



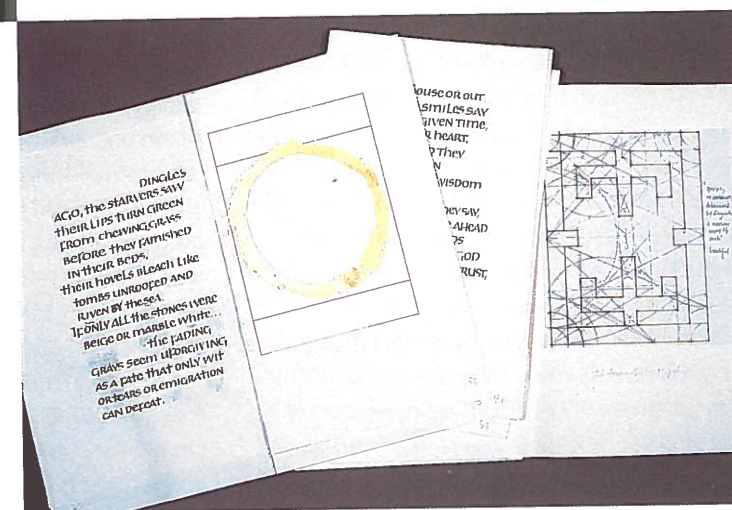
TAKING TIME, TURNING The PAGE: The CREATION OF A NANCY LEAVITT BOOK

by Donna Gold

Nancy Ruth Leavitt sits in her studio in northern Maine, a palette dotted with shades of green beside her, the quiet Stillwater River ahead. Gazing over her garden to the meandering river beyond, Leavitt waits. In front of her are the elements of a book. She has chosen the paper, a pale green handmade muslin, determined size and colors and created an alphabet for the lettering. The text, the heart of the book, has also been decided. It is to be the poem, "The Real Reason For Going Is Not Just To Get There" by Pennsylvania poet laureate Sam Hazo from his 1996 volume, *The Holy Surprise of Right Now*.

But though her book has been gestating for three years, Leavitt has yet to work out the elements that will complete it. What will connect the many experiences that brought her to this poem? The link could be internal or external; expressed through calligraphy, design or imagery, but it must be made. "What will make them turn the page?" Leavitt asks herself, always. Viewing books as if they were architectural spaces, she knows that design can stop the reader cold, much like a column stuck in a narrow hallway. But her books, brilliant with

color and surprising in conception, flow from page to page, enticing the reader not only to the end, but back again to the beginning. Read, touched, marveled over, these books are years in the making: a synthesis of Leavitt's deep interest in the world at large and intense attention to the smallest detail of the page.



Page spreads from model book

For nearly 20 years, Leavitt has been creating unique and limited run volumes that have been placed in such collections as Harvard's Houghton Library, London's Victoria and Albert Museum and Tate Gallery, The Brooklyn Museum of Art and the Rare Book Collection of Dartmouth University. As with many of those books, this volume-to-be emerged from a journey. Three years ago, she and husband David Yarborough took a trip to Ireland for their 25th wedding anniversary. Leavitt returned with hundreds of slides and a journal filled with sketches of rocks, houses and churches, and even a pronunciation guide

that she was teased for trying to steal Stonehenge. Some rocks looked like she scooped them off a Maine beach 30 miles from her home; others were wholly different, like the luminescent green "mermaid tears" said to be shed by a mermaid whose lover, a monk, refused to abandon the Church for her.

Soon, Leavitt was painting tiny sketches of rocks in her journals and oversized portraits of them on her walls. Meanwhile, she found herself drawn to early illuminated manuscripts. She noticed that the books held her interest even though she couldn't read them. As the rocks evolved into illustrations for her

Scottish books, she came to understand – in desperation, she says – that the text would be her own marks: lettering looking like an ancient, untranslatable alphabet (shown in photo of Nancy, page 29). The page design in this "Book of Rocks" follows that of the illuminated books she pored over in Scotland and Ireland. An earlier book in this series earned her first

prize in the 1999 "Writing Beyond Words" exhibition.

It was at the 1999 calligraphy conference that Leavitt heard the Hazo poem she is now working with. "He recited it from memory," she recalls. "I was stunned. It was so beautiful. We had just been to Ireland, so it struck a deep chord in me." *Killarney's maps are for the unredeemed*, Hazo begins. He proceeds to speak of the rugged Irish land, the music of its names, the struggle of its people, the mass emigrations: *The starvers saw their lips / turn green from chewing grass*, then ponders their mysterious faith: *I fish the air / for what it is that makes / the Irish Irish*.

To transform these words into a book, Leavitt fishes not only air, but water, land, memory and her own spirit. She questions the sources of her own deep connection to Ireland's stones and structures, weaving her inner experience to the exterior journey and that journey to the text. She's seeking not to illustrate the poem, for it stands on its own, but a parallel encounter. Not knowing what that will be, she experiments with making the paper look like stone, then sits back for a moment in her studio to look through an open archway into her living room, with its inviting touches of pinks and greens. Pointing to her chest and head, she says, "As I get older, I'm discovering that the last frontier we have is in here – in heart and mind.

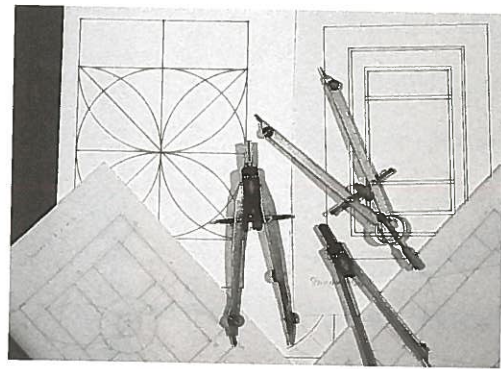
I want to use it while I still can."

She laughs – something this committed, serious artist does heartily and readily. Turning to Hazo's line, *And stone / and stone and stone*, she asks, "How do you do that without going overboard?"

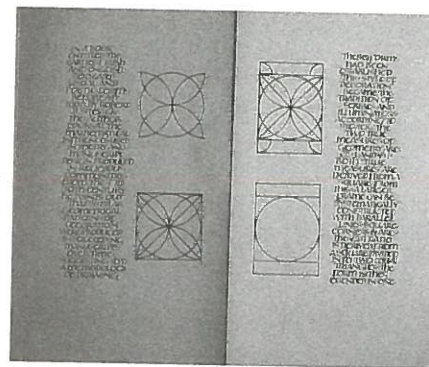
Soon, she dismisses the stone-paper approach and returns to the poem. She begins to letter the lines in this alphabet based on Irish half uncial, also known as insular majuscule, from the Lindesfarne gospels. This is her alphabet, however; not a reproduction. "I didn't live in that time," she says. As she letters, she sees she has sized the book wrong. The letters are large, slowing the eye. That's okay, she wants the reading to be leisurely. But the poem is contemplative, so Leavitt decides to add visual room to the page, expanding it to 11.5 x 7 (29 x 18 cm). Other aspects may change too, she knows, so she puts the book aside to work on a commissioned piece. But she hasn't entirely left this one.

At night she returns to her slides, images of the oratory at Gallarus with its corbeled stone roof built like an upside-down hull, and Skellig Michael, an ancient stone monastery that caps an island rock off Ireland. "What we saw was so incredibly magical. I was overwhelmed," Leavitt says. One rainy day, two children appeared in the mist, walking with a lamb, a donkey, and a dog perched on the donkey's shoulders. The image became a poem. Rereading it now, she knows that this, too, will become a book, perhaps combined with some ancient Irish texts. But that idea is just at the seedling stage. "I won't just go and get one poem," she explains. "When I'm collecting data, I'm paying attention

"In this book, I have patterned my illustrations from pages found in the St. Cuthbert Gospel, the Echternach Gospels, the Book of Durrow, and the Soiscél Molaise book shrine. This method of drawing carpet pages may seem contrived and pedantic to some. However, once you embark on one of these geometrical constructs, you begin to understand the possibilities in this design methodology. With basic concepts and a few simple tools, one can create interesting and complex forms. The proportions established from the $\sqrt{2}:1$ and $\phi:1$ ratios reveal an underlying mystery that is wondrous to work and beautiful to behold."



Geometrical constructs studies and tools



From the finished book

to the language. "I drew a lot of symbols and stones everywhere," she says, reviewing the notebook she carried with her, which is hand bound in simple linen. But notes are not a book and so Leavitt still takes time: "Time to read, think, draw, ruminate, absorb the information and let it incubate," she explains. Eventually, she knows, an idea will push forward. Inevitably it will link vision, rhythm, nature, the intimacy of touch and thought. "This is how I work," she says simply. "I stay connected." But staying connected is not simple. From her trip to Scotland five years ago, Leavitt returned with 487 slides, numerous sketchbooks and so many rocks

to what inspires me, I keep looking, keep notebooks. When I start working with the donkey piece more, I'll probably find out something about donkeys." She loves the research phase. When she was immersed in her rock books, she hired a geologist to help her identify the stones she had collected.

Research is integral to Leavitt, who was raised in Maine's northernmost county, the state's potato basket. "Like many girls growing up in Maine, I learned how to do things with my hands: knit, crochet, cook, garden," she says. In high school, she worked in a pharmacy. On slow days, the elderly pharmacist, trained to hand letter

prescriptions, showed her how to letter. Later, she studied art, but not before she received a B.S. in biology with a focus on entomology. Accuracy is essential to Leavitt. But so is that unknown synthesis that is art.

Waiting still, Leavitt heads to a nearby church where she and a baritone meet regularly to sing. As she listens to her friend, she lies on a bench, eyes closed, pondering what has stalled her. Suddenly, she sees a parallel between the early Irish illuminated manuscripts she's been so fascinated by and the poem's precise,

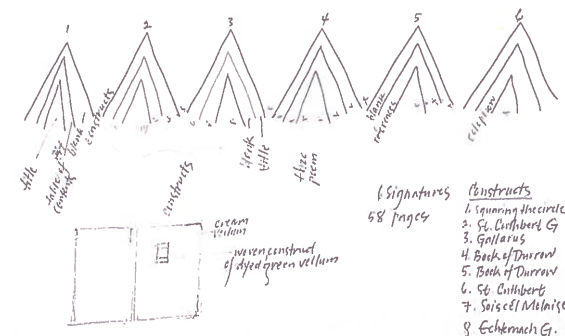
she says. As if echoing the poem's title, "The Real Reason For Going Is Not To Get There," Leavitt adds, "It's important to finish, and I tell my students that, but the wondrous part is the process."

One week later, the book is no longer the one poem, but parallel meditations on land, life and faith, titled "Parallel Constructs." Leavitt's table is now covered with resource books on early Irish manuscripts, detailing how the maze-like crosses and inner textual structures are dictated by fundamental geometric constructs. Having been fascinated with these structures for years, having alluded to them in her stone books, she now plunges deep into their mathematical creation. Still, she's unsure of the presentation. Should some of the pages reveal the underlying



Color and paper trials

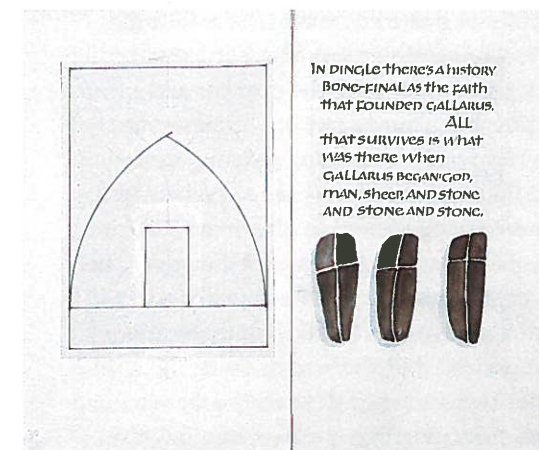
formal elements. This book, she realizes, needs to echo the ancient texts of the land. She hurries home to render Gallarus, its roof like an upside-down boat. She then diagrams the book, first creating pencil sketches of the pages, then full-scale models of the signatures, working them over and over until she has them right. "I need to know exactly what goes on which page," she explains. This part, she loves. "Creating a book is like planning a party. The planning is fun – there are all the possibilities, the colors, the pages. I'm coming up with so much – it's so freeing,"



Schema for order of binding

geometric grids used to design the book? Should she add calligraphic comments? In the end, she decides to do both: add something of their mathematical construction and some comments, letting the drawings in the text area also evolve from the geometry into large, bold images in a limited palette of gold, green and grey.

Leavitt estimates that her books take a year to make. That's a year of sifting, researching, thinking and waking up at midnight with new thoughts. Once she finally gathers all her ideas and makes her models, the final lettering, painting and



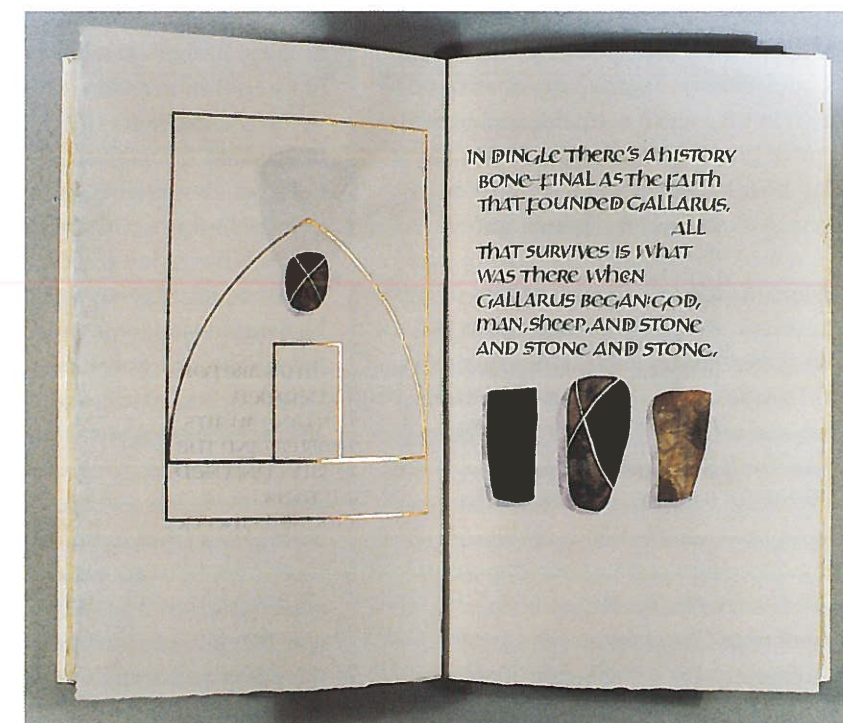
Mock-up for pages 30 & 31

binding may only take two weeks of straightforward attention: "lines lined up, pages lined up, colors mixed, not too much coffee or tea to make me jittery," she says. It's the easy part, but even so, Leavitt needs to be constantly aware of the whole, the architecture and all its details.

And sometimes she has to backtrack. "No matter how well I have planned it out, something happens," she observes. Something – some detail – doesn't work. Even now, she's rethinking the paper. The poem may need a warmer page, with no hint of green. Something else may come up, too, causing her to rework an idea. It's not easy to accept, nor is the need always obvious. "On these really big books, I may be unsure, but I have to trust," she says. "Those intuitive thoughts are usually right."

Returning to Hazo's poem, she reads: *The hidden land awaits the stumblers / who find their destinations as they go.* "Boy, that describes me," she says, tossing her head in affirmation. Though it seems wrong to call Leavitt's elegant endeavors as "stumbleings," there is no straight line to art. Only by waiting, trusting, staying connected, does Leavitt find the hidden land that is her work.

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Pages 30 & 31 of completed book