sotheby's, comments: *"In the census of the hundred greatest illuminated manuscripts, European or Oriental, the present example is the only one ever likely to appear on the market. Conceived as the first illuminated bible and on an Imperial scale, it is one of the most profusely illustrated medieval bibles in existence. It is probably the last remaining manuscript in private hands from the incomparable Palatine Library, one of the greatest art collections ever formed. The manuscript has not changed hands except by descent since 1632, and in addition, it is one of the best documented manuscripts in the world, which gives it an academic importance beyond equal."*

The early 15th century was a hugely important period in the history of the transmission of the Bible. The Latin Vulgate had been sanctioned by the Church for a thousand years and it was not until the 15th century that local, vernacular translations of the Bible started to become more commonplace. The Ottheinrich Bible was almost certainly commissioned by Ludwig VII (1368-1447), Duke of Bavaria-Ingolstadt and grandson of the Holy Roman Emperor Ludwig IV, for the library of manuscripts he collected for the French Gothic castle of Ingolstadt in South Germany which he had built on his accession.

The Ottheinrich Bible was written by a single scribe in approximately 42,000 lines of text, and was originally designed with spaces left for 146 large miniatures, two large historiated initials and 294 illuminated capital letters. However, for nearly 100 years the majority of the book remained unfinished.



On the death of Ludwig, the incomplete Bible passed by family descent to his cousin's son, Georg der Reiche, then to Georg's daughter, Elisabeth, and thus in turn to her son, Ottheinrich. Art lover Ottheinrich was the first to share his great-great grandfather's first cousin's passion for the manuscript and on his inheritance of it in 1530, he commissioned the young and celebrated artist Mathis Gerung from Lauingen to decorate the unfinished work – an artist who would later work with the extravagant Ottheinrich on several other projects. The records of the commission survive in the form of contracts between Ottheinrich and Gerung, dated December 23, 1530 and September 24, 1531, and inscriptions accompany several illuminations. That of December 23, 1530, records that Gerung was promised 60 Rhenish guilders and a supply of winter clothes for the work.

It has been argued, perhaps correctly, that the decades of the mid 16th century were the greatest decades of German art - certainly until the 19th century - and the present volumes seem to embody the very best of that period. The quality of the painting in the Ottheinrich Bible is extraordinarily high and immensely sophisticated, with an infinite variety of expression and human interaction, and the subjects are a wealth of detailed observations of both the natural and human worlds, executed with astonishing talent.

After a lifetime of lavish expenditure on art and architecture, Ottheinrich went bankrupt in 1544 and withdrew from Neuberg to his hereditary palace of the Electors Palatine at Heidelberg, and the manuscript is listed in the private library of the palace in 1610. During the Thirty Years' War Heidelberg and its Palatine art collections were raided several times and the first of these raids was undertaken by the armies of Pope Gregory XV in 1621. If the Ottheinrich Bible was briefly in papal possession - which was highly likely - it was quickly recovered. The Bible subsequently passed to the library of the elector Maximilian of Bavaria in Munich and then with the Swedish invasion and occupation of Munich in 1632, it was in the possession of Gustavus II Adolphus, King of Sweden (1594-1632). Following this, the manuscript has passed by descent within the Ducal House of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, later Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

The first detailed description of the Bible was published in 1836 and in this it was admired as one of the principal ornaments of the Gotha Ducal library. The five volumes of the Bible that are to be sold represent the very last manuscript from those great Palatine collections which still remains in private hands.

* Pre-sale estimates do not include buyer's premium

EXHIBITION DATES

New York : Tuesday, September 25 - Friday, September 28
(Tuesday 10am-noon; Wednesday-Friday 10am-5pm)

Paris : Wednesday, November 14 - Sunday, November 18

London : Friday, November 30 - Monday, December 3

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