

Photo by Faith Rotbach (Photography and Lens-Based Design '27)

Illuminating Gifts of Wisdom

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"Wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness."[1]

The relationship between wisdom and light is enshrined in the academic mission of BYU, where we profess that "the glory of God is intelligence, or, in other words, light and truth."[2] In Christian iconography, some of the most striking representations of luminous knowledge appear in illuminated manuscripts, such as a circa 1530 book of hours conserved in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections. The book depicts a sequence of supplications organized around a devotional theme, including the Descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (shown left), when the "spirit of wisdom" like a "rushing mighty wind . . . filled all the house" and "cloven tongues . . . of fire . . . sat upon each of [Jesus's disciples]."[3]

The images and text in this particular book of hours were printed with movable type and metal-cut plates and then *illuminated* with colored washes and gold. *Illuminate* means to enliven an image with color, flooding its lines and shapes with multi-hued light, in a manner not dissimilar to the outpouring of knowledge at the Pentecost. The effect is particularly dramatic in BYU's book because many of the metal-cut lines from the print are visible through the illuminating color. A ghostly halo shows through the yellow wash surrounding the dove of the Holy Spirit, and, through its gold overlay, a printed inscription in the oval frame is discernible: *Veni, Sancte Spiritus, reple tuorum corda fidelium, et tui amoris in eis ignem accende* ("Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful and kindle in them the fire of thy love"). The semitransparent colors that overshadow these lines and text trope the action of the Holy Spirit, which hovers over the Virgin Mary and distills fiery, Pentecostal wisdom from within the "shadow of [its] wings."[4]

A BYU education seeks the overshadowing of the Spirit, whose diverse gifts of wisdom are similar to the spectrum of colored glazes that gives form, depth, and differentiation to the printed matrix. The outpouring of languages, light, and elocution at the Pentecost resonates in a special way with the work of the College of Humanities, where we layer our study of words, images, and tongues with illumination from the spirit of Christ. ✠

1. Ecclesiastes 2:13
2. Doctrine and Covenants 93:36
3. Isaiah 11:2; Acts 2:2–3
4. Psalm 63:7