Part IV

Cultural and Artistic Appropriation: Imagery, Music and Literature

Chapter 17

THE BOOK OF KELLS AND THE VISUAL IDENTITY OF IRELAND

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1. *Introduction*

Like whirling dervishes of design, the spinning spirals, triskeles and knots illuminating the Book of Kells have spun off the page into the collective cultural and visual identity of Ireland.[1] The unique graphic design of these patterns, illustrations and typography have become the defining visual cultural identity of modern Ireland. The graphic elements of the Book of Kells have been appropriated to create an instantly recognizable and unique 'brand' or visual identity for Ireland, removed from the particularity of the text that is a book of the four Gospels.

The Book of Kells is ranked among the greatest and best-known art treasures in the world. For Ireland, beyond representing an important part of the cultural heritage, it is elemental to the national imagination and a quintessential visual identifier for Irish culture.[2] The Book of Kells is not just a work of art but also a symbol of cultural identity for people of Irish origin both at home and all over the world, as Peter Fox has noted.[3] For many tourists travelling to Ireland, the visual elements of the Book of Kells are often already familiar as inherently Irish, but the content of the book may as well be Irish mythology as be the 'Gospel of Jesus

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1. The Book of Kells' exact time and place of origin remains a mystery, although an 'uneasy scholarly consensus' holds, at present, that it was created around 800 CE. Bernard Meehan, the Keeper of Manuscripts at Trinity College, Dublin, suggests that '[t]he book might have been produced on Iona before the Norse raid of 795, or at Kells during a period of calm enjoyed after the building of the church in 814, or partly made in both monasteries. That areas of decoration are unfinished on several pages might seem to support the view … that it was rescued from Iona and brought to Kells in the face of a Norse attack'. Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 21.

2. W. A. Watts, preface to *The Book of Kells, MS 58, Trinity College Library, Dublin: Commentary*, ed. Peter Fox (Lucern: Faksimile Verlag, 1990), 9.

3. Peter Fox, ed., introduction to *The Book of Kells: Commentary* (Lucern: Faksimile Verlag, 1990), 21.

Christ' according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, such is the separation of form and content.

Section 2 of this chapter shall briefly examine the distinctiveness of the Book of Kells as groundbreaking in its time as a work of graphic design, including the visual integration of word and image. Section 3 shall consider the enduring reception and appropriation of the aesthetics of the Book of Kells as a primary, foundational signifier of 'Irishness'.[4] Section 4 briefly explores the role the Book of Kells plays in Irish tourism beyond being a tourist attraction.

2. *The Graphic Design of the Book of Kells*

Observers recognize that the Book of Kells is 'distinguished by extraordinarily rich artistic imagination and skill, allied with vivid colouring and expert calligraphy'.[5] For all that Bernard Meehan has described it as 'a sprawling and uneven piece, assembled by scribes and artists of varying abilities',[6] the Book of Kells marks a significant moment in the global history of the graphic design of page layout and the integration of text and illustration. We know that the pages were cropped by an overzealous librarian of the nineteenth century, in an attempt to create clean, crisp edges, sadly losing some illumination in the process. Nonetheless, the pages maintain generous margins, allowing the page space to breathe and offering visual balance to the complex designs and galleys of text. The predominantly text pages are characterized by the gracious uncial script and glowing illuminations that, quite literally, animate the text.

2.1 *Artistic Inspiration*

The Book of Kells draws on a diverse decorative inheritance of abstract patterns and animal representations, in use in earlier manuscripts and other media.[7] The Book of Durrow (ca. 680) is the earliest fully designed and ornamented Celtic book. The Lindisfarne Gospels (ca. 695) is thought to represent the full flowering of the Celtic Style, into which different ingredients were skilfully blended in a new form of insular art.[8] 'Influences from the Mediterranean, assimilated and adapted

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4. There are other contemporaneous artefacts – such as the Ardagh Chalice, the Cross of Cong, the 'Tara' Brooch – that are also exquisite examples of the material culture that often bear identical design elements in their own distinct form.

5. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 15.

6. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 13.

7. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 103.

8. Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels and the Early Medieval World* (London: British Library, 2011), 107. The Lindisfarne Gospels were written by Eadfrith, bishop of Lindisfarne, before 698 CE and represent the 'epitome of the "Insular" or "Hiberno-Saxon" style . . . blending influences from Celtic, Pictish, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean art' (107).

by artists, can be seen both on major pages and in details of decoration.[9] The scale and range of its decoration have led commentators on the Book of Kells to find similarities in Anglo Saxon, Pictish, Byzantine, Armenian and Carolingian art. Heather Pulliam notes, 'The variety and quantity of its decorated initials are unique in insular manuscripts, but a Merovingian sacramentary and an early Carolingian psalter have comparable decoration.'[10] There is a natural transfer, appropriation and adaptation of motifs from one medium and place to another that occurs as a consequence of the type of travel and pilgrimage known to have been undertaken by monks of the period. Francis John Byrne has drawn the connection with the iconographic style of the Byzantine churches. 'The artist responsible for the portraits, including St John (f. 291v), St Matthew (f.28v) and the majestic figure of Christ teaching (f. 32v), had most likely seen examples of Byzantine figure painting for his portraits possess that same distant formal dignity associated with icons and mosaics.'[11] Michele P. Brown maintains that the decoration of the Book of Kells is indebted to the style and zoomorphic ornament of the Lindisfarne Gospels which it elevates in complexity in its interlace.[12] The Book of Kells carries far more full-page illustrations than any other Celtic manuscript. Over 2,100 ornate capitals engage the reader.[13] At significant intervals through the course of its 339 leaves, a sentence blooms into a full-page illumination, shimmering with colour and intricate convoluted forms, blossoming over a whole page.[14] The sheer number and quality of minor initials sets it apart from related manuscripts. It is rare to find a page within the Gospel text that lacks a zoomorphic or anthropomorphic initial.[15]

2.3 *Typography*

The Irish script, common in manuscripts such as this, was a deliberate creation by the scribes, drawing on elements of several scripts inherited from antiquity which the earliest missionaries had brought with them. Byrne writes:

> Use of the Latin alphabet proper, at first for Latin, and later for Irish too, came in the course of the fifth century conversion with its necessary complement of scripture, liturgical books, and the written records of the Christian communities … As the earliest missionaries came from Roman Britain and Gaul

9. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 103.

10. Heather Pulliam, *Word and Image in the Book of Kells* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006), 16.

11. Francis John Byrne, introduction to *The Irish Hand: Scribes and Their Manuscripts from the Earliest Times to the Seventeenth Century, with an Exemplar of Scripts*, by Timothy O'Neill (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1984), ix–xxxii.

12. Brown, *Lindisfarne Gospels*, 111.

13. Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (London: Viking, 1983), 55.

14. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design*, 55.

15. Pulliam, *Word and Image*, 40.

they must have brought with them the scripts there current. But the Irish were always eclectic in their borrowings, and the palaeographers have detected elements of Italian, Spanish, and North African scripts in the Irish or insular script which had fully evolved by the beginning of the seventh century. The main book hands of Christian antiquity were the massive uncial with its handsome well-rounded forms, and the half-uncial with its ascenders and descenders.[16]

Two important writing styles came into prominence during the course of the late antique and early Christian period. Both were primarily used within the Christian church from the fourth until the ninth century CE and have retained this association. The uncials, so named because they are written between two guidelines that are one uncial (the Roman inch) apart, were invented by the Greeks as early as the third century CE. Uncials are rounded, freely drawn majuscule letters more suited to rapid writing than either square capitals or rustic capitals.[17] A step towards the development of minuscules ('lower case' letterforms) was the half-uncial when strokes were allowed to soar above and sink below the two principal lines, creating true 'ascenders' and 'descenders'. The pen was held flatly horizontal to the baseline, which gave the letterforms a strong vertical axis.[18]

In the Celtic manuscript tradition, a radical design innovation is the practice of leaving a space between words to enable the reader to separate the string of letters into words more quickly. The half-uncial script of late antique codices journeyed to Ireland with the early missionaries and was transformed into the *scriptura scottica*, or insular script, as it is now called. These half-uncials became the national letterform style in Ireland and are still used for special writings and a type style. Starting with the half-uncial, the Celts subtly redesigned the alphabet to suit their visual traditions. Written with a slightly angled pen, the full rounded characters have a strong bow with ascenders bending to the right. A distinctive feature is the heavy triangle, or wedge-shaped serif, that perches at the top of the ascenders. The horizontal stroke of the last letter of the word, particularly an *e* or *t*, zips out into the space between words. A text page from the *Book of Kells* shows how carefully the insular script was lettered. Characters are frequently joined at the waistline or the baseline.[19] The importance of this script can be seen in the fact that it was in use from the sixth century to the nineteenth century. There now exists a plethora of so-called Celtic fonts, derivative and imitative of this early Irish uncial are now available for (often free) download and used with vary degrees of artistic skill to carry an instantly recognizable and consistently reinforced message of Irishness'.

16. Byrne, *Irish Hand*, xi, xii.
17. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design*, 52.
18. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design*, 52.
19. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design*, 54–5.

2.4 *The Reception of the Biblical Text in the Image*

As Pulliam notes, more scholarly attention has been paid of late to the insular imagery and its exegetical function.[20] In the popular cultural reception of the artwork, most especially the figurative and zoomorphic ornament, the impression is sometimes given that these were humorous details drawn by mischievous scribes, perhaps slightly bored with the rigours of endlessly copying out Latin text, who had indulged their imaginations and produced these whimsical creatures. Clearly, there are such instances in the book, as seen, for example, with the mouse running off with the Eucharistic host (folio 48r). That such humour creeps into the illuminations offers an insight into the monastic atmosphere of the time and implies a freedom experienced by the scribes in their creative task. This perception has, however, also fed into the separation of text and image. A closer study of these details reveals that actually these illustrations were often performing an exegetical role. An example would be the use of the hare as a symbol for cowardice in the passage describing Peter's denial of Christ (Figure 17.1).

> On folio 180r lines 15–16, a hare, recognised as such by its long ears and strong hind legs, helps to form the shape of the letters *Et* in the phrase *Et exiit foras ante atrium et gallus cantauit rursus* ('And he [Peter] went forth before the court; and the cock crew'; MK 14.68): the timid hare in this context was a comment on Peter's behaviour in denying Christ.[21]

3. *The Visual Reception of the Book of Kells*

3.1 .*The Book of Kells and Irish Design*

The period roughly marked out as the century between 1830 and 1930 is often referred to as the 'Celtic Revival'. Paul Caffrey outlines how during this era a policy of de-Anglicization and the promotion of what was called 'Irish Ireland' was advocated. This meant, in practical terms, the promotion of the Gaelic language, use of Gaelic names and place-names, the use of the Gaelic alphabet and typography, traditional music and games, preserving customs and habits of dress, and reading

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20. Pulliam, *Word and Image*, 18.

21. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 22. 'An early reference to the hare as a symbol of timidity occurs in the early seventh century Etymologies of Isidore of Seville', writes Meehan. The hare is also an indigenous and common animal found in the Irish countryside and popular in fables and folklore. Niall Mac Coitir notes that 'Julius Caesar in his work *De Bello Gallico* stated that the ancient Britons [Celtic Britain] regarded the hare as sacred, and taboo as food' (155). He also relates accounts of a widespread belief among country people that witches could 'shape-shift' and disguise themselves as hares (153). Hares were often perceived as 'tricksters' and potentially devious. Niall Mac Coitir, *Ireland's Animals: Myths, Legends and Folklore* (Cork: Collins Press, 2015 [2010]), 153–8.
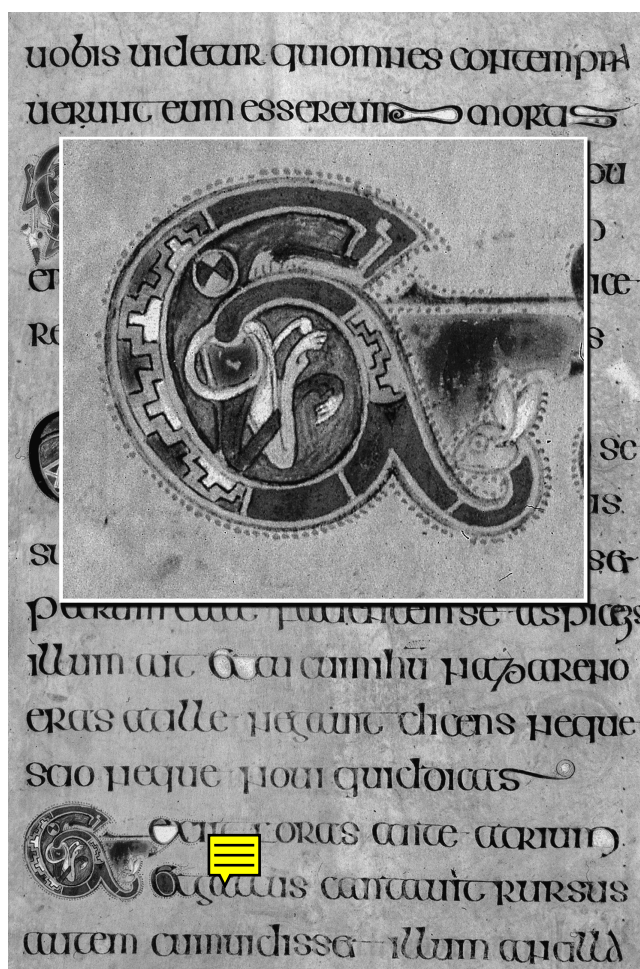
Figure 17.1 Book of Kells, Folio 180r. With permission of the Board of Trinity College Dublin.

Irish literature.[22] The most common forms of decoration used to express national feeling were Celtic ornament and interlace patterns. 'Although not specific to

22. Irish literature that emerged during this period included the *Gaelic Journal* (*Irisleabhar na Gaedhilge*) in which such items as Ulick Bourke's *Beatha Sheághain Mhic Éil* (The Life of John MacHale) and the serialized publication of Peadar Ó Laoghaire's *Séadna* appeared. Other popular writers in Irish, of the period, included Liam P. Ó Riain, Séamas Ó Grianna, Pádraig Mac Piarais (Patrick Pearse), Pádraic Ó Conaire, Aodh Mac Domhnaill, Art Mac Bionaid and Áine Ní Fhoghlú. See: William J. Mahon, 'Irish Literature [5] 19th century *(c. 1845 – c. 1922)*', in *Celtic Culture: A Historical Encyclopedia*, ed. John Koch (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 1011–13.

Ireland, these were associated with the apex of Irish culture in early manuscript illumination such as the Book of Kells.[23]

The most obvious way in which nationality could be expressed was by the use of emblems. These were numerous, but the most commonly employed were the shamrock, the harp, the Irish wolfhound and the round tower.[24] The use of Celtic interlace ornament became common on book covers later in the nineteenth century.[25]

Jeanne Sheehy explains:

> Art was not strong enough in any of its branches for a common style to emerge which could be recognised as an expression of nationality, on whatever level. If it wished to proclaim its Irishness it was forced back upon recognisably Irish symbols, upon 'Irish' subject matter, and upon imitation of models from what was seen as the golden age, the period which produced the Book of Kells, the 'Tara' Brooch, and Cormac's Chapel. Preoccupation with these elements was the factor that bound Irish art together in the nineteenth century.[26]

Caffrey has pointed out that public perception of design has changed throughout the Western world. In Ireland, the economic prosperity and general confidence of those decades prior to the recent recession bred an environment where critical design awareness could thrive. General design consciousness has been developed and raised by specialist design shops alongside public exhibitions of design, high-profile design awards and media attention to the reception of Irish designers' work abroad. The establishment of professional bodies such as the Institute of Designers in Ireland and government agencies like the Crafts Council of Ireland and Enterprise Ireland has served to highlight the importance of design and designing.[27] Irish design is dominated by the crafts; indeed, Ireland is associated internationally with the handcrafted aesthetic.[28] Luke Gibbons marks the government-led establishment of the Kilkenny Design Workshop in 1963 as the beginning of a new surge in Irish design.

> This became a trailblazer in vernacular modernism as traditional motifs or 'Celtic' forms were filtered through the linear abstractions of the International

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23. Paul Caffrey, 'The Coinage Design Committee (1926–1928) and the Formation of a Design Identity in the Irish Free State', in *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity. 1922–1992*, ed., Linda King and Elaine Sisson (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 75–89.

24. Jeanne Sheehy, *The Rediscovery of Ireland's Past: The Celtic Revival, 1830–1930* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 9.

25. Sheehy, *Rediscovery*, 24.

26. Sheehy, *Rediscovery*, 9.

27. Paul Caffrey, 'Irish Design 1984–2004', *Irish Arts Review* 21.3 (2004): 86–9.

28. Caffrey, 'Irish Design', 87.

Style in an attempt to forge a distinctive Irish visual identity. The emphasis on tradition, authenticity and the handmade look in ceramics, glass, furniture and fabrics allowed for high profile promotions at the upper end of the American market in leading stores such as Bloomingdales and Neiman-Marcus, but did not make inroads on the mass market.[29]

A wander through any high-end design or gift-shop countrywide confirms Caffrey's assertion. 'Commercial potteries producing batch or small-scale production of hand-crafted ceramics and glass have been enormously successful. Stephen Pearce pottery, Nicholas Mosse's spongeware, and Jerpoint Glass, established by Keith Ledbetter have all become identified with Irish design. Their domestic wares are both functional and decorative and have become ubiquitous.'[30] Within the broader selection, 'Celtic motifs' have been appropriated and applied to various products, to lasting popular appeal, borne out by their commercial longevity.

3.2 *The Book of Kells and Irish Art in the Late Twentieth Century*

In the later decades of the twentieth century, other artists also made allusions to the Book of Kells. Catherine Marshall writes, 'Gerard Dillon, Robert Ballagh and Michael Farrell mocked the grand tradition by appropriating its imagery and bending it to the cause of subversion rather than passive acceptance.'[31] Farrell reacted so strongly to political events in the north of Ireland that he placed himself in a self-imposed exile in France. Of the influence of the Book of Kells, Farrell maintained,

> Having no Celtic tradition in painting for over 1000 years one has to go back to when Celtic art was at its greatest and most important, for it is true that no pictures of any value concerned with the real problems of picture-making have been made in Ireland since the book of Kells, a masterpiece devoid of all mist, wind and whimsy – perfect in harmony and uncompromisingly direct.[32]

In 'A Shorter History' he implies an interlace pattern or a carpet page of roundels, forming from these curved shapes full of text, but then disrupts it, allowing the shapes

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29. Luke Gibbons, 'Modalities of the Visible', in *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating Modernity, 1922–1992*, ed. Linda King and Elaine Sisson (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 19–25.

30. Caffrey, 'Irish Design', 88.

31. Catherine Marshall, 'History and Narrative Painting', in *Art and Architecture in Ireland. Volume V: Twentieth Century*, ed. Catherine Marshall and Peter Murray (Dublin: Yale University Press, 2014), 212–15.

32. Michael Farrell, 'Artist's Statement' [1965], in Cyril Barrett, *Michael Farrell* (Dublin: Douglas Hyde Gallery, 1979), 19–21.
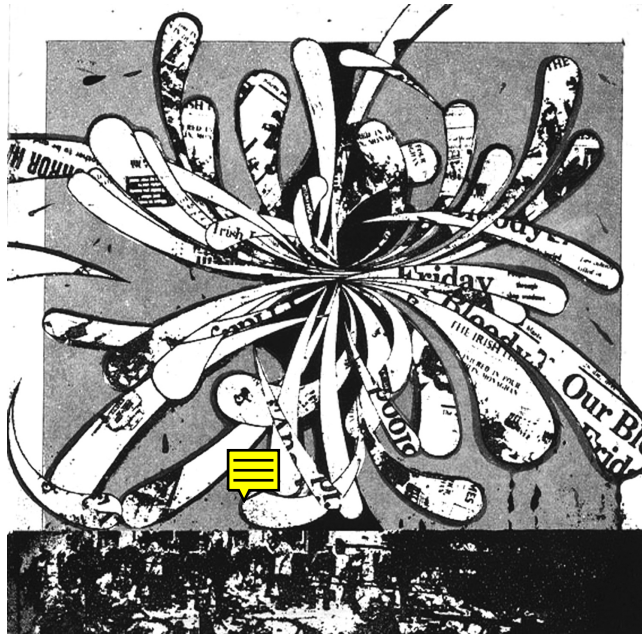
Figure 17.2 Michael Farrell, 'a shorter history'. With permission of The Irish Visual Artists Rights Organisation.

to explode in the middle of the canvas, thereby denying any coherence. Beneath this is a panel with a photograph of carnage (Figure 17.2).

Richard Hamilton's diptych, *The Citizen*, also relates to 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland (Figure 17.3).[33] This painting depicts a 'blanketman', Republican detainee Hugh Rooney, at the Maze Prison.[34] The impetus for the work came

33. Terry Riggs, 'Summary', http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the-citizen-t03980/text-summary. The painting was made between 1981 and 1983 and purchased by the British Tate Gallery in 1985. It is interesting in itself that the Tate acquired a work of this political nature during this period. The website outlines the background to the work thus: 'The initial source for this painting was a Granada Television episode of the *World in Action* programme, titled "The H-block Fuse", transmitted on 24 November 80.' This along with other footage showed prisoners escalating their protest. They refused to obey prison regulations and would not wear prison clothes, choosing instead to wrap themselves 'only in the blankets they were provided as bedding, and lived in their own squalor, surrounded by excrement-smeared walls'.

34. Tate Gallery, 'The Citizen–Catalogue Entry', http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hamilton-the citizen-t03980/text-catalogue-entry. In one of his own letters Hamilton identified Hugh Rooney as the subject of the painting: 'A TV programme was the source of the idea and also provided the material I used to construct the image. The subject is a detainee in the H blocks named Hugh Rooney.' A number of journalists, among them Jonathan James

Figure 17.3 'The Citizen', 1981–83, Richard Hamilton (1922–2011). Purchased 1985. © Estate of Richard Hamilton, DACS London/IVARO Dublin, 2017. Photo credit: ©Tate, London, 2017.

from a television documentary, scenes from which made a profound impact on Hamilton and which he later described as 'a strange image of human dignity in the midst of self-created squalor … endowed with a mythic power often associated with art'.[35] A Fenian character in Joyce's *Ulysses* provided the title for the work.[36]

and Fisun Güner, incorrectly describe the work as a 'portrait of the IRA hunger-striker Bobby Sands'. Jonathan James, 'Jesus in Jail', *The Guardian*, 20 August 2008, http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2008/aug/20/art. politicsandthearts; and Fisun Güner, 'Richard Hamilton: Modern Moral Matters, Serpentine Gallery', 18 March 2010, http://www.theartsdesk.com/visual-arts/richard-hamilton-modern-moral-matters-serpentine-gallery.

35. Fionna Barber, *Art in Ireland since 1910* (London: Reaction Books, 2013), 220.

36. Barber, *Art in Ireland*, 220: 'The painting's title is taken from the "Cyclops" episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which the hero Leopold Bloom comes into conflict with a Fenian bar-fly known to all as "citizen"'.

The right-hand panel portrays Rooney standing in his prison cell clad only in a blanket. The left-hand panel is vaguely abstract, and represents the excrement-daubed walls of the prisoner's cell. Hamilton felt the calligraphic, abstract qualities of the H-Block prisoner's own mark-making could be seen to have stylistic links back to the earliest phases of Irish art: 'Each cell is marked with the graphic personality of its inhabitants; the walls look different because the pigment, of their own creation, is deployed in varying ways. It isn't difficult to discern the megalithic spirals of New Grange inscribed there, nor are the Gaelic convolutions of the book of Kells remote from the wall paintings of Long Kesh.'[37]

The use of both the terms 'mythic' and 'Gaelic convolutions' in the artist's own articulation of what he is trying to convey reinforce the idea that the Book of Kells is an exemplar of 'early Christian art which in its linear intricacies is purported to image the Irish mind'.[38] For all its visceral crudity and the repulsion we may feel, this 'mark-making' is immensely powerful precisely because of the immediate allusions it makes to other primordial forms of human 'mark-making' like the cave-paintings at Lascaux.

3.3 *The Art of Jim Fitzpatrick*

Jim Fitzpatrick is another artist who has appropriated the Celtic motifs, most especially the interlace patterns and roundels, into his designs. He has forged an idiosyncratic graphic style that draws heavily on Celtic mythology and advances the romance of an otherworldly 'Celtia',[39] populated with an alluring, syncretic mix of Irish superheroes and heroines; saints and goddesses, warriors and giants, queens and faeries (Figure 17.4). His hugely popular artwork, published in the form of greeting cards, posters and calendars, is ubiquitous in tourist venues. He received a nomination for an award, from the Allianz Business to Arts organization in 2008, having been commissioned by CityJet 'to produce six paintings of the islands of Ireland for their Boardroom. In 2007, these paintings were exhibited for three months in the *Centre Culturel Irlandais* in Paris. The exhibition served to showcase Fitzpatrick's work to a new audience, highlight the islands of Ireland as a tourist attraction and promote the CityJet brand'.[40] Despite being dismissed in many Irish art-critical circles and labelled as kitsch,[41] his work was deemed by a large French

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37. Richard Hamilton, *A Cellular Maze: Rita Donagh, Richard Hamilton* (Londonderry: Orchard Gallery, 1983), 7–8.

38. Brian O'Doherty, in *The Irish Imagination, 1959–1971* (Dublin: Municipal Gallery of Modern Art, 1971), cited in Fintan Cullen, *Sources in Irish Art: A Reader* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 272.

39. *Celtia* is the title of a book by Fitzpatrick featuring his artwork, and as such may be understood as a personal description of his work.

40. 'Winners 2008: Allianz Business to Arts Awards 2008', 45 (cited 16 January 2015), online: http://www.businesstoarts.ie/pdfs/Winners_Brochure_2008.pdf.

41. Maeve Connolly, 'Celtic Revivals: Jim Fitzpatrick and the Celtic Imaginary in Irish and International Popular Culture', in *Ireland, Design and Visual Culture: Negotiating*
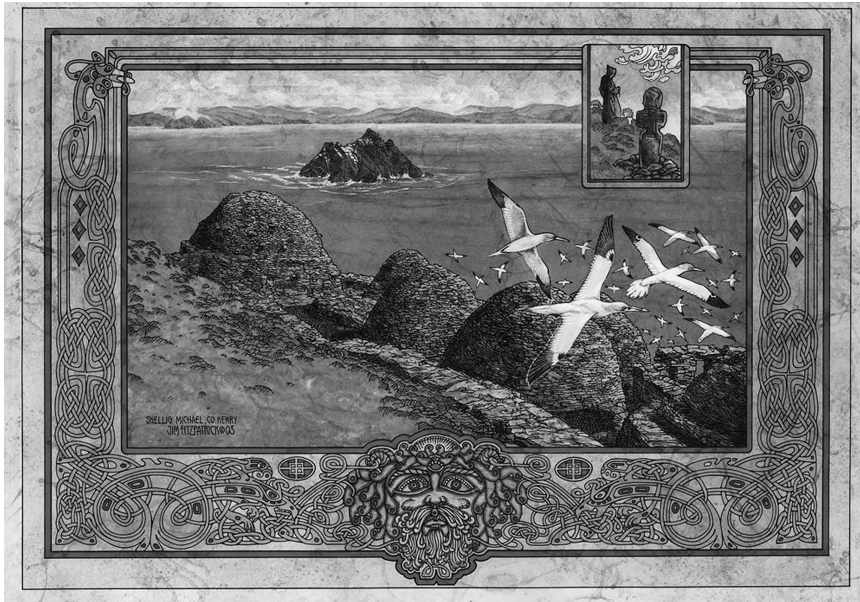
Figure 17.4 Jim Fitzpatrick, 'Skellig Michael'. With kind permission of the artist.

airline brand to resonate with their target audience and communicate effectively a perceived attraction of Ireland as a tourist destination.

3.4 *The Secret of Kells*

The most well-known feature-length animated movie to be produced in Ireland is *The Secret of Kells* (Figure 17.5).[42] In time it will no doubt become a focus of academic work across many disciplines in its own right, not least as a creative reception of the Book of Kells.[43] In a well-conceived storyline that incorporates

Modernity, 1922–1992, ed. Linda King and Elaine Sisson (Cork: Cork University Press, 2011), 255.

42. The film was released in 2009 and nominated for Best Animated Feature Film at the 82nd Academy Awards in 2010. It has received numerous other prestigious industry awards and is described as having achieved 'cult status … within the animation industry and among film critics everywhere'. Don Hahn cited in Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart, *Designing the Secret of Kells* (Chicago: Trinquétte, 2014), 228.

43. When Bernard Meehan (Keeper of Manuscripts) learned that the drawings from *The Secret of Kells* were to be destroyed, the archivist offered to house them in Trinity College where they will be preserved. 'In a few years, or a few centuries, the twenty-first century drawings and the eighth century manuscript that inspired them may inspire future practitioners of the art of animation and draftsmanship.' Charles Solomon, foreword to *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 11.

historical narrative of life at the beginning of the ninth-century in Ireland in a monastery setting under the threat of marauding Norse invaders, the film also includes some pre-Christian aspects of the spirituality of the period. Most significant, however, is its extraordinary integration of the aesthetic of the Book of Kells in a way that is simultaneously true to the original and yet also startlingly fresh. The aesthetic of the Book of Kells exquisitely informs the aesthetic of the world of the film and is neither contrived nor overly demanding of the viewer. Down through the centuries, generations have been enraptured by the Book of Kells and wondered what 'world' it illuminated and how they might access it. People have bent down as close as possible to the page, squinting their eyes, hoping to peer through the lacertine and glimpse the scribes in the scriptorium. The Book of Kells has the quality of a sacred portal, of being capable of transporting the viewer to another time and space and consciousness. *The Secret of Kells* has recognized that quality and creatively conceived the 'world' on the other side. This is where you land if you fall through the knot-work. *The Secret of Kells* opens up the 'Narnia' hidden behind the spinning spirals of the Book of Kells and lets us be there for a while.

> The Secret of Kells is a film which, by its commitment and its subject, is a celebration of the work accomplished by the illuminators of the Book of Kells. Tomm Moore's script and directing are directly inspired by this Bible, written and illustrated with great virtuoso in quill and ink during the eighth century. The graphic world of the film isn't the work of a copyist, or a mere academic reproduction of the calligraphies and drawings of the illuminator monks. No, it is an original recreation, which incorporates the spirit and style of the classic illuminations and transforms them into a more expressive rendering; an expressionist stylisation imagined and conceived especially for the grand unfolding of strokes and colours on the big screen.[44]

Not unlike the monks of Kells, these contemporary graphic artists of Kilkenny have 'imagined a new form of illuminating, a modern calligraphic treatment designed for a movie'.[45] Art director Ross Stewart adapted the intricate patterns in the Book of Kells for the film's backgrounds, 'within the 2D, stylised world of the old illuminated manuscript'.[46] Producer Tomm Moore describes how he 'was mainly concerned with bringing the character designs closer to the Book of Kells influences seen in the background art while keeping them animatable'. He goes on to note, 'I tried to integrate the geometry of the Book of Kells with the character design'.[47] The considerable care taken in the translation of the graphic quality of

44. Didier Brunner, cited in *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 13.
45. Brunner, cited in *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 13.
46. Solomon, *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 11.
47. Moore, *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 22.

Figure 17.5 Image from Tomm Moore and Ross Stewart, *Designing the Secret of Kells* (Chicago: Trinquétte, 2014). With kind permission from Cartoon Saloon.

the Book of Kells into this new articulation in animation is evident and thrilling. Meehan writes:

> In much of its artwork it mirrors the extraordinary qualities of the Book of Kells with an attention to detail which stays long in the memory. In my favourite scene, snow falls on the monastery in a relentless storm, each flake a differently formed cross. It is in scenes like this that The Secret of Kells displays its deep empathy with the detail as well as the spirit of the manuscript.[48]

4. *The Defining Visual Cultural Identity of Modern Ireland*

'Exit Through the Gift Shop', referring to the ubiquitous gift shop in every gallery and museum, is the witty, if somewhat sardonic, title of a documentary by the artist Banksy critiquing the commodification of art and cultural artefacts. These

48. Meehan, *Designing the Secret of Kells*, 222.

five pithy words capture the marketing machinery that perceives no sacred cows (not even if it is 'the Bible') but only opportunities to leverage each and every artefact to sell yet more product. The reception of the art of the Book of Kells in and since the Celtic Tiger period has seen much application of its graphic motifs to what is commonly referred to as 'tourist tat'.

'During the Celtic Revival in the late nineteenth century, the Book of Kells came to be revered as a symbol of Irish nationalism, a status that it emphatically retains', insists art-historian Stalley.[49] Annually, well over half a million visitors enter the Library at Trinity College to view it on display. 'No other book attracts the same level of public interest.'[50] Fáilte Ireland consistently places the Book of Kells around fifth position in the top-ten of 'paid-in' tourist attractions in the country.[51] Sociologist Dean MacCannell writes that once a sight is 'sacrilized' (identified as significant) and mechanically reproduced through 'off-sight markers' (information about or representations of the sight which are physically separated from the original source), these markers, including posters and brochures, feed a tourist industry in which the tourist is motivated to travel as a way of locating an authentic experience.[52] 'For moderns, reality and authenticity are thought to be elsewhere: in other historical periods and in other cultures, in purer, simpler lifestyles … [T]he concern of moderns for "naturalness", their nostalgia and their search for authenticity are not merely casual and somewhat decadent, though harmless, attachments to the souvenirs of destroyed cultures and dead epochs.'[53]

Tapping into this 'search for authenticity' is evident in much of the marketing both of Ireland as a destination and the Book of Kells as a highlight for tourists to Ireland. In many ways, echoes of the 'Celtic Revival' are ever-present and diversely pervasive and look set to remain so. Alluding to the 'world behind the text' that seems to whisper constantly to the viewer, Umberto Eco, in his poetic reflection on the Book of Kells, wrote: 'For my part, I have always endeavoured to divine the portions of the manuscript that were unknown to me by listening to the murmur of those other voices that preceded it. A marvel such as the Book of Kells is not conceived from nothingness. It is born surrounded and preceded by a deep and pervasive murmur.'[54]

Woven deeply into the complex interlace patterns that frame, decorate and illuminate not only the gift-shop merchandise, but also the Kilkenny Design Shop

49. Roger Stalley, 'Book of Kells', *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*, Oxford University Press, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T046203.

50. Meehan, *Book of Kells*, 13.

51. Tourism statistics from 2013 placed the Book of Kells at number 5 with 588,723 visitors. See more online at: http://www.failteireland.ie/Utility/Media-Centre/Failte-Ireland-reveals-nation%E2%80%99s-Top-Tourist-Attrac.aspx#sthash.8rE5x3LQ.dpuf.

52. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, 2nd ed. (Berkley: University of California, 1999), 3.

53. MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 3.

54. Umberto Eco, foreword to *The Book of Kells: Commentary*, 11.

pottery, the fine-art of Farrell and Hamilton, the popular art of Fitzpatrick, the animated *Secret of Kells* is that 'pervasive murmur', an ethereal promise of yearned-for authenticity.

Because the visual dimension of the Book of Kells is so strong and the text, being Latin, largely inaccessible to many viewers, the aesthetics of the book dominate the collective imagination as they reach back to the early Irish-Christian monastic era. Pulliam notes perceptively that 'perhaps the most unique feature of the Book of Kells is the manner in which imagery repeatedly invades the territorial domain of text'.[55] This has happened in both the cultural and religious reception of the book. The aesthetics of the Book of Kells have become – through both genuine, popular-cultural evolution and marketing manipulation – a portal which promises entry to the timeless compounds of ancient Celtic consciousness.

The new Irish passport design, unveiled on 30 September 2014, is unexpected and even startling, as an example of present-day 'Celtic Revival', in its bold appropriation of so many familiar 'Celtic' tropes thought by some to have been banished to Irish design history. Illustrations of Irish landmarks such as the Cliffs of Moher as well as Gaelic games are framed by a wildly lyrical and loose interlace on the left-hand page and are stamped over with a Celtic brooch on the right. Short bits of verse from the Irish national anthem and Irish poetry feature in a contemporary Celtic font. It is profoundly telling that such a design should be produced during a period of high 'forced emigration', as some perceive it, due to the severe economic recession. Here the romantic evocation of mystical Ireland, seamlessly blended with the real and contemporary, is not about marketing a tourist destination but reaches deep into the collective imaginary, reinforcing the belief in Ireland as ancient, eternal home.

5. *Conclusion*

High resolution digital images of every page of the Book of Kells are now available to view online through the Trinity College Dublin website.[56] In a way inconceivable to the mind of the most imaginative ninth-century monk, the viewer may now scroll through the pages and enlarge and examine the very finest details of the illuminations. It is certainly a scholar's and devotee's delight and a very welcome addition to the many resources on the Book. And yet, it still does not address that conundrum about the relationship between the image and the text – the Latin text of the book remains beyond the reach of many contemporary readers, while the aesthetics continue to enthral. For example, exiting through the gift-shop at the end of the Book of Kells display one finds, jostling side by side, vying to capture the tourist's eye, expensive jewellery and plastic knick-knacks

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55. Pulliam, *Word and Image*, 37.

56. See http://digitalcollections.tcd.ie. An Apple iPad app is also available with similar functionality.

in gaudy colours drawing from the imagery of the book; there is something for every taste and every budget. There is barely a product of which one can conceive – an item of clothing, a room in the house – that has not had a Book of Kells motif applied to it. What is much harder to find, however, is a Bible. On a recent visit I did eventually find one, down on the second shelf from the floor, around the corner at the back of the shop. One, lonely, soft-cover NRSV edition, going for half-price, 'reduced to clear'. It is somewhat ironic, in the midst of all this carefully orchestrated merchandising, that the one thing that has not been 'Kells-ified' is the Bible – or more precisely, the Gospels of the New Testament. There is no *Your Own Book of Kells Gospels in English with Illuminations* or 'Illuminated with the Book of Kells' illustrated study Bible with daily reflections. It is hard to imagine that such a book would not sell.

The new manifestations of the Book of Kells in the digital realm, the iPad app and online, parallel its cultural appropriation in contemporary media like animation. Digital technology opens up the possibility of a digital interlinear version, with translations in many modern languages. This would go some way to breaking down the word/image dichotomy that persists for many viewers in their reception of the Book of Kells and open up the text for many more readers.

Nevertheless, the polyvalent aesthetic legacy of the art of the Book of Kells looks set to prevail into the future. From handmade craft work, to kitsch and political art, to an Oscar nominated, feature-length animated film, the ability of the Book of Kells to inspire artists of every ilk and medium endures undimmed. Perhaps a task for biblical scholars is to help highlight the integration of image and word and thus revive (and even animate) its textual legacy in the popular reception of the book.

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