

# Christmas 1991

12 November 1991



The five stamps to be issued on 12 November will be Britain's 26th Christmas issue (first in 1966) and the sixth to feature medieval architecture or artefacts.

The stamps reproduce details from a 14th century illuminated manuscript *Acts of Mary and Jesus* in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The illustrations depict scenes surrounding the Nativity set within the manuscript's decorative initial letters. The first scene, on the **18p** stamp (basic inland 2nd class rate) depicts the Adoration of the Magi, set within the initial letter O.

The **24p** value (basic inland 1st class and EEC rate) shows the letter M for Maria, and portrays Mary placing Jesus in a manger. The ox and ass shown here were not recorded in the Gospels, but have become part of the traditional Christmas story.

The letter A contains a depiction of The Holy Family on the **28p** stamp (Europe, non-EEC rate) and the **33p** denomination (worldwide postcard rate) the letter O shows the Annunciation (when the Angel Gabriel reveals to the Virgin that she has been chosen by God to bear His Son).

The **39p** stamp (basic airmail rate, Zones 1 and 2) features the letter N encapsulating the flight of the Holy Family into Egypt.

The stories told in the *Acts of Mary and Jesus* were no doubt copied from earlier manuscripts. No one knows for certain who commissioned this particular manuscript; it was most probably a wealthy Venetian. Three subsequent owners inscribed their names on the end page — Antonius Turchonius, his grandson Joannes Turchonius (1557), and the Count of Malpaga (1637). In an important and prosperous city like Venice would have lived many families eager to commission their own books; professional scribes settled in the city to meet this need. (Some aristocrats even employed their own scribes.) Illuminated manuscripts once owned only by royalty, the higher nobility and the church, could now be obtained by the rich and educated classes.



*The Acts of Mary and Jesus* was acquired by a Venetian Jesuit Matteo Canonici, whose collection of 3,550 manuscripts was purchased by the Bodleian Library in 1817. This world-famous library, formally opened in 1602 now houses over 5.3 million volumes.

The term "Illuminated Manuscripts" is used to describe manuscripts adorned with burnished gold and other precious metals. Manuscripts were copied onto parchment (animal skin) by scribes using a goose quill and ink-horn; the scribe would outline initial letters which would later be completed by the illustrator. Initial letters and chapter titles were often "rubricated" (highlighted in red) — from such letters in liturgical calendars comes the term "red letter days". In addition to burnished gold, the illustrators used vermilions, azure blues, greens and purples to achieve their brilliant results.

### Technical Details

The stamps were designed by David Driver and printed in photogravure by Harrison and Sons Limited. They are of horizontal format (41 x 30mm), printed in sheets of 100 with PVA Dextrin gum. Perforation measures 15 x 14. The 18p stamp is on fluorescent coated paper with one phosphor band, the 24p, 28p, 33p and 39p values are on phosphor coated paper.

### Presentation Pack

The pack (No. 222) will cost £1.75. It was designed by David Driver with text by Sara Driver; made and printed by Raithby, Lawrence.

### Royal Mail Stamp Cards

Cards, featuring enlargements of the stamp designs, will be available approximately two weeks before the stamp issue, price 21p each. They are numbered 139A-E.

### First Day Cover

The Royal Mail first day cover will be available from the British Philatelic Bureau, Collections, philatelic counters and main post offices approximately two weeks before 12 November, price 21p. Two pictorial postmarks will be used for the first day cover service — one for the Bureau, the other for Bethlehem, Llandeilo, Dyfed.

A first day cover service will be provided by the Bureau with the official Royal Mail cover addressed to the destination required with the stamps cancelled with the requested postmark. Application forms, available from the Bureau

and main post offices, should be returned not later than 12 November.

Collectors may send their own cards/covers for the pictorial postmarks; these should be sent on the first day of issue in a stamped outer envelope endorsed "Pictorial First Day of Issue Postmark" to: British Philatelic Bureau, 20 Brandon Street, EDINBURGH EH3 5TT (Bureau postmark) or Wales & The West Special Handstamp Centre, Royal Mail Cardiff, 220-228 Penarth Road, CARDIFF CF1 1AA (Bethlehem postmark). Collectors wanting their cards/covers returned under cover should enclose a suitable addressed envelope. This need not bear additional postage stamps, the postage being already paid by the stamps affixed to the covers for postmarking.

First Day Posting Boxes will be provided at most main post offices for those collectors who wish to post covers to receive the standard, non-pictorial "First Day of Issue" handstamps. In addition, pictorial "First Day of Issue" postmarks will be used at City of London EC (shows City coat of arms), and Durham (Cathedral). Reposting addresses: London North SHC, Royal Mail City and International, King Edward Street, LONDON EC1A 1AA (City of London handstamp); and Northern England SHC, Royal Mail Newcastle, Forth Street, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE NE1 1AA (Durham). These handstamps were introduced on 17 January 1989 and 22 March 1988 respectively.

A number of special handstamps sponsored by stamp dealers and others, will be used on 12 November — details of these will be found in the *British Postmark Bulletin*, available on subscription from the British Philatelic Bureau.

### Souvenir Cover

A souvenir cover, of similar design to the first day cover, will be available from Collections and philatelic counters from 13 November, price 21p. This will be on sale for one year.

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### Earlier "Medieval" Christmas Stamps

Rather an interesting collection can be assembled of British Christmas stamps featuring medieval works of art and architecture. The 1970 Christmas stamps, designed by Sally Stiff, depicted Nativity scenes based on a medieval book of psalms, the de Lisle Psalter, part of the Arundel Collection then in the British Museum (now British Library). An article by Sally Stiff on how she set about designing these stamps was pub-

ROYAL MAIL MINT STAMPS

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illuminated manuscripts, once the preserve of churches, were now within the reach of a new, rich and educated class. Hard-working monks or nuns were gradually superseded by workshops of professional craftsmen. Some aristocrats kept their own stables of lay scribes and illuminators; less exalted customers consulted booksellers, middlemen and illuminators; in one recorded transaction in fourteenth-century England, £3 15s 5d was paid for a bound illuminated manuscript. By contrast a ploughman would have earned little more than £1 8s 0d a year.



ONCE the text was finished the illuminator would outline the design, first with a lead point, then with a pen. The next step was to lay down beaten, harnished gold leaf. Then brilliant colours, vermilions, azure blues, greens and purples, were gradually built up layer upon layer until the whole intricate pattern was complete.



*Acts of Mary and Jesus* (MS, CANON, MISC, 476) was eventually acquired by a Venetian Jesuit, Matteo Canonico, and in 1817 his collection of 3,550 manuscripts was purchased by Oxford's Bodleian Library for £5,444 5s 1d. In addition to maintaining its magnificent collection of illuminated manuscripts and preserving thousands of valuable books, the Bodleian, as it is called, takes a copy of every book published in the United Kingdom and currently houses some 5.3 million volumes on over 158 kilometres of shelving. Restored by Sir Thomas Bodley for 'the publique use of Students', the Bodleian was formally opened in 1622. The mellow, honey-coloured stone library is one of the oldest in Europe.

With acknowledgements to Martin Kaufmann, Bodleian Library; Ewan Clifton, calligraphy and Donald Jackson, The Calligraphy Centre



ROYAL MAIL FIRST DAY COVER

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