Gold
50 spectacular manuscripts from around the world
Supported by BullionVault

Large print guide and video transcript

Please do not remove from the exhibition
Gold

Gold has long held a special place in manuscript traditions around the world. This exhibition showcases golden manuscripts in 17 different languages, from 20 countries, ranging in date from around the 5th century to the 1920s.

People have found all kinds of ways to incorporate gold into books and documents: golden writing, inscriptions on gold surfaces, illuminated pictures and gilded book covers. So intrinsic was gold to the craft of luxury book production that manuscript decoration is known as ‘illumination’ from the use of gold to light up the pages.
SECTION 1
Written in Gold

Across time and place, people have written in or on gold as a way of expressing the extraordinary importance of a text. This particularly applies to sacred texts, where the material value of the gold becomes a metaphor for spiritual value, and where its shine may suggest the radiance of divinity and wisdom. Rulers also saw the potential of gold for conveying an impressive message, producing golden documents to show off their wealth, honour the recipient and emphasise the text’s authority.
The Qur’an written in gold

Sultan Baybars’ Qur’an is the earliest dated Qur’an of the Mamluk dynasty, which ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 until 1517. Produced in Cairo in seven volumes, and written throughout in gold, this Qur’an is named after the ruler who commissioned it, Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Jashnagir. The calligrapher was Muhammad ibn al-Wahid, while the golden rosettes and marginal ornaments were the work of a team of artists headed by the master illuminator, Abu Bakr, also known as Sandal.

Sultan Baybars’ Qur’an
Cairo, 1304-06
Add MS 22408, ff. 91v–92r
The Lotus Sutra written in gold

The Lotus Sutra is one of the most influential scriptures of the Mahayana school of Buddhism in East Asia, and is seen by many as the summation of the Buddha’s teachings. This lavishly decorated scroll is written entirely in gold and silver ink on indigo-dyed paper. It was probably commissioned by the Japanese emperor Go-Mizunoo (1596–1680) for presentation to the Toshogu Shrine in Nikko where his grandfather-in-law, the Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, was buried.

Lotus Sutra
Japan, 1636
Or 13926
The Gospels written in gold

Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope on Christmas Day, 800. Thereafter Charlemagne sought to revive the artistic style and splendour of ancient Rome. This is one of a small group of surviving Gospel-books demonstrating the success of that ambition. It is written entirely in gold ink and as further decoration, every text page has a different elaborate gold border.

The Harley Golden Gospels
Aachen?, Carolingian Empire, c. 800
Harley MS 2788, ff. 25v–26r
Illuminated ornament marking the end of five verses.
Royal Ottoman tughra

An important element of Ottoman official documents was the tughra, a highly stylised calligraphic rendering of the Sultan’s name. This deed bears Sultan Murat IV’s lavishly illuminated tughra and relates to the transfer of land in Szent Tamás, near Timişoara in present-day Romania. The words composing the Emperor’s name are written in gold, and act as branches supporting red and blue flowers. The document is written in Ottoman Turkish in alternating lines of gold and black ink.

Ottoman land grant
Romania, 1628
Stowe Or 21
The Sahasras (Thousand Delights) is a collection of 1004 songs written in Braj Bhasha, a dialect of Hindi. It was compiled for the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (reigned 1628–58) by the master musician Nayak Bakhshu. This illuminated copy was probably made for the Emperor himself. The names of the original patrons of the songs were replaced on every page by the royal name ‘Shah Jahan’ written in gold.

Songs of Nayak Bakhshu
India, c. 1650
IO Islamic 1116, ff. 1v–2r
Letter to King Richard II

By 1395, the Hundred Years’ War between England and France had been raging for decades. In May, the French author and soldier Philippe de Mézières sent this ‘letter’ to King Richard II of England advocating for peace. The frontispiece illuminations illustrate the text’s central message of Christian unity. A golden ‘YHS’ (Jesus) monogram overlays the heraldic arms of the two kingdoms, and the Crown of Thorns shines golden rays onto the French and English crowns.

Philippe de Mézières, Epistre au roi Richart Paris, 1395
Royal MS 20 B VI, ff. 1v–2r
Dedication to King Henry VIII

The French author Martin de Brion produced two copies of this work about the Holy Land as gifts to the rival kings, Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France. Henry’s copy, seen here, opens with his royal arms framed by a border, two fleurs-de-lis and two crowned ‘H’ initials in gold. Facing this is a dedication poem to Henry, splendidly written in gold ink on a red ground, alluding to the heraldic colours of England.

Martin de Brion, Tresample description de toute la Terre Saincte
Paris, c. 1540
Royal MS 20 A IV, ff. 1v-2r
Letter of King James II

King James II of England sent this letter to the Grand Vizier (senior minister) of the Ottoman Empire in Constantinople. It announces the recall of the existing British ambassador and the appointment of his replacement. The letter was made by Gideon Royer, official ‘Embellisher of letters to Eastern Princes’. The borders are illuminated with the royal arms. Names, titles and personal pronouns throughout are written or flourished in gold ink, including the King’s signature at the end.

Letter from King James II of England to the Grand Vizier
Windsor, 30 Sept. 1685
Stowe MS 221
Golden words in Malay

This beautiful letter is more significant as a work of art than of diplomacy. It was sent to Napoleon III of France from Temenggung Daing Ibrahim, the ruler of Johor at the southern tip of the Malay peninsula. This is the earliest known example of chrysography – writing in gold ink – in Malay. Its 13 golden lines pay effusive compliments to the French emperor but offer little else, for at this time Johor was firmly allied with the British.

Letter from the ruler of Johor
Singapore, 1857
Or 16126
1
The Golden Canon Tables

The Golden Canon Tables demonstrate the remarkable quality of painting undertaken in Constantinople (now Istanbul). The ten tables, or canons, list passages that are common to some or all of the Four Gospels. In this early fragment the tables are written on parchment painted entirely with gold.

Canon Tables of Eusebius of Caesarea
Constantinople, 6th to 7th century
Add MS 5111/1, ff. 10r and 11v
The princes of Badung and Mengwi in Bali sent this letter to the Dutch governor of Semarang, on the north coast of Java. Inscribed on a sheet of gold, it affirms their everlasting friendship with the Dutch. Like the other inscriptions on gold displayed in this case, the letter is shaped like a palm leaf, for centuries the standard writing material in much of South and Southeast Asia.

Letter in Balinese from the Princes of Badung and Mengwi
Bali, 1768
Egerton MS 765
3

Buddhist chants on gold

Two gold plates, dating to the 5th–6th centuries, are among the oldest known Buddhist texts written in Pali. The plates start with a well-known chant, Ye dhamma, which refers to the core teachings of Buddhism: suffering, what causes it, and how to end it. These words had the power to protect and generate merit. The plates were originally rolled and placed at the base of a stupa, symbolising the presence of the Buddha and endowing the monument with sacredness.

Maunggan gold plates
Myanmar, 5th-6th centuries
Or 5340 A & B
4

Diplomatic treaty on gold

On 10 November 1691, the powerful Zamorin or ruler of Calicut, on the southern Indian Malabar coast, concluded a treaty with the Dutch for a defensive alliance against neighbouring Cochin. The treaty, written in Malayalam, is inscribed in eight lines on a strip of gold over two metres long. There is a long tradition in South Asia of using durable metals for the recording of important legal and political texts.

Treaty between Calicut and the Dutch India, 1691
MS Malayalam 12
5
Burmese commissions on gold

These two gold strips bear official seals and the ritual ruling titles for the Shan cities of Mone and Keng Tawng, located in the western part of Myanmar (Burma). They were given in the 1880s by Thibaw, the last king of Myanmar, to Twek Nga Lu, thus installing him as overlord of the cities. This appointment was contentious, and Twek Nga Lu was ousted locally after a series of campaigns.

Burmese sanad or commissions issued by King Thibaw
Myanmar, 1880s
Mss Burmese 211 A and B
6
Gold seal of Emperor Baldwin II

In medieval Europe documents were often sealed with wax or lead. The extremely rare gold seal on this charter imitates the gold seals traditionally used by Byzantine emperors on their most important documents. It was issued by Baldwin II, the last of a series of Latin emperors who ruled Constantinople from 1204–61. Baldwin granted the charter after he was deposed and fled to Western Europe. However, he still presents himself as reigning emperor through his use of the gold seal, which portrays him wearing a Byzantine style crown and jewelled robe.

Grant of lands at Biervliet to the Church of St Bavo, Ghent
Biervliet, the Netherlands, May 1269
Add Ch 14365
The reverse side of the gold seal shows Baldwin on horseback.
Mughal royal decree

On 21 July 1789 the Mughal Emperor Shah ‘Alam II issued this royal farman or decree to Sophia Elizabeth Plowden. It gave her the aristocratic rank of begum or noblewoman, with the title Bilqis uz-Zaman, ‘Sheba of the Age’. The whole background of the farman has been gilded, and religious phrases have been written in gold calligraphy. Sophia, the wife of an East India Company officer, collected Persian and Hindustani songs which she later published to great acclaim.

Decree of Shah ‘Alam II, mounted on red silk brocade
India, 1789
IO Islamic 4439
Pictured in Gold

With its reflective properties, gold was ideal for representing sacred light. Figures might be depicted in gold to reveal their inner holiness, or set against golden backgrounds to suggest an expanse of heavenly light. Gold’s appeal to the senses may also have helped readers to focus their attention and raise their mind in prayer. In royal portraiture, the costliness of gold pointed to awe-inspiring power of a worldly kind.
St Mark in a golden setting

Around 2,000 medieval copies of the Four Gospels in Greek survive. The finest were embellished with painted portraits of the Evangelists, and made in the imperial capital of Constantinople, known for the production of books of the highest artistic quality. These Evangelist portraits are set on backgrounds of shimmering gold leaf. Here, St Mark sits in contemplation, holding an open book on his lap, and a golden quill in his right hand.

The Four Gospels, in Greek Constantinople, 10th century with portraits added in c. 1125-50
Burney MS 19, ff. 63v–64r
St Æthelthryth of Ely

Gold was central to the specifications of St Æthelwold, bishop of Winchester, when he commissioned this book from a monk named Godeman. The manuscript contains ceremonial blessings for church services. These pages show the beginning of the blessings for the feast day of St Æthelthryth (died 679), founder and abbess of Ely Abbey. She is represented inside an ornate golden frame, wearing a golden dress and holding a golden book and lily, suggesting her saintliness and heavenly setting.

The Benedictional of St Æthelwold
Winchester, c. 971–984
Add MS 49598, ff. 90v–91r
Golden scenes from Genesis

Haggadah is the text for Passover Eve telling the story of the Jews’ exodus from slavery in Egypt. Because of the tooled gold-leaf backgrounds of the illustrations, this lavish manuscript is known as the Golden Haggadah. It contains 14 full pages devoted to scenes from Genesis and Exodus. For example, in the top left Joseph dreams of his brothers’ sheaves of wheat bowing to his upright central sheaf, all set against the intricate cross-hatched golden background.

The Golden Haggadah
Northern Spain, probably Barcelona, c. 1320
Add MS 27210, ff. 4v–5r
A Holy Lineage

Pictured in this book of the Psalms is the Tree of Jesse (on the left), a representation of the ancestors of Christ growing from the recumbent figure of Jesse, the father of King David. Facing this is a rare manuscript illustration of the so-called Holy Kinship, based on a popular medieval account of the Virgin Mary’s sisters and nephews. The setting for all these holy figures is appropriately grand, with intricate patterns of gold leaf in checkerboards and incised with diamond shapes. The manuscript was presented to Queen Mary I in 1553 when a customs official prevented its export from England.

The Queen Mary Psalter
London, early 14th century
Royal MS 2 B vii, ff. 67v–68r
Divine light

Painted gold highlights on the Virgin Mary’s robes indicate light radiating onto her at the moment of the Annunciation, when she learned that she would become the mother of Christ. The golden rays represent the presence of God as light, emphasising the purity of Christ’s conception. This painting comes from a Book of Hours made for King Louis XII of France by his court painter Jean Bourdichon, who is known particularly for his fine gold hatching technique.

Jean Bourdichon, the Annunciation Tours, France, c. 1498 Add MS 35254 V
Lives of the Buddha

Before gaining Enlightenment, the Bodhisatta (or Buddha-to-be) had hundreds of lives, in which he was born as man and animal in many different forms. In this Burmese manuscript, gold is used to identify the Bodhisatta in various Jatakas, or stories of his lives. In one he was born as the handsome horse of a king (left), while in another he was born as an elephant, who had to confront a bad-tempered crab (right).

Tikanipat, scenes from the Jatakas
Myanmar, 19th century
Or 4542 B, ff. 105r–111r
The Lothar Psalter

Lothar (died 855), grandson of the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne, ruled with his father Louis the Pious from 817. In this Psalter, closely associated with the royal family, he is pictured as the emperor, covered in gold and jewels. His cloak has been compared to a robe worn by the Roman Emperor Constantius II. Opposite this image is a poem written in gold ink referring to Lothar’s status as a ‘triumphant Caesar’.

Psalter
Aachen, c. 842–55
Add MS 37768, ff. 3v–4r
A regal image

This spectacular image portrays Robert of Anjou, king of Naples (reigned 1309–43). The manuscript may have been made for presentation to him; it contains a work in Latin surviving in only three copies. The golden fleurs-de-lis in the background refer to the Anjou family’s position as part of the French royal family and underline Robert’s royal status.

Carmina regia: Address of the City of Prato to Robert of Anjou
Tuscany, c. 1335
Royal MS 6 E ix, ff. 10v–11r
Tibetan Garuda

Garuda is a bird-like deity in Indian mythology. In this thangka, or traditional Tibetan painted scroll, Garuda is drawn in gold ink on indigo-dyed paper. In the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition Garuda protects against diseases and poisoning. It is one of the ‘Four Dignities’ depicted on Tibetan prayer flags, together with the dragon, snow lion and tiger. Thangka paintings like this can help as a focus for prayer and meditation.

Thangka painting of Garuda
Tibet, 1788–1805
Add Or 3050
Sultan Uljaytu’s Qur’an

This lavishly illuminated royal Qur’an was commissioned by the Ilkhanid Sultan, Uljaytu (reigned 1304–17), whose empire stretched from Anatolia to Iran. The opening pages are filled with purely decorative geometric designs, preceding the Qur’anic text inscribed in gold by the calligrapher ‘Ali ibn Muhammad al-Husayni. Even by the standards of other imperial Qur’ans of the time, the cost of creation of this large manuscript must have been exceptionally high.

Part (Juz’) 25 of a 30-volume Qur’an
Mosul, Iraq, 1310
Or 4945, ff. 1v–2r
**Illuminated Hindu scroll**

The Bhagavata Purana is one of the most influential scriptures in the Vaishnava tradition of Hinduism. It contains stories of the various manifestations of the God Vishnu. Prominently positioned at the start of this scroll is the sacred mystic syllable Om, written in gold, followed by an image of the God Ganesh. In Hindu manuscripts gold can be associated with creative power and knowledge, and used as an aid to meditation.

**Bhagavata Purana**  
Rajasthan, India, late 18th century  
Add MS 16624
Om decorated with images of deities.
Illuminating the Psalms

Queen Melisende (died 1161) reigned in the Crusader kingdom of Jerusalem jointly with her husband Fulk of Anjou until his death, and then with her son. This Psalter was probably made for her, with extensive gold illumination, and large parts of the text written in gold. The initial ‘B’ (for Beatus, meaning blessed) at the beginning of the first Psalm has an intricate pattern including King David, the supposed author of the Psalms, playing his harp.

The Psalter of Queen Melisende
Jerusalem, 1131–43
Egerton MS 1139, ff. 23v–24r
Dara Shikoh and Nadira Banu Begum

Prince Dara Shikoh, the eldest son and heir-apparent of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (ruled 1627–58), was a connoisseur and patron of the arts. Set in exquisite gold-painted frames, these two portraits are from an album of paintings compiled by the Prince for presentation to his wife Nadira Banu Begum, whom he married in 1633. Dara Shikoh is shown here facing a noble-woman, probably representing Nadira Banu Begum herself; both are wearing rich garments embroidered and painted with gold.

Portrait of Dara Shikoh, attributed to Murar, and portrait probably of Nadira Banu Begum, attributed to Balchand
India, 1631–32
Add Or 3129, ff. 59v and 20v
Sourcing Gold

The process of creating these golden objects began with labourers obtaining the gold from the earth, either by panning in rivers or mining underground. Historically this could be done on a relatively small scale, often as a supplement to agricultural incomes, or as a major commercial industry. Conditions could be harsh and dangerous, as depicted in the Japanese mining scroll.

Merchants often transported the gold for long distances along international trade routes, for example across the Sahara Desert. The high value and scarcity of gold meant that it was frequently recycled by melting down older objects such as coins or jewellery.
Gold mining in Sado

Sado is an island off the north-west coast of Honshu, Japan, which was well known as a source of gold. Scrolls such as this, with detailed representations of mine workings, were painted on silk panels by artists employed by the Shogunate office in charge of mining. From contemporary sources we know that the miners worked in harsh conditions, in pairs in eight-hour shifts, and while one laboured at the rock face his partner would take his meal and rest breaks.

Kinzan emaki, Illustrated scroll of gold mines Japan, c. 1810–20
Or 920
Gold miners in Sado working underground at the rock face.
Gold from West Africa

Although gold was rarely used in the illumination of manuscripts from the region, West Africa was a major supplier and trader of the precious metal. For centuries, gold from West Africa was carried by merchants in caravans across the Sahara to North Africa and Egypt and on to Europe. The wealth of gold is reflected in the richness of attire of African kings depicted here, including the ‘Emperor of Mali’, most likely representing Mansa Musa (reigned 1312–37), thought to be the richest person who ever lived, and the ‘King of Nubia’.

Queen Mary Atlas, by Diogo Homem
England, 1555–58
Add MS 5415 A, ff. 13v–14r
Top, the Emperor of Mali, and below, the King of Nubia, both lavishly adorned with gold ornaments and crowns.
Illumination Techniques

There are two main methods of applying gold to the page, each of which produces different effects. The first uses gold leaf, which is gold beaten into a thin foil. This is applied, sometimes over a raised ground of gesso (plaster mixed with glue), then burnished until it gleams. The results are large areas of brilliant sheen.

The other method uses ‘shell’ gold, which is gold ground up into a fine powder. Its name derives from the traditional practice of storing it in seashells. This powder can be mixed with a binder to make a paint, allowing artists to apply the gold finely with a brush to create delicate paintings and calligraphy.
1

Burnished gold leaf

Created by nuns for use within the convent, this Psalter features a large amount of highly burnished gold leaf. In combination with the rigid stylised figures and bold primary colours, the gold gives the pages a dazzling intensity. In this image, the Virgin Mary is crowned as Queen of Heaven by Christ. On the facing page, the opening to Psalm 51 is headed by a giant golden letter ‘Q’ for Quid (‘Why’).

Psalter
Germany, c. 1250–1300
Add MS 60629, ff. 56v-57r
2

Stamped gold leaf

The feast of the Annunciation to the Virgin on 25 March was one of the most important in the medieval Church year. Originally, this image of the event illustrated a choir book used by the monks of Santa Maria degli Angeli in Florence for their services. The background is gold leaf laid over a ground of gesso (plaster mixed with glue), which was stamped while the gesso was still soft to create the raised pattern on the two halos.

Cutting from a Gradual
Florence, c. 1350–1400
Add MS 35254 C
3 Chinese gold-flecked paper

From the early 15th century, decorated Chinese paper was much valued by the Timurids of Central Asia. This volume is a collection of poetry in Persian by 12 different authors, and was copied in 1468 in Shirvan in present day Azerbaijan. The paper is highly polished, dyed different shades of pink, mauve and yellowish green and decorated with large flecks of gold leaf.

Shamakhi anthology of poetry
Azerbaijan, 1468
Add MS 16561, ff. 57v–58r
4

Incised gold leaf

Patterned golden grounds provide a fitting backdrop for a series of scenes from the life of Christ. These were created by first laying down a base of reddish gesso (plaster mixed with glue). Glimpses of the gesso are apparent in the scene of the Annunciation to the Shepherds (when an angel informed shepherds of the birth of Christ). While the gesso was still damp, gold leaf was laid on top and incised with intricate patterns.

The Nativity and the Annunciation to the Shepherds, probably from a Psalter Northern France or Flanders, c. 1175–1200 Cotton MS Caligula A vii/1, ff. 5r and 6v
5
Shell gold painting

In this prayerbook, shell gold is used to highlight the figures, such as St Mark the Evangelist on the left-hand page. Text pages have borders with intricate plant paintings set on shell gold grounds. Often artists replicated the effect of gold borders more economically by painting a thin layer of shell gold over yellow pigment. The artist, Jean Bourdichon, is known to have sometimes mixed shell gold with inexpensive gold-coloured pigments, such as pyrite (a sulphide of iron) or mosaic gold (a sulphide of tin).

Jean Bourdichon, Book of Hours Tours, France, 1510–25 Add MS 18855, ff. 13v–14r
Bound in Gold

Covering a book with gold indicates the value of the text that is within, while also allowing the owners to display their wealth and taste to the world. Sacred texts were sometimes furnished with splendid treasure bindings of gold metalwork. Leather covers were often decorated with gold tooling, a technique in which gold leaf is impressed into the surface of the leather with heated metal tools to form intricate designs. Boards could be richly decorated with lacquer and gold leaf.
Video Transcript

Techniques for Working with Gold

Gold leaf

Golden Haggadah, Spain, 13th century.
Incised gold leaf

Apply a mixture of plaster and glue known as gesso, then breathe heavily onto it to reactivate the stickiness.

Then apply a layer of gold leaf to the gesso.

Use a burnisher made from polished stones to create a brilliant shine.

Repeat these steps until there are several layers of burnished gold.

Polish the gold to a mirror finish with the burnisher.

If desired, create patterns on the gold using a pencil burnisher.
Shell gold

Book of Hours, France, early 16th century.
Shell gold
Mix gum Arabic, a type of resin, with powdered gold.
Alternatively, you can mix gold leaf into gum Arabic.
Add water to the gold liquid then pour the mixture into a shell or receptacle.
The use of shells as a palette accounts for the name of this type of gold.
Apply the shell gold to the design first, before any other paint or ink.
Once the gold has dried, add other colours and highlights.
Gold-tooling on bindings

Qur’an, Morocco, 1256. The earliest known gold-tooled binding

Create an impression on the leather with a hot tool.

Cover the impression with a mixture of egg-white and water known as glair.

Once the glair is dry, wipe Vaseline over the pattern.

Place the gold leaf onto a pad, usually leather or suede coated in brick dust.

Use forehead grease and cotton wool to lift the gold and place it on the impression.

Repeat this until the pattern is covered solidly with the gold leaf.

Make a second impression exactly over the first.

Apply a varnish over the impressions to seal the gold to the leather.

With thanks to: Patricia Lovett MBE, Rick Brown
Miniature Qur’an

Too small to be read easily, miniature Qur’ans were usually carried by travellers as protective amulets. They were often encased in jewel-like boxes for safe-keeping. This tiny octagonal Qur’an from Persia is bound with delicately engraved covers of pure gold, secured with a clasp. The volume is stored in a case of white jade decorated with floral patterns.

Qur’an
Iran, 16th or 17th century
Loth 36
2
Thai lacquer book cover

Animals and plants in the heavenly Himavanta forest of the Buddhist cosmos are pictured on this manuscript cover, created using a Thai technique called *lai rot nam* (*design washed with water*). Thick mulberry paper was covered with layers of black lacquer, a pattern was traced, areas to remain black were painted with a natural gum, and gold leaf was applied to the whole surface. The next day the gum was removed with water to reveal the intricate gold design.

Buddhist texts and Phra Malai
Thailand, 1850–1900
Or 15257
In the courts of 16th-century Europe, it was fashionable for aristocratic women to hang from their belts miniature prayer books bound in elaborate metalwork covers. These girdle books provided their owners with handy reading material as well as stylish dress accessories. This exquisite example is adorned with covers of gold tracery and black enamel. It contains selected Psalms translated into English verse by John Croke, a clerk in Chancery who prepared and wrote out documents for King Henry VIII.

John Croke, Psalms in an English verse translation
England, c. 1540
Stowe MS 956
4
Treasure binding

The most prestigious sacred manuscripts were sometimes fitted with treasure bindings of precious metalwork, and displayed prominently in churches. Although the ornate binding of this Gospel-book is probably not contemporary with the manuscript, at least some of the components are medieval. The cover of copper-gilt (copper overlaid with a thin layer of gold leaf) is ornamented with a relief figure of Christ in the centre, surrounded by four enamel plaques and a border of crystals.

The Four Gospels, with a treasure binding
Northwest Germany, c. 1000 (manuscript); Germany or France, 12th–14th century (some binding components)
Add MS 21921
Armenian binding

Armenian gospel books were sometimes adorned with exceptionally sumptuous bindings, like these gold and silver covers with clasps in the shape of hands. The silversmith Malkhas hadji Karapet and the sponsors of the book are named on its spine. On the front cover is the Nativity, with the rejoicing of the shepherds and the visit of the Three Kings, while the back cover portrays the Resurrection.

The Four Gospels
Kayseri, Turkey, 1691
Or 13808
The earliest gold-tooled binding

The technique of gold tooling, where gold leaf is impressed onto leather with a metal stamp, is thought to have originated in Morocco. This Qur’an manuscript from Marrakesh was copied by the Almohad ruler Abu Hafs Umar in 1256. It has a leather cover decorated with an interlaced geometric pattern of eight-pointed stars in blind (uncoloured) and gold tooling. This is the earliest known example of gold tooling on a leather binding.

Qur’an
Morocco, 1256
Or 13192
Arts and Crafts binding

Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson (1840–1922) was a leader in the Arts and Crafts movement, which sought to revive traditional crafts such as bookbinding. Bookbinding as an occupation was recommended to him by Janey Morris, William Morris’s wife, and he founded the Doves Bindery, naming it after a nearby pub called the Dove. The pages of this book are gauffered, meaning that the edges are gilded and then tooled.

Thomas James Cobden-Sanderson binding
John Ruskin, Unto this Last
London, late 19th century
C.68.h.17
French gold-tooled binding

Gold-tooling on leather was practised in Europe from around the 15th century, and French bindings of the 17th century are particularly prized. The craftsman who made this binding has not been identified but his expertise in gold tooling was such that he was known as the Maître Doreur (literally, the Master Gilder). His workshop specialised in the pointillé style of motifs comprising tiny dots creating magnificent detailed patterns, as in this example covering a book printed in Rome.

Le Maître Doreur binding
Alonso Chacon, Historia utriusque belli Dacici a Traiano
France, c. 1623
C.14.c.12
9
Gold tooling and jewels

Francis Sangorski (1875–1912) and George Sutcliffe (1878–1943) met in 1896 at a bookbinding evening class in London, and together established one of the most important bookbinding workshops of the 20th century. Their bindings often featured gold and precious stones. Shortly after the establishment of their firm, they created this example with a floral pattern tooled in gold on goatskin.

Sangorski and Sutcliffe binding Edmund Spenser, Epithalamion and Amoretti London, 1903 C.109.p.20
10
Art Deco binding

The lively style, fine craftsmanship and the rich materials of this binding exemplify the Art Deco style of the 1920s. The binding was created by Pierre-Émille Legrain (1889–1929). His innovative and creative designs incorporated geometric and abstract patterns, featuring semicircles of gold with overlapping blue and silver circular motifs on goatskin.

Pierre-Émile Legrain binding
Colette, La vagabonde
Paris, 1927
C.108.w.8
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Gold in History
Thursday 9 June
Professor of Global History Peter Frankopan presents a world view of the power and resonance of gold across cultures. In conversation with Dr Sushma Jansari.
The Wonder of Gold,  
with Professor Andrea Sella  
Friday 24 June  
Andrea Sella, broadcaster and Professor of Inorganic Chemistry at UCL, explores the remarkable properties of gold.

Gold! The Art of Manuscript Illumination  
Thursday 7 July  
Scribe and illuminator Patricia Lovett MBE demonstrates the techniques behind the manuscripts in our exhibition.

Eldorado. The Land of Golden Stories  
Wednesday 1 June  
Dress in your finest golden attire for an evening with master storytellers and performers.

Golden Books  
Thursday 14 July  
Medieval and Renaissance treasures explored by Lucy Freeman Sandler, Professor of Art History emerita at New York University.
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