

# Theodore Irwin

## An early collector of Western medieval manuscripts in North America

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*Theodore Irwin (1827–1902) of Oswego, New York, was among the first modern collectors of medieval manuscripts and rare books in North America. Despite the small size of his holdings relative to those of other prominent Gilded Age private collectors, his library included the most sought-after items available on the contemporary market and has been described as one of the richest collections of illuminated manuscripts and printed books in the world. His practice as a collector, and his contribution to the development of the trade in rare books remain, however, poorly understood, in part because his manuscripts were subsumed into J. P. Morgan’s library in New York. This article considers Irwin’s medieval manuscript acquisitions and examines his approach against the wider panorama of contemporary manuscript collecting in Britain and America. It interrogates his choices and his interactions with local and international dealers to shed light on his contribution to the development of the transatlantic trade in rare books at the turn of the twentieth century.*

BEFORE the boom in the transatlantic trade of European cultural goods in the first decades of the twentieth century, a small group of American collectors began to assemble private libraries containing rare printed books and medieval manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Their activity paved the way for decades of remarkable acquisitions from the ‘Old Continent’, American buying power surpassing that of European collectors and public institutions by a significant margin at this time.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon – characterized in *The Times* of London in 1902 as ‘the drain of European culture’ – underpinned the creation of the most prominent private and public collections in the USA, elevating them to world-leading cultural institutions.<sup>3</sup> The suppression of many monastic houses in Europe in the nineteenth century, together with the public sale of some British aristocratic collections, fed a growing European market for rare books, with London as its epicentre. There was, however, no comparable environment in North America. The few auction houses and emerging book dealers had neither the stock nor the cachet of their European counterparts, prompting American collectors to look across the Atlantic for the ‘choicest books’.<sup>4</sup>

Among the early rare-book collectors in North America was Theodore Irwin (1827–1902), an agricultural magnate based in the provincial city of Oswego, on the shores of Lake Ontario in upstate New York. Over almost forty years, Irwin amassed a substantial library, comprising (at least) one exemplar of each of the most coveted items on the contemporary rare-book market. He rose to further prominence for paying the largest sum for a medieval manuscript on the Anglo-American market before 1900, when he secured the famous ‘Golden Gospels of Henry VIII’ for the exceptional price of £2,300 (\$11,500).<sup>5</sup> Irwin’s activity as a book collector, and his contribution to the development of the market for medieval manuscripts in North America, remain, however, poorly understood. Even a cursory look at the *Dictionary of American Book Collectors* shows that little is known about him relative to some of his contemporaries, such as Brayton Ives (1840–1914) and Robert Hoe III (1839–1909).<sup>6</sup> This article addresses that imbalance. By drawing on the under-explored archival materials of the Irwin–Hilliard collection at the University of Louisville, it writes Irwin back into the history of the modern manuscript trade and illuminates his

pioneering approaches. A close reading of library catalogues, sales inventories, dealers' records and personal correspondence – combined with the evidence yielded by Irwin's manuscripts – enables the reconstruction of his manuscript library and the contextualization of his choices, and sheds a brighter light on his contribution to the establishment of the transatlantic trade in medieval manuscripts at the turn to the twentieth century.

### Portrait of an elusive collector

Born in 1827 in the provincial town of Sodus, about 65 kilometres from Oswego (to where he moved at the age of 16), Irwin's life was not especially different from that of other contemporary Gilded Age collectors. The profits of his highly successful business were channelled towards the assemblage of a sizable collection of manuscripts, early printed books and deluxe modern editions, as well as etchings and engravings. Yet unlike several of his peers, his origins were humble and he spent his life away from the main cultural centres of the period, such as New York and Boston.<sup>7</sup> His residence in Oswego and the impact of its insularity on the formation of his collection are acknowledged in the preface to his library catalogue, published privately in 1887. There, he stated that his collection had been 'gathered under the disadvantage of residence distant from the chief book markets, otherwise the same amount of labor and outlay might have shown a more important result'.<sup>8</sup> Limitations notwithstanding, Irwin's collecting activity remained consistent over four decades – beginning in the antebellum period in the 1850s – during which he acquired over three thousand rare books.

Few personal statements about Irwin's life and work survive, but when queried about his practice in 1893, Irwin declared: 'my books are not a collection – I have aimed to form a library'.<sup>9</sup> This striking statement offers crucial evidence regarding Irwin's ambitions for his project: the wish to create a resource endowed with primary sources as well as reference materials that would contribute to the furthering of bibliographical knowledge. We may, however, also reasonably assume that contemporary cultural ideals and the mark of distinction of the Gilded Age gentleman were closely connected with the assemblage of an eclectic personal library, reflecting a range of aspirational

intellectual pursuits. The relatively modest prices of antique books (especially of medieval manuscripts) in the period may have also influenced his choices: they were a popular and (still) affordable option for the wealthy collector, while retaining the cachet of a historical artefact. Yet Irwin's genuine interest in manuscripts must not be overlooked. A report published in 1893 in the *American Athenaeum* offers a vivid glimpse of Irwin's enthusiasm when presenting one of his most treasured items:

Mr. Irwin, while I was examining this volume, gave me a surprise. 'When Henry VIII', said he, 'wrote or caused to be written, the famous treatise on the seven sacraments against Luther, Leo X, as is well known, conferred upon the English monarch the title of Defender of the Faith. With the bull conferring the title he sent a beautiful manuscript [. . .] As Mr. Irwin concluded he disappeared into the alcove, I heard the bolts of the safe shoot back and he reappeared a moment later with a folio Morocco case in his hands. Quickly opening it, he exposed a book within. Then, not without a quiet triumph in his manner, not without a flashing of that genial eye, he almost whispered, 'And there is the manuscript'.<sup>10</sup>

This anecdote draws on popular ideas about American collectors at the time: that they amassed treasures and guarded them carefully.<sup>11</sup> However, it is unusual in portraying Irwin's connection to, and enjoyment of, his manuscripts.

Irwin's estate in Oswego, built in the early 1860s, also reflected these aspirations. The main house, regrettably demolished in 1936, was constructed as an idealized Italian villa which included a purpose-built library room. Two surviving photos of the interior show that it comprised two rooms, both lined with custom-made modular walnut bookcases, and had painted ceilings depicting American writers.<sup>12</sup> In addition to thousands of volumes, the main room was also adorned with paintings, prints, *objets d'art*, and two writing desks in the revivalist Tudor style that was popular in England in the first half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 1). One of these tables was adjacent to the fireplace, which also reflected Irwin's appreciation of Renaissance art and literature, with two bronze sculptures – of Dante and Dürer – adorning the mantelpiece.<sup>13</sup> The second room (connected to the main one through an archway) was used to store folio-size volumes and the most precious items, which were reportedly kept in a safe.<sup>14</sup> The two photographs also portray the collector wearing a morning coat and vest, looking serenely into the distance while sitting



Fig. 1. The Irwin House Library, Oswego, NY, c.1916. Irwin–Hilliard collection, ULRB 1999\_004\_4404, University of Louisville Rare Books, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville.

beside one of the writing tables, book in hand (Fig. 2).<sup>15</sup> Importantly, these pictures bring Irwin's predilection for rare books over other art forms into even sharper focus, showing that while he also acquired other artistic media (including prints by Dürer and Rembrandt), books undoubtedly took centre stage.

Further glimpses into Irwin's character can be obtained at second hand. The surviving correspondence between the London-based dealer Bernard Quaritch (1819–1899) and his son Bernard Alfred (1871–1913), exchanged during the latter's visit to Oswego during the firm's first business trip to the US in 1890, describes Irwin as a 'pleasant and very godly man' and someone 'who had not made up his mind regarding the purchase of any works'.<sup>16</sup> This evidence, together with further commentary in contemporary news articles and correspondence, is suggestive of a

cautious collector who avoided impulse buying and swift deals. This aspect of his personality was, in some ways, in stark contrast to some of his peers, who made the headlines for their spectacular investments in rare books and for the purchases of entire libraries, as did Robert Hoe, who secured almost the entire library of the female American collector, Abbie Pope (1858–1894) in 1895.<sup>17</sup> Irwin's 'demure' nature as a collector is further attested by correspondence concerning the sale of the Golden Gospels, the record-breaking tenth-century Ottonian purple codex secured from Quaritch in 1890. Irwin requested maximum discretion regarding the acquisition, stating that he had 'no desire to be celebrated as a collector'.<sup>18</sup> Although he was recognized by his peers as an important bibliophile (having become a member of the distinguished Grolier Club in 1885),<sup>19</sup> contemporary media reports

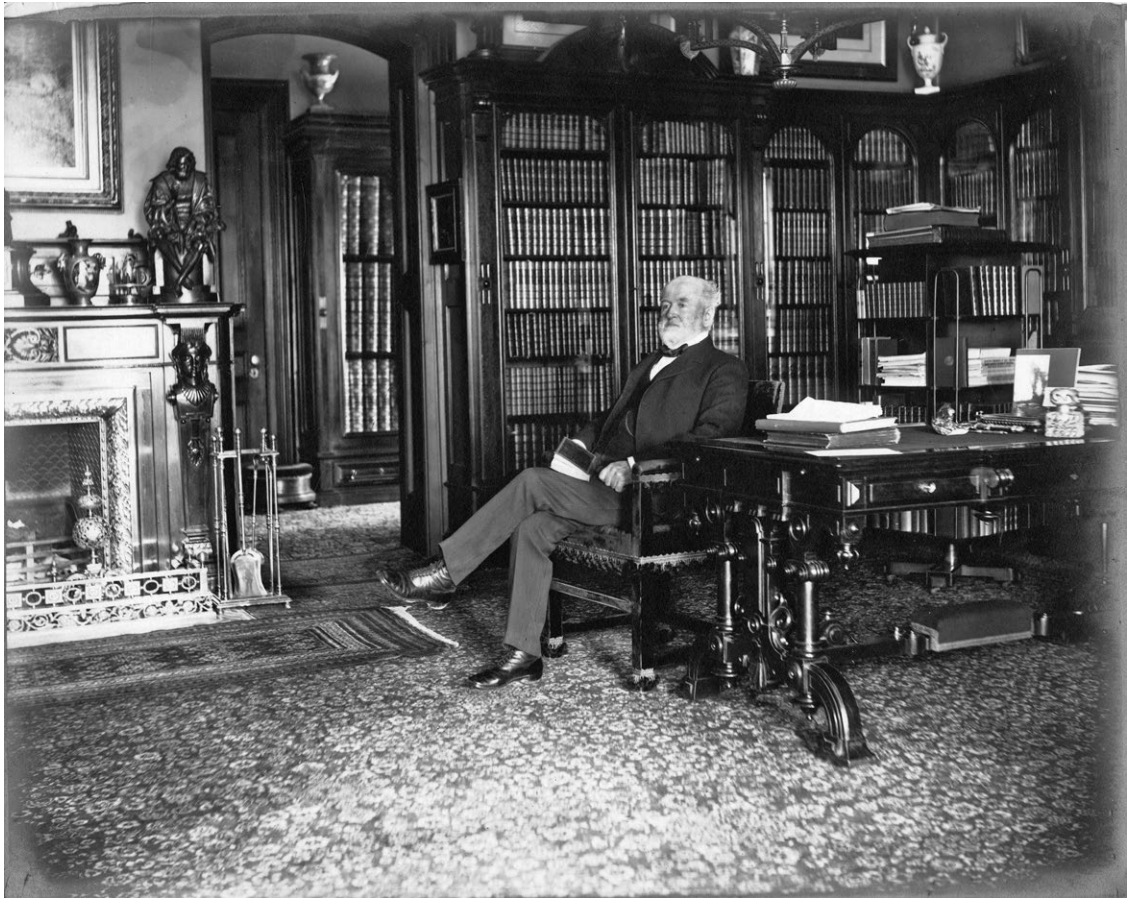


Fig. 2. Theodore Irwin (1827–1902) in the Irwin House Library, Oswego, NY, c.1900. Irwin–Hilliard collection, ULRB 1999\_004\_0094, University of Louisville Rare Books, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville.

testify to his general anonymity before 1900. An article published in the *New York Times* in 1902, titled ‘American libraries. Collections not known to the public: the library of Theodore Irwin of Oswego’, is a case in point.<sup>20</sup>

Irwin was primarily a collector of printed books. Medieval manuscripts seem not to have been his immediate focus; his first codex was acquired only in 1859–60, seven years after his first dealings in the rare-book trade. His holdings comprised some of the most sought-after items in the world of book collecting, including *en vogue* Shakespeare folios, a Gutenberg Bible and several early printed editions of the most renowned historical printers (such as Wynkyn de Worde and William Caxton), as well as rare specimens of Americana (literary works relating

to the early history of America).<sup>21</sup> But while concealed from the public eye, the high quality of several of his works was well-known across the Atlantic. For instance, Irwin’s copy of the first edition of the *Chronicles of England*, printed by Caxton, was regarded as the most perfect in existence (preceding the one owned by the British Museum); it had been requested for loan by William Morris (1834–1896) as an exemplar for reprint by the Kelmscott Press.<sup>22</sup> Posthumous descriptions of the library also highlight the impressive ‘Gibbs Bible’: a 63-volume extra-illustrated Bible with 18,000 prints added by the British illustrator James Gibbs (1804–1891). It is now held in the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA, and was described as the most expensive modern Bible in existence, priced at \$10,000.<sup>23</sup>

Of the 3,084 works listed in the 1887 catalogue of Irwin's library – which comprise early and modern printed books as well as hundreds of reference works on various aspects of history, literature and bibliography – only thirteen are medieval manuscripts, to which two extra items, secured after its publication, should be added (see [Table 1](#) for a complete list of Irwin's manuscripts).<sup>24</sup> Yet despite the negligible number of medieval works relative to the rest of his holdings, Irwin was invariably characterized as a distinguished owner of medieval manuscripts. The *New York Times* went so far as to describe his library as one of the 'richest in the world in illuminated manuscripts, early manuscripts of the classics and incunabula'.<sup>25</sup> Without exception, medieval manuscripts feature in these reports as some of the most superlative and historically relevant works in the collection. The interest in medieval manuscripts may be explained by their rarity in North America at that time, and equally by the growing interest in them among American collectors.

In 1900, two years before Irwin's death, the library was inventoried for sale. Unlike other aspects of his activity, the circumstances of this event are generally well documented, not least thanks to the survival of a partial copy of the inventory. The sale was also promptly reported by the press, regardless of the 'endeavour [that] was made to keep the fact of Mr. Irwin's connection with the library secret [. . .] because he did not want the publicity of a public sale'.<sup>26</sup> The business was entrusted to the two most prominent North American book dealers of the time, the firm of Sabin & Sons, and George H. Richmond (d. 1904), who together mediated 'the largest private transaction in rare books that has ever taken place in this country', totalling \$200,000.<sup>27</sup> In addition to these details, press reports described the movement of people and books between Oswego and Manhattan, with Richmond overseeing the organization of an open sale which never came to fruition. Frederick Throwbridge was the first name advanced by the press as the possible buyer of the entire library (apart from the Gibbs Bible and reference works).<sup>28</sup> In a matter of days, though, the identity of the real buyer made the headlines: J. P. Morgan (1837–1913), whose voracious appetite for rare books prompted the acquisition of several libraries en bloc during the first decades of his collecting activity. The deal was seemingly completed

in a single day and the transaction was made without hesitation.<sup>29</sup>

In contrast to most contemporary book collectors who preferred to auction their libraries under their own name, Irwin did not wish his to feature in the provenance history of his books. He rejected the prospects of a public sale, preferring a discreet deal directed at buyers who could secure several items.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, he did not seem concerned with assembling a library of epic proportions through bulk or en bloc acquisitions, privileging fewer items and acquiring them piecemeal – an approach not unusual for early American manuscript collectors, as seen in the practice of John Allan, Alexander Smets and Edwin Dalrymple.<sup>31</sup> Yet this method of making acquisitions was also possibly dictated by the limited access to such items before the first decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, favourable observations in contemporary American newspaper articles emphasized the singularity of his actions, portraying Irwin as a collector 'whose knowledge and judgement of books were always on rare order and reflecting much of his personality'.<sup>32</sup> A more detailed analysis of the medieval manuscripts that once featured in his library, and the circumstances of their acquisition, will offer further evidence about Irwin's collecting and commercial practices.

### Manuscripts and networks

Although medieval manuscripts constituted less than 1 per cent of Irwin's library, their importance to the magnate is visible through the descriptions produced for the catalogue. Collectively, this cluster of works merited the lengthiest and most detailed entries in an otherwise succinct and non-scholarly publication.<sup>33</sup> While most descriptions comprised only a few lines with the standard 'biographical' data for each item and their material features (that is, size, medium, characterization of the binding), the manuscript entries, albeit still impressionistic, were significantly more detailed. They often included the item's date and geographical origin, material features, provenance (typically naming the illustrious collectors to whom a manuscript had previously belonged) and statements contextualizing their significance, often highlighting their rarity, antiquity and historical and/or literary value. The description of the so-called

Table 1. Manuscripts in Theodore Irwin's collection

Manuscript	Date	Origin	MLM shelf mark	Previous ownership	Irwin's catalogue number	Market & year of purchase	Sales inventory order	Price paid by Irwin	Sales inventory price
Lectionary	c.1500–50	Belgium	M. 5	John Allan	939	A. Ebbs New York (1864)	9 *listed as <i>Gospel Book</i>	\$60.00	\$125.00
<i>Golden Gospels of Henry VIII</i>	c.977–993	Germany	M. 23	Alexander Douglas Hamilton, Duke of Hamilton collection until 1882	N/A	B. Quaritch London (1890)	1	\$11, 500	\$11, 350.00
Book of Hours	c.1485–90	France	M. 26	Firmin-Didot collection until 1884	N/A	J. O. Wright New York (1885?)	5	Unknown	\$800.00
Book of Hours	c.1420–30	France	M. 27	Unk	1367	D. Appleton New York 1860	4?	Unknown	\$500.00
Book of Hours	c.1470	France	M. 28	Frances Mary Richardson Currer until 1863	1368	London ?	10	Unknown	\$75.00
Psalter-Hours	c.1460	France	M. 29	Guillaume Libri?	2301	D. Appleton New York 1860	11	Unknown	\$40.00
Book of Hours	c.1470	Belgium	M. 30	Unknown	2112	Ellis & White London 1881	8	\$315.00	\$315.00
Book of Hours	c.1500–25	France	M. 31	Unknown	2113	A. Ebbs New York 1863	6	Unknown	\$200.00
Book of Hours	c.1470	France	M. 32	Guillaume Libri sale 1859	1369	D. Appleton New York 1860	12	Unknown	\$89.00
Book of Hours	c.1490–1500	France	M. 33	Unknown	2111	Ellis & White London 1881	7	\$450.00	\$450.00
Psalter	c.1290	Netherlands	M. 34	John Allan	2300	A. Ebbs? New York 1865	14	\$50.00	\$50.00
Bible	c.1225–50	France	M. 65	Rafael José Crespo until 1829	163	Ellis & White London 1881	13	\$150.00	\$150.00
<i>Berry Apocalypse</i>	c.1415	France	M. 133	Unknown	40	Ellis & White London 1881	3	\$1875.00	\$1875.00
<i>Roman de la Rose</i>	c.1405	France	M. 245	Almon W. Griswold	2426	New York 1878?	2	Unknown	\$650.00
John Lydegate's <i>Siege of Thebes</i>	c.1450	England	M. 4	Almon W. Griswold	1829	New York 1878?	15? *listed as <i>Theological Questions</i>	Unknown	\$5.00

Information concerning the manuscripts' provenance history (previous ownership, market and year of purchase) was extracted from the Morgan Library and Museum online catalogue to supplement this listing: <https://www.themorgan.org/manuscripts/list>

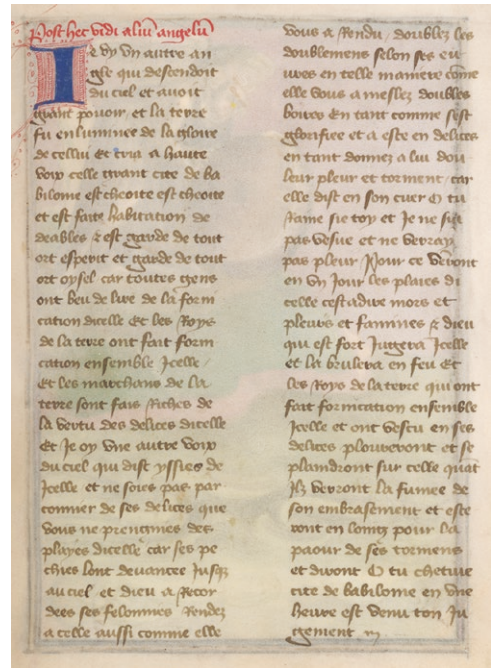


Fig. 3. The Berry Apocalypse, c.1415, Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MS M.133: (a) fol. 67v; (b) fol. 68r.

'Berry Apocalypse', now in the Morgan Library and Museum, New York (hereafter MLM), exemplifies this approach (Fig. 3):

4to, bound in red velvet, with silver corners and clasps.

MS. of French execution of the middle of the 14th century. It is enriched with 86 large paintings, each of which occupies more than one-half of the page. Though quaint in their conception, extraordinary in their design, these paintings are of great artistic interest and merit, and of great curiosity, as showing the interpretation put on the prophecies of the Apocalypse by the divines of the 14th century.

This valuable Manuscript is not only important as a work of art, but also as a monument of the old French language, and as an early example of French Biblical translation.<sup>34</sup>

Irwin acquired primarily late medieval works, possibly owing to their relative abundance on the market in comparison to early medieval specimens; only one item in the collection pre-dated 1200 CE.<sup>35</sup> In terms of their typology, manuscript classifications do not always correspond across the extant listings, an aspect that testifies to the difficulty of cataloguing them with precision in the period. More secure information about their nature can, however, be obtained from their most recent catalogue records and from

the manuscripts themselves. These reveal that Irwin owned a fifteenth-century illustrated copy of the Book of Revelation (the Berry Apocalypse), one thirteenth-century illustrated psalter, a thirteenth-century Paris Bible with illuminated initials, a fifteenth-century illustrated copy of the fourteenth-century French 'best-seller' *Le roman de la rose*, a copy of John Lydgate's *History of the Siege of Thebes* from the fifteenth century, one sixteenth-century illustrated lectionary, and eight books of hours from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> While no strong correlation between price and antiquity is observed in the rare-book trade in the period, the only early medieval manuscript in the collection was, coincidentally, the record-breaking Golden Gospels, a manuscript that stood out in the collection not only for its early date but also for its economic value.<sup>37</sup> Apart from the acquisition of a few specimens of medieval literature, Irwin's penchant for religious works is evident: thirteen of the fifteen manuscripts are devotional works. Strikingly, most originate from France and Flanders, and all bear substantial cycles of illuminations and/or decorative programmes.<sup>38</sup>

The two earliest acquisitions were seemingly two books of hours: a fifteenth-century French specimen (MLM, MS M. 29) containing twelve half-page illustrations with lavishly decorated borders, and a second one from the same country and period, exhibiting three large illuminations and a calendar with a programme of vices and virtues, labours of the months, and biblical scenes (MLM, MS M. 32).<sup>39</sup> In addition to their common French origin and abundant decoration, both manuscripts had previously belonged to the Italian count and bibliomaniac Guillaume Libri (1803–1869), an association that is overtly expressed in Irwin’s library catalogue as a marker of added prestige.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, his first medieval manuscripts were purchased locally from the then leading book dealer Daniel Appleton & Co., a business established in New York City during the Civil War.<sup>41</sup> How much Irwin paid for these items is unknown, but subsequent purchases suggest that at this stage, his investments in medieval manuscripts were not great. The purchase of the sixteenth-century ‘Tongerloo Lectionary’ (MLM, MS M. 5) is a more adequate point of reference for his investments in the period.<sup>42</sup> The item was yet another local acquisition, secured in one of the John Allan sales in New York City in 1864 by Allan Ebbs, a small dealer with a shop located on the west side of Broadway.<sup>43</sup> Whether Ebbs was bidding on Irwin’s behalf, or whether he sold the manuscript to him soon after remains unknown, but the annotated auction catalogue states that the manuscript was secured for \$60. It is likely that Irwin acquired it from the dealer at a higher rate, but certainly not for a substantial amount.<sup>44</sup>

Although it is difficult to pinpoint when Irwin began to acquire rare books directly from European dealers, the 1880s were a watershed moment in his collecting history. In September 1881, Frederick Ellis from the London-based firm Ellis & White travelled to North America with a stock of rare books and approached Irwin, whose reputation was growing steadily among European book brokers and bibliophiles. Nothing is known about this encounter, but an extant book list reveals that Irwin acquired at least four manuscripts from the firm: the thirteenth-century Paris Bible for \$150 (MLM, MS M. 65), a Belgian book of hours with a Marian cycle for \$315 (MLM, MS M. 30), a French book of hours with grisaille illustrations for \$450 (MLM, MS M. 33), and the Berry Apocalypse for \$1,875 (MLM, MS

M. 133). The last volume became the most expensive medieval manuscript in the collection to date.<sup>45</sup>

Surviving correspondence between Irwin and Bernard Quaritch from the same years also testifies to the growing ties between the collector and the London dealer, providing evidence that the latter sent catalogues to Oswego as early as 1878.<sup>46</sup> Yet this correspondence also sheds important light on the difficulties faced by those involved in the emerging transatlantic book trade. The awkwardness of settling long-distance deals, several changes of heart about items, and the laboriousness of establishing strong customer relations are but a few of the challenges reflected in this documentation. Indeed, in a letter dating to February 1881, Quaritch commented on Irwin’s excessive reservations, lamenting his lack of trust in requesting assistance from Joseph Sabin and later from George Wright to inspect, on his behalf, a selection of books at the Quaritch firm’s headquarters before the settlement of a deal.<sup>47</sup> These discussions may have concerned the twenty-eight books in the ‘List of selected books from Bernard Quaritch catalogues’ preserved in the Irwin–Hilliard archive which includes nine medieval manuscripts. It is, however, unclear if any items crossed the Atlantic at this stage.<sup>48</sup>

Relations between Irwin and Quaritch improved significantly in 1890, when Irwin acquired the Golden Gospels, in what seems to have been his last manuscript purchase. After being available for sale on the London market for more than two years, the manuscript was brought to North America by Quaritch’s son Bernard Alfred (known as Alfred), together with a portion of Quaritch’s stock to feature in an exhibition organized in the Albemarle Hotel in New York between January and February 1890.<sup>49</sup> The business expedition was, however, much longer, and only after five months spent touring several cities of the East Coast and Midwest (which included two in-person meetings with Irwin) did Alfred manage to convince him to buy the manuscript.<sup>50</sup> This historical acquisition not only cemented their commercial bond but also propelled Irwin into the pantheon of great book collectors. Bernard Quaritch placed him in the line of the Golden Gospels’ distinguished owners, stating that the manuscript had been: ‘once the property of Henry VIII, later that of the Duke of Hamilton, but considered too expensive by Queen Victoria when offered to her before you secured it’.<sup>51</sup>

The episode of the sale of the Golden Gospels offers further important perspectives on Irwin's practice as a collector – namely, relating to his interest in sharing his library with scholars. His interaction with Samuel Berger (1843–1900), the biblical scholar from the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Paris, demonstrates that Irwin willingly opened the doors of his library not to the public but to academic bookmen. Although Irwin's original letter does not survive, Berger's reply is preserved in the Irwin–Hilliard archive and reveals that the collector contacted him directly to report that he had acquired the manuscript, offering assistance should he require further information for the completion of his research.<sup>52</sup> Berger's reply also offers an important glimpse into the growing symbiotic relations between the world of rare-book collecting and scholarship. Here, Berger offered a modicum of information about the manuscript's origin and date, and crucial details about its context of production; in return, he requested the examination of the codex's quire arrangement.<sup>53</sup>

It is also important to note that, in addition to the scholarly community, Irwin occasionally engaged with museums, lending works to temporary exhibitions at least once during his lifetime. That occasion involved the loan of two books of hours (MLM, MS M. 27 and M. 32), which travelled from Oswego to Montreal to feature in an exhibition commemorating the fourth centenary of Caxton's first printed work, which was held in that city between 30 June and 1 September 1877.<sup>54</sup> The difficulties in keeping up with scholarly and institutional requests was presented as one of the reasons for Irwin to part with his library. Reports about the sale of the collection declare that the decision had been motivated by his advancing age and growing difficulty in managing such requests – a demand that must have increased significantly as Irwin's library grew in quality and importance and became better known among this restricted community.<sup>55</sup>

### Quality and value

Unlike many books that reached the open market and continued to change hands in individual transactions in subsequent decades, the fate of Irwin's medieval manuscripts was to be a collective one. They were absorbed as a collection into Morgan's library, where they have remained. Morgan continued to add books to his library and, after his death in 1913, his

collection was developed by his son Jack and the librarian Belle da Costa Greene. An analysis of digital surrogates, limited as they may be, reveals that Irwin's manuscripts were of varying quality. Although Irwin acquired only items that contained lively illuminated cycles, several are arguably second-rate works by comparison with the quality of equivalent items in Morgan's collection. Even Irwin's most refined books of hours (while striking and well preserved) are not as technically accomplished as, for instance, the fifteenth-century Hours of the Master of Jacques de Luxembourg (MLM, MS M. 1003) and the Morgan Black Hours (MLM, MS M. 493), which had featured in the collection of Robert Hoe III.<sup>56</sup> The inferiority of Irwin's first manuscript acquisitions is particularly clear: MLM, MS M. 29 and M. 32 are imperfect specimens with lacunae in both text and illuminations and display crude draughtsmanship (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Books of Hours, France, c.1470. Morgan Library and Museum, New York, MS M.32, fol. 4r.

Irwin's turn to the international market thus reflected a growing ambition for better books. It is striking that there is an evident correlation between quality, date, and place of acquisition. It was between 1880 and 1890 that he acquired his finest medieval works: the Berry Apocalypse, an illuminated French copy of the Book of Revelation commissioned by the Duc de Berry around 1415; the Golden Gospels, a rare example of an early medieval purple codex believed, at the time, to have belonged to Charlemagne; and the two most sophisticated books of hours in his collection, MLM, MS M. 26 and M. 30.<sup>57</sup> Even when a few deals were still being made locally – as was the case with MS M. 26, acquired from the New York-based British dealer James Osborne Wright – Irwin's demand for higher-quality manuscripts is apparent. Unsurprisingly, the desire for better manuscripts was tied to greater financial investment.

Although very few invoices survive, the sales inventory of Irwin's collection in the Irwin–Hilliard archive offers important evidence about the value of Irwin's manuscripts in 1900, not least because these items were priced individually. The document demonstrates that the manuscripts assigned lower values correspond precisely to the first medieval works of inferior quality acquired locally: MLM, MS M. 29 (identified in the inventory as 'Heure 8vo, Green Velvet Debaune') is priced at \$40; MLM, MS M. 32 ('Horae, 8vo, Old Leather Henry VIII') at \$89; and MLM, MS M. 34 ('Psalterium – 18mo calf – English') at \$50.<sup>58</sup> By contrast, all manuscripts secured from European dealers retained their higher economic value, their prices ranging from \$200 to \$800, with the exception of the Berry Apocalypse and the Golden Gospels valued at \$1,875 and \$11,350 respectively. It seems that Irwin's expenditure on medieval manuscripts saw a sharp rise after 1881, reaching a par with his investments in early printed books. This becomes clearer when the values placed on some of his most coveted items of Shakespeareana and Americana are set against his post-1880 manuscript purchases. For instance, all four Shakespeare folios were valued at \$1,250 in the inventory, and the famous 'Eliot Bible' (the first translation of the Bible into the Massachusetts native language of the Wampanoag people) at \$762.<sup>59</sup>

Overall, the financial evaluation of Irwin's library remains difficult to contextualize against broader contemporary market trends, which reflected a sharp and steady increase in the value of both manuscript and

early printed books.<sup>60</sup> Strikingly, the sales inventory also reveals that most medieval manuscripts either retained the approximate price that Irwin had originally paid for them or presented a slight price reduction. The Berry Apocalypse was offered for the same price Irwin had paid for it twenty years earlier, whereas the Golden Gospels show a 9 per cent reduction from the 1890 market price. Interestingly, however, a selection of printed works (whose original value can be attested in extra documentation) reflects the opposite trend. The Eliot Bible is one such case, having increased in value by 17 per cent, from \$650 in 1878 (when Irwin acquired it from J. W. Bouton) to \$762 in 1900.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the many press stories and rumours surrounding early American collections, commentary on Irwin's lack of concern for profit seems accurate. Little, if any, seems to have been made from the sale of the collection, which earned roughly 'just what it cost him' – possibly a reflection of a market that was not yet profitable for dealings in manuscripts.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, owing to his distance from the main book markets, it was also said that Irwin 'bought largely at the full market price of the day' not having indulged in the book collector's greatest joy, 'the finding of a bargain'.<sup>63</sup> Yet his dealings with Quaritch show how Irwin's business acumen was profitably applied to his collecting practice. Discussions were often dynamic, including detailed negotiations about price reductions and clarification of profit margins, as well as the establishment of agreeable payment conditions. Once again, the case of the Golden Gospels offers important detail about his financial strategy: not only did he manage to negotiate payment in instalments over a one-year-period, but he was also granted an 8 per cent discount from Quaritch's original price – precisely the same price reduction he had managed to secure for the much desired Gutenberg Bible from the same dealer three years earlier.<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Over the forty years of his collecting activity, Irwin's approach was consistent. He bought little and often, first locally and then internationally, privileging the London market where he negotiated primarily with Bernard Quaritch. His development as a collector was coherent with general views about his personality: he preferred to invest in works that met his increasingly higher standards rather than securing various medieval

manuscripts of more modest value and quality that were widely available on the market. Overall, his taste was eclectic, but his choice of manuscripts was specific: he acquired illustrated books that bore witness to the splendour of medieval devotional culture and art. In doing this, his approach was a precursor to that of subsequent major American book collectors, such as Morgan and Henry Walters, whose libraries reflect similar trends and preferences. Invariably, Irwin employed his business acuity even when purchasing inexpensive items, securing them only after close inspection by qualified men of his trust. Medieval manuscripts were a minute fraction of his library, but they held a prominent place within it. Indeed, in the last two decades of his collecting activity, his investments in manuscripts increased threefold, culminating in the purchase of the most expensive manuscript sold before 1900. The strengthening of his ties with London-based dealers went hand in hand with his growing demand for quality. Before this, his acquisitions reflected what Scott Gwara accurately noted about early American collectors of medieval manuscripts: they secured mainly imperfect and pedestrian specimens, as that was what was available on the North American market.<sup>65</sup> The outstanding specimen was still, at this stage, the appanage of the European book broker.

The glamour of the auction room was not part of Irwin's vision for book collecting, presumably because of his desire for anonymity.<sup>66</sup> His statement regarding the nature of his holdings – 'I have aimed to form a library' – not only contextualizes his careful curation of a smaller body of works but, importantly, his patronage of bibliographical studies. Irwin's letters to Samuel Berger reveal a man who preferred to avoid the limelight but recognized his agency as an active supporter of knowledge development. It is unlikely that Irwin had the necessary skills to engage at a deeper level with his works; his understanding of the material was probably that of a dilettante. But it is striking that, together with historical books, he also acquired key reference works to support the study of medieval history, literature, manuscript art and palaeography.<sup>67</sup> His library thus seems to have been an extension of his personality and taste not only for the subjects that it represented but for the way it was assembled and managed.

The study of Irwin's progress as a collector also offers essential information beyond his personal practice. It sheds light on the dynamics of the

emerging transatlantic trade on a more granular level. The fact that he did not attend auctions abroad or engage in frequent book-buying trips in Europe (despite having made a transatlantic voyage at least once during his lifetime) turned him into one of the main players in long-distance commerce. As a top American buyer in the client lists of London sellers, he helped to set the parameters of the business when they began to brave the Atlantic with their stock. The difficulties of the process were manifold: the discussions about ever changing book lists, the awkwardness of defining payment conditions and, crucially, the arduous process of developing trust, prompted a series of adaptations to the practices of European dealers as well. These challenges certainly inspired their first trips to North America to meet potential buyers in person in the final decades of the nineteenth century, which, thanks to their success, became a more frequent strategy thereafter. Irwin saw in this his opportunity to secure better items but, correspondingly, he helped to sustain the logistically demanding (and high-risk) transatlantic movement of people and books.<sup>68</sup> The sale of the Golden Gospels is yet again an important example. Despite the initial difficulties of selling any manuscripts in the US, Irwin's purchase of the most expensive manuscript on the market was a beacon of hope for profitable deals on those shores of the Atlantic. The trajectory of Irwin's collecting thus mirrors that of the transatlantic trade itself: European dealers found buyers for some of their most expensive (unsold) items, and the US began to receive better manuscripts, elevating their appreciation for quality and the cachet of their market and collections.

After Irwin's death in January 1902, the newspapers mourned the passing of a collector whose library held 'a high and distinguished rank among the world's great book collections'.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, he was not an exceptional collector, but one who made a few outstanding purchases. By fostering an appreciation for highly decorated manuscripts – which became the norm in subsequent decades – he also became fortuitously a tastemaker. His personal choices shaped the nature of future private libraries, having endowed Morgan's with works that remain to this day some of its most prominent bibliographic treasures. At a time when several major North American collections were becoming 'sites of national identity' for the wider society, Irwin's medieval manuscripts helped to sustain

– even if inadvertently – the construction of those narratives and ideals.

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## Notes and references

- 1 The following abbreviations are used throughout the notes: BQA (London, Bernard Quaritch Ltd, Archive); IHC (Irwin–Hilliard collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Louisville); MLM (Morgan Library and Museum, New York); *NYT* (*New York Times*). For easier searchability and clarity, Irwin's manuscripts are referenced by their current MLM shelfmark, as well as the original catalogue number in Irwin's collection.
- 2 On the establishment of a market for medieval manuscripts and the formation of private libraries in nineteenth-century North America, see S. Gwara, 'Peddling wonderment, selling privilege: launching the market for medieval books in antebellum New York', *Perspectives Médiévales* 41 (2020), pp. 1–24.
- 3 'The exportation of rare books to America', *The Times*, 7 July 1902, p. 14; see also D. Magnusson and L. Cleaver, *The Trade in Rare Books and Manuscripts between Britain and America, c.1890–1929* (Cambridge, 2022). Concerning the wider North American economy in the period, see, J. Levy, *Freaks of Fortune: The Emerging World of Capitalism and Risk in America* (Cambridge, MA, 2012); R. E. Gallman and P. W. Rhode, *Capital in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 2020); S. Adams, 'The Late 19th-Century Economy', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History* (2021) at <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-c-893> (accessed 16 May 2025).
- 4 Gwara, op. cit. (note 2); Magnusson and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 3).
- 5 MLM, MS M. 23. On the sales history of the 'Golden Gospels of Henry VIII', see A. de Oliveira Dias, "'The most precious volume that has been sold for a century': the Golden Gospels and the manuscripts trade, ca. 1882–1900", *Manuscript Studies* (forthcoming).
- 6 'Hoe, Robert III', in D. C. Dickinson, *Dictionary of American Book Collectors* (New York, 1986), pp. 160–62; 'Irwin, Theodore', in *ibid.*, p. 176; 'Ives, Brayton', in *ibid.*, pp. 179–80.
- 7 There is little evidence regarding Theodore Irwin's early life. He was the first-born child of the second marriage of his father, William Patten Irwin of Newburgh, NY (1789–1863), and seems not to have benefited from a high-level education. He was therefore not exposed to the history and the old languages preserved in the manuscripts he collected. He was a self-made man, having moved to Oswego to work as a miller, and later developed his highly successful business. In contrast, several of his peers had inherited family businesses that they further developed (as was the case with J. P. Morgan Sr.) and a few attended prestigious academic institutions, including Brayton Ives, who graduated from Yale in the 1860s.
- 8 *Catalogue of the Library and a Brief List of the Engravings and Etchings Belonging to Theodore Irwin, Oswego, N.Y.* (New York, 1887). The author remains unknown, but owing to Irwin's professional association with Joseph Sabin, and the overall style of the publication, we may reasonably hypothesize that it was a product of Sabin & Sons, who were the most sought-after cataloguers in North America in the period. On the different styles of cataloguing in nineteenth-century North America, see Gwara, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 2–3.
- 9 A. J. Bowden, 'The Irwin books', *American Athenæum* 1 no. 3 (March 1893), pp. 69–71, at p. 69.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 11 On the security practices of early American book collectors, see Magnusson and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 3), pp. 37–40.
- 12 Bowden, op. cit. (note 9), p. 70.
- 13 For a digital image of Irwin's library c.1916 (which retains the original nineteenth-century decor), see [https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb\\_1999\\_004\\_4404?locale=pt-BR](https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb_1999_004_4404?locale=pt-BR) (accessed 16 May 2025).
- 14 Bowden, op. cit. (note 9), p. 70.
- 15 For digital versions of photographs of Irwin, see [https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb\\_1999\\_004\\_4381?locale=pt-BR](https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb_1999_004_4381?locale=pt-BR) and [https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb\\_1999\\_004\\_0004?locale=pt-BR](https://digital.library.louisville.edu/concern/images/ulrb_1999_004_0004?locale=pt-BR) (accessed 16 May 2025).
- 16 Letter from Bernard Alfred Quaritch to Bernard Quaritch, 12 April 1890, BQA.
- 17 On the sale of Abbie Pope's collection, see 'News for bibliophiles', *The Nation*, 30 March 1911. Further examples of en bloc library purchases include J. P. Morgan's acquisition of James Toovey's and Richard Bennett's collections in 1899 and 1902 respectively; see Magnusson and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 3), p. 28.
- 18 Letter from Theodore Irwin to Alfred Quaritch, 31 May 1890, BQA. L. A. Morris, 'Bernard Alfred Quaritch in America', in *150th Anniversary of Bernard Quaritch (1997)* [*Book Collector*, special issue], pp. 180–97, esp. p. 195.
- 19 *Transactions of the Grolier Club of the City of New York: From February eighteen hundred and ninety-four to July eighteen hundred and ninety-nine*, pt. 3 (1899), p. 225. I am grateful to Pierre-Louis Pinault for this reference.
- 20 'American libraries. Collections not known to the public: the library of Theodore Irwin of Oswego', *NYT*, 30 August 1902.
- 21 Important items of Americana in Irwin's collection included a greatly coveted first edition of John Smith's *General History*

- of *Virginia*, which was inventoried for sale in 1900 and priced at \$2,000; see *Catalogue of the Library*, op. cit. (note 8), cat. no. 2607, p. 420. For the inventory of Irwin's collection see, 'Sales inventory', IHC, p. 3.
- 22 'Theodore Irwin's library sold', *Publishers Weekly*, 31 March 1900.
  - 23 *Publishers Weekly*, 17 June 1893.
  - 24 These two extra items are included in the library inventory conducted in preparation for its sale in 1900; 'Sales inventory', IHC.
  - 25 'Big sale of rare books', *NYT*, 30 March 1900.
  - 26 *Ibid.*
  - 27 *Ibid.* This was an inaccurate remark considering that five years earlier Robert Hoe had purchased the library of Abbie Pope for at least the same sum. On Pope's sale, see 'News for bibliophiles', op. cit. (note 17); Magnusson and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 3), p. 28.
  - 28 'American libraries', op. cit. (note 20).
  - 29 A short article posthumously published by J. H. Jordan (one of Richmond's associates during the period of the Irwin sale) offers further interesting details about Morgan's purchase of Irwin's library: 'in knowing that Richmond was in the possession of the stock, J. P. Morgan personally called in, checked a selection of the items (for an hour), and immediately after asked for the value of the whole collection; the whole library was purchased and paid in that same afternoon, just before he sailed to Europe'; 'When folios changed hands', *Publishers Weekly*, 10 June 1922.
  - 30 'Big sale of rare books', op. cit. (note 25).
  - 31 S. Gwara, 'Je me souviens: the forgotten collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts owned by Gerald E. Hart of Montreal', in *Between the Text and the Page: Studies on the Transmission of Medieval Ideas in Honour of Frank T. Coulson*, eds. H. Anderson and D. T. Gura (Toronto, 2020), pp. 255–88, at p. 255; see also S. Gwara, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the American South, 1798–1868* (Cayce, SC, 2016).
  - 32 'American libraries', op. cit. (note 20).
  - 33 The limitations of Irwin's library catalogue were recognized by contemporary dealers and bibliophiles; see, for instance, Bowden, op. cit. (note 9), pp. 69–71. In 1878 Bernard Quaritch offered the services of Michael Kerney (Quaritch Ltd, chief cataloguer) to produce the publication, stating that there was no one suitable to conduct the work in North America in the period; see letter from Bernard Quaritch to Theodore Irwin, 15 September 1878, IHC.
  - 34 *Catalogue of the Library*, op. cit. (note 8), cat. no. 40. p. 7. The cataloguer of Irwin's collection misattributed the manuscript by around half a century, relying on stylistic and palaeographic criteria later revised.
  - 35 On the scarcity of early medieval manuscripts on the book market in the early twentieth century, see H. Y. Thompson, *A Lecture on some English Illuminated Manuscripts* (London, 1902), p. 10: 'Why, then, do I confine my range to a period beginning so late as 1250? It is for the very good reason that I possess no adequate specimen in the art of the earlier century. No private collector does. [They] are so few that they can almost be counted on a man's fingers'.
  - 36 See [Table 1](#) here.
  - 37 When Irwin acquired the Golden Gospels, the manuscript was presented as a ninth-century Frankish specimen which had been associated with the Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne (d. 814); other theories regarding its historical provenance included an early English origin and ownership by archbishop Wilfrid of York (d. 709). On this debate, see Dias, op. cit. (note 5). For a discussion of the relationship between manuscript prices and antiquity in the early twentieth-century book trade, see A. Rais, 'Valuing rare books in 1920s Germany: prices in Jacques Rosenthal's Bibliotheca Medii Aevi Manuscripta', in *The Economics of the Manuscript and Rare Book Trade, c. 1890–1939*, eds. F. Botana and L. Cleaver (Leeds, 2024), pp. 21–40.
  - 38 On the reception of books of hours and their place on the art market, see C. de Hamel, 'Books of hours and the art market from the seventeenth century to the present day', in *Books of Hours Reconsidered*, eds. S. Hindman and J. Marrow (London, 2013), pp. 41–50.
  - 39 For partial digital images of the manuscripts, see <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/76893> and <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/76886> (accessed 16 May 2025); *Catalogue of the Library*, op. cit. (note 8), cat. no. 2301, p. 372, and cat. no. 1369, p. 217, respectively.
  - 40 *Catalogue of the Library*, op. cit. (note 8), cat. no. 1369, p. 217.
  - 41 Gwara, op. cit. (note 2), p. 3.
  - 42 MLM, MS M. 5. The attribution of the manuscript's ownership to the Abbot of Tongerlo was based on the representation of the abbot's coat of arms on folio 1. For a digital facsimile of the manuscript, see <https://www.themorgan.org/manuscript/76845> (accessed 16 May 2025).
  - 43 Concerning Allan Ebbs, see W. L. Andrews, *The Old Booksellers of New York, and other Papers* (New York, 1895), p. 45.
  - 44 *A Catalogue of the Books, Autographs, Engravings, and Miscellaneous Articles, Belonging to the Estate of the late John Allan* (New York, 1864), cat. no. 2521, p. 199, available online at <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofbooksoobang/> (accessed 16 May 2025). On Allan's collecting activity, see Gwara, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 6–7.
  - 45 Book list addressed to Ellis & White, 5 September 1881, IHC.
  - 46 Letter from Bernard Quaritch to Theodore Irwin, 15 September 1878, IHC.
  - 47 Letter from Bernard Quaritch to Theodore Irwin, 17 February 1881, IHC.
  - 48 This book list further underlines Irwin's interest in religious manuscripts and in bibliographical studies. Of the nine manuscripts listed, six are liturgical and exegetical works; the list also includes two nineteenth-century copies of H. N. Humphreys, *The Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages*, and J. B. Silvestre, *Universal Palaeography*; list of books selected from Bernard Quaritch's catalogues, IHC.
  - 49 Regarding Alfred Quaritch's visit to North America, see Morris, op. cit. (note 18); R. A. Linenthal, "'The collectors are far more particular than you think': selling manuscripts to America", *Manuscripta* 51 no. 1 (2007), pp. 131–42.
  - 50 The sale of the manuscript was realized only in May 1890, when Alfred Quaritch was already in Philadelphia, on the last stretch of his North American trip. On the sales history of the Golden Gospels see Dias, op. cit. (note 5). A letter of commiseration from Theodore Irwin Jr. to Quaritch Ltd, following the news of the death of Bernard Alfred Quaritch in 1913, offers a lively description of the book dealer's visit to Oswego through the eyes of the collector's son. It describes how young Alfred travelled to Oswego with several rare books in a 'big Gladstone

- bag', including the Golden Gospels. The letter also testifies to an in-person visit from the younger Irwin to the firm's headquarters in 15 Piccadilly, London. The date of this transatlantic trip is not mentioned, so it is impossible to ascertain whether he travelled alone or with his father. See letter from Theodore Irwin Jr. to Bernard Quaritch Ltd, 6 September 1913, in 'Volume of letters of commiseration on the death of Bernard Alfred Quaritch', BQA.
- 51 Letter from Bernard Quaritch to Theodore Irwin, 12 June 1891, IHC.
  - 52 Letters from Samuel Berger to Theodore Irwin, 31 October 1891 and 15 December 1891, IHC. For Berger's study see *Histoire de la Vulgate pendant les premiers siècles du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1893).
  - 53 Letter from Samuel Berger to Theodore Irwin, 31 October 1891, IHC.
  - 54 Gwara, op. cit. (note 31), pp. 263–5.
  - 55 As reported, for instance, in 'The late Theodore Irwin', *NYT*, 3 January 1903.
  - 56 For digital facsimiles and curatorial descriptions, see <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/76920> and <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/Black-Hours> respectively (accessed 16 May 2025).
  - 57 Digital facsimiles in respective order: MLM, MS M. 133, <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/berry-apocalypse/thumbs>; MLM, MS M. 26, <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/76884>; MLM, MS M. 30, <https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/thumbs/76885> (accessed 16 May 2025). There is currently no digital facsimile for MLM, MS M. 23.
  - 58 'Sales inventory', IHC, p. 5.
  - 59 There is no reference to a Shakespeare first folio in this document, suggesting that Irwin managed to secure only a copy of a second folio (1632), two copies of the third folio (1663–4) and a copy of the fourth (1685). However, the Shakespeare Census from the Penn Libraries, University of Pennsylvania, lists Irwin as the owner of eleven Shakespeare quartos, and indeed of a copy of the first folio, which was acquired by Morgan and subsequently sold to the Konan Women's Library and Museum. Why this item is absent from the list of Shakespearana in the sales inventory is unknown, and further investigation of its provenance history is required. For the Shakespeare Census, see [https://shakespearecensus.org/search/?field=provenance\\_name&value=irwin+theodore#se](https://shakespearecensus.org/search/?field=provenance_name&value=irwin+theodore#se) arch (accessed 16 May 2025). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this important reference.
  - 60 On the broader market trends, see Botana and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 37).
  - 61 See the invoice from J. W. Boughton, 16 December 1878, and the 'Sales inventory', both IHC.
  - 62 'Theodore Irwin's library sold', *Publishers Weekly*, 31 March 1900.
  - 63 Bowden, op. cit. (note 9), p. 69.
  - 64 Letter from Bernard Quaritch to Theodore Irwin, 12 June 1891, IHC. Regarding the purchase of the Gutenberg Bible, see <https://www.themorgan.org/collections/works/gutenberg/provenance> (accessed 16 May 2025).
  - 65 Gwara, op. cit. (note 2), p. 9.
  - 66 On the stark differences between auctions in London and North America, and the glamour of the latter, see Magnusson and Cleaver, op. cit. (note 3), p. 9.
  - 67 See note 50. Other salient reference works in the library catalogue included, for instance, items 2561 and 2563, respectively H. Shaw, *Hand-Book of Mediaeval Alphabets and Devices: Being a Selection of Twenty Plates of Alphabets, and Seventeen Plates of Original Specimens of Labels, Monograms, Heraldic Devices, etc., not heretofore Figured. . . Thirty Seven Coloured Plates* (London, 1853), and *A Handbook of the Art of Illumination, as Practised during the Middle Ages: With a Description of the Metals, Pigments, and Processes Employed by the Artists at Different Periods* (London, 1866). Irwin also acquired interesting facsimile editions of medieval works, including, for instance, item 24, which was an early nineteenth-century edition described as *Almanac for the Year 1386: Transcribed Verbatim from the Original Antique Illuminated Manuscript in the Black Letter, Containing many Curious Particulars Illustrative of the Astronomy Astrology, Chronology, History, Religious Tenets, and Theory and Practice of Medicine of that Age. Plates* (Hackney, printed for the proprietor, by C. Stower, 1812).
  - 68 A case that illustrates the risks of the transatlantic book trade clearly is that of Almon Griswold's Shakespeare first folio, which was lost at sea when the ship transporting it to New York in 1854 sank; D. Magnusson and L. Cleaver, 'The First Folio and the transatlantic trade in early drama, c.1900–1929', *Journal of the History of Collections* 36 (2024), pp. 289–300, p. 291.
  - 69 'American libraries', op. cit. (note 20).