

☪ Poetry, Art, and the Book

Companion Exhibitions at Beinecke Rare Book
& Manuscript Library and the Arts of the Book
Collection, Sterling Memorial Library

The companion exhibitions “Metaphor Taking Shape: Poetry, Art, and the Book” and “The Publishers’ Roundtable: Book Artists in Dialogue,” on view from January 22 to March 31, 2008, consider the ways poetry and book arts interact, their intersections and connections, their shared context and their potentially conflicting functions. The books in both shows demonstrate how poets, artists, and publishers have explored the book, its intimacy, portability, and physicality, and how they have asserted its position as a multifaceted historical and contemporary method of communication, as well as its signification as an evolving cultural object. The works in the exhibitions consider, too, the book’s history and potential as a verbal and visual work of art, the possibilities the format represents for uniting poetry and the visual arts. Each exhibition explores questions of textuality, verbal and visual metaphor making, tensions between language and image, and the physicality of texts and books.

Both exhibitions highlight poetry and artists’ books from the Yale Collection of American Literature, the Arts of the Book Collection, the Modern Books and Manuscripts Collection at Beinecke Library, and the Yale University Art Gallery, showing the depth and richness of Yale’s collections in this area. Including both celebrated works by influential publishers, artists, and writers and examples by lesser-known individuals and groups, the exhibitions celebrate the variety and vitality, the traditions and trends, the history and the potential futures of the vast and growing body of work uniting art and poetry in book works.

“The Publishers’ Roundtable: Book Artists in Dialogue” in the Arts of the Book Collection features the work of six contemporary small presses that have worked variously with poetry and the visual arts, combing the two art forms in both traditional and innovative ways.

☪ *The Beinecke Exhibition*

“Metaphor Taking Shape” begins with a timeline, stretching from William Morris and his Kelmscott Press to the present. Morris revived the printing methods of the late fifteenth century in response to the low-quality books being produced in the late nineteenth century as a result of increased mechanization.

Another influential figure from the period, French art dealer Ambroise Vollard, brought the *livre d’artiste* genre to prominence; the exhibition features one of his most important productions, *Parallèlement*, with poetry by Paul Verlaine and drawings by Pierre Bonnard, published in 1900.



The exhibition includes the monumental modernist masterpiece, *La Prose du Transsibérien et de La Petite Jehanne de France* (Paris, 1913) by the enigmatic poet Blaise Cendrars, with watercolor pochoir by the lyrical painter Sonia Delaunay (pictured on page 1). An accordion-folded book nearly seven feet when fully opened, this key document of the modernist movement stands as one of the most beautiful productions of the 20th century.



Also on view is a collaboration between Harlem Renaissance figures, poet James Weldon Johnson and artist Aaron Douglas. Their 1927 book, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, includes Johnson's famous poems accompanied by Douglas's distinctive images, which show the artist's interest in marrying Art Deco and Art Nouveau styles with themes and images from African American culture.

☞ Other Highlights

☞ An important mid-century work included in the exhibition is *Pismo / Escrito*, a 1948 collaboration between Pablo Picasso and Iliazd, a prominent and innovative Russian writer, designer, and typographer. The design of *Pismo / Escrito*, or *The Letter*, is inventive and interactive; the text and images are printed on papers of various sizes, folded in different ways so that the text may be visible while an image hides behind a fold. Reading the book is not merely a matter of turning pages; it becomes, instead, a process of discovery and encounter, as the poem, a kind of love letter, unfolds revealing images of the beloved.

☞ An interesting late-century example of the union of poetry and art in the book form can be found in *Conjuros y Ebriedades: Cantos de Mujeres Mayas, Incantations by Mayan Women: Fathermothers of the Book*. The book was published in the 1990s at Taller Leñateros, or "The Woodlanders' Workshop," in Chiapas, Mexico, a workshop run by native men and women who use traditional techniques to make hand-made paper and dyes, then combine them with modern technology like silkscreen printing, to make book objects and paper goods that celebrate and preserve the native Mayan and mestizo culture. In this work, the poetic songs and incantations "dreamed by Maya women" are paired with their Spanish translations and drawings of Mayan imagery. In the native language of the Maya, "Tzotzil," the verb to write and to paint, are the same; in the Mayan viewpoint the creation of imagery does not separate into either verbal or visual. The cover and endpapers feature paper made from local materials.

☞ Another even more recent example is *Led Almost by My Tie* with poems by Jeremy Sigler and images and a poem by Yale School of Art professor Jessica Stockholder, published in 2007 (pictured above). Sigler's poems are deconstructed and reassembled by Jessica Stockholder to create both the book's images and an additional poem that threads throughout the book. Stockholder's text underlines and emphasizes aspects of Sigler's poems and adds an additional layer to the text, a scrim through which Sigler's poems can be reread. The idea of layering is accentuated by the book's innovative use of a wide array of materials and printing techniques; the book includes translucent and transparent mylar and plastic as well as paper pages, created using letterpress, lithography, digital printing, and hand coloring.

For more information, including image use and credit:

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