

# To Throw Some Light on The Origin of Species

JONATHAN SHIPLEY and PETER MITHAM investigate  
Kelly Houle's illuminated manuscript project.

A BOOK WAS SHELVED in the stalls of London on November 24, 1859. It was a Thursday. It sold for 15 shillings. One thousand two hundred and fifty copies were printed, 500 of them sent directly to Charles Mudie's Lending Library for wider distribution (as much as could be had, anyway, with so few copies). The book was written by an English naturalist—Charles Darwin. The book shook the foundations of religious and scientific inquiry. His theory, with compelling evidence for evolution, reshaped the world. The book was *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

The book, with its scintillating theories, took on a life of its own. A second edition was published the following January, a third edition in 1861, a fourth in 1866, and a fifth in February 1869. Now there are countless editions in languages that span the globe. It is not just a book of science. It's a book of the world, for the world.

It is also a book for Kelly Houle, an Arizona book artist with a lifetime's interest in science and art. Based northeast of Phoenix on the edge of the Tonto National Forest, Houle established her own imprint, Books of Kell's Press, in 2008. Having spent a decade teaching and tutoring students, she wanted to pursue the book arts more seriously than she had in the past.

Working as a science teacher and doing lectures at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona, she had been incorporating her own artwork into her classes. This led to serious study of landscape and wildlife painting. She studied bookbinding. She took to letterpress. She got an MFA in creative writing. With her press, she wanted to bring

attention to books she felt were languishing in obscurity or deserved special treatment.

Her first productions were miniature books, often with an anamorphic twist. Anamorphic artworks incorporate distorted images that can only be seen for what they are from a specific angle or through the use of mirrors or special lenses. *Portrait of Bashō* (2008), for example, incorporates a portrait of the Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō in a banana plant, blending Houle's literary subject with her love of art—in particular, botanical art.

Houle won an award from the Miniature Book Society for an edition of Jorge Luis Borges, *Poem of the Gifts* (2008), but she began to wonder whether she could be just as successful focusing on botanical art and, by concentrating on it, lavish new meaning on her texts. The idea of calligraphy and illuminated manuscripts—which she discovered in Grade 5—was also surfacing in her mind. And then, in 2009, the attention paid to the sesquicentennial of *The Origin of Species* brought everything together for her.



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*Kelly Houle's Portrait of Bashō.*



Sheets of the illuminated edition of *The Origin of Species* are as large as the undertaking itself—22 × 30 inches.

“I started to think about the book projects I could do that would merge science and art,” she says. Darwin centennial events were going on at the same time, which suggested Darwin’s *Origin of Species*.

“I had this convergence of thinking about *The Origin of Species* and working in the genre of botanical art,” she says. “If you’re going to choose a science book to illuminate with biological material, botanical art, there seemed to be no other choice. . . . Once I hit on that idea, it just didn’t let go.”

And the idea is an ambitious one. The volume, by definition, will be a manuscript, illustrated with Houle’s botanical prints.

Ornamentation is *de rigueur* in works of this sort, and the quality of the materials will match the skill required to produce the volume:

Fabriano Artistic paper made in Italy; Winsor & Newton watercolours and gouache; 23k gold foil, shell gold and interference watercolours (a special paint containing small flecks of mica to make it iridescent). Each sheet will be 22 by 30 inches, and the manuscript will be housed in a large, decorated handmade clamshell box.

“I will design the entire book before I pen a single page, and I will complete the writing on each page before adding the illuminations,” she says. “I look forward to spending the next five to 10 years creating a beautiful book in celebration of



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*Cards with illuminated illustrations of beetles were part of the appreciation contributors to Houle's fundraising campaign received.*

nature and human endeavour." She estimates the total cost will be between \$500,000 and \$700,000.

In addition to the main volume, Houle plans to produce 12 full-size reproductions of her work featuring hand-embellished giclée prints. Subscribers will receive 20 to 40 pages as each chapter completes, or 15 instalments delivering the book's 14 chapters, prefatory material and glossary. Houle admits, however, that she has never undertaken an illuminated manuscript before. Despite learning calligraphy in Grade 5—well enough to prepare certificates at her school—she has never tackled anything quite as long as a monograph.

The audience for her work has also been small; while her miniature books were issued in editions of 30 to 300, she candidly admits that sales of her art—by which she means her botanical prints—were limited until she began raising funds for *The Origin of Species*. Using the fundraising platform Kickstarter, Houle raised \$15,015 (after fees, and

before taxes) from 172 supporters. Supporters received art cards and prints celebrating Darwin's work and her own, and the orders have been keeping her busy through the winter. She's also working to have the title page and other elements

ready by summer, but fulfilling orders from the fundraising campaign has delayed her progress.

Bearing this in mind, she is re-evaluating the project's schedule. The first three chapters are tentatively set for completion in 2014, a few months later than planned, while completion of the entire work will likely be the early 2020s, rather than 2019 as originally hoped. Now 43, she'll be well into her 50s by the time the project completes.

While critical attention to the project is slow in coming, one

group enthusiastic in its support of Houle's work are the stalwart advocates of evolution. America may be a melting pot, but the question of human origins nevertheless inspires fierce debate. Houle, ironically, finds herself

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*"Freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds, which follow[s] from the advance of science."*

—CHARLES DARWIN

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Houle (left) expects to work long hours in her studio (right) producing the illuminated manuscript edition of *The Origin of Species* over the coming decade.

caught in the crossfire. Although the arts may well be called areligious, Houle often finds herself encountering a charge that she's making *The Origin of Species* into a sacred text.

"Some people say it's not a good idea," she said. "They see it as making *The Origin of Species* into a Bible, which it isn't. But there's always that criticism that scientists have their

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*"When on board H.M.S. 'Beagle,' as naturalist, I was struck with certain facts in the distribution of South America, and in the geologic relations of the present to the past inhabitants of that continent. These facts seemed to me to throw some light on the origin of species—that mystery of mysteries, as it has been called by one of our great philosophers."*

— CHARLES DARWIN

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Bible, and that illuminating a manuscript would only reinforce that perception."

She herself disagrees, noting that monasteries illuminated manuscripts that were neither scripture nor liturgical works: bestiaries and herbaria, for example, as well as early works of science. "There's a history of illuminating secular manuscripts that people probably don't know about," she says. "But there *are* illuminated science books and it seems to be the direction, historically, that these books were going."

This is the foundation on which she is building—selecting, if you will—as she marries her natural strengths in a work of art that applies illuminated illustration and calligraphy to a contemporary text fundamental to our understanding of the world.

"This seems like the logical next generation," she says. "As our science understanding improves, this would be the next kind of book you would want to celebrate."

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