Exquisite Miniature Bookbindings Showcase Shakespeare on a Different Scale

“THE POET OF THEM ALL”: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND MINIATURE DESIGNER BINDINGS FROM THE COLLECTION OF NEALE AND MARGARET ALBERT
June 16 – August 21, 2016

NEW HAVEN – In June 2016, the Yale Center for British Art will present “The Poet of Them All”: William Shakespeare and Miniature Designer Bindings from the Collection of Neale and Margaret Albert, an exhibition that will explore the works of William Shakespeare from a fresh perspective, placing the literary giant within a tradition of fine craftsmanship on a completely different scale. Nearly one hundred exquisitely bound miniature editions of plays, sonnets, and books inspired by Shakespeare—each measuring three inches high or less and selected from the singular collection of Neale and Margaret Albert—will be on display in the Center’s newly restored and reconfigured galleries. The exhibition includes miniature editions of Shakespeare’s works published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by William Pickering, Knickerbocker Press, and others, all bound with artistic designer bindings commissioned by Neale Albert (Yale JD 1961) during the past decade. Focusing on designer bookbinding, an aspect of the book arts too often overlooked, this exhibition will offer a unique opportunity for visitors to examine these works closely. All of the books included in the exhibition are a promised gift to the Center from Neale and Margaret Albert.

The title “The Poet of Them All” is taken from a line in the song “Brush Up Your Shakespeare,” from Cole Porter’s lively 1948 musical Kiss Me, Kate. At the heart of the Alberts’ collection, and of this exhibition, are thirty-nine copies of a miniature book illustrating the lyrics and music to that song, published by Neale Albert at his Piccolo Press in 2009. Designed by Leonard Seastone, with drawings by Seymour Chwast, every copy has a unique artistic binding. For these bindings, as well as the others on display, Albert commissioned some of the most talented designer bookbinders working today in the United Kingdom, the United States, and throughout the world. As in all his commissions, Albert asked every artist to craft their own interpretation, offering no guidelines and imposing no restrictions. He wrote to one artist, slightly tongue-in-cheek: “My only instructions are to make this the finest binding you have ever done. How is that for pressure?” Every artist, whether working in leather, paper, cloth, wood, or metal, rose to the occasion.
Having served two terms as president of the international Miniature Book Society, Neale Albert actively continues to support designer binders. In 2014 he was elected an honorary fellow of Designer Bookbinders, the principal society in Great Britain devoted to artistic bookbinding. “I wish there were more Neale Alberts in the world,” says British bookbinder Susan Allix. “It is a pleasure to know someone who values and trusts a creative ability to the extent that he can stand back and allow a binding to happen.”

The exhibition will be augmented by a number of other works from the Alberts’ collections, with unique pieces by the London bespoke furniture designer Tim Gosling, including a scale model of the Globe Theatre and miniature bookcases.

The collection of miniature books on display illuminates the wide array of artistic responses that Shakespeare’s plays and poems have continued to inspire in the four hundred years since he wrote them, and provides an overview of a vibrant branch of twenty-first-century practice in the book arts. The exhibition and the accompanying publication explore these books in depth. They also provide a glimpse into the heart and mind of a true collector, one who does not merely accumulate things for their own sake but actively engages in the process of creating a work of art.

CREDITS AND PUBLICATION
“The Poet of Them All”: William Shakespeare and Miniature Designer Bindings from the Collection of Neale and Margaret Albert has been curated by Elisabeth Fairman, Chief Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at the Yale Center for British Art. A fully illustrated publication, edited by Fairman and designed by Miko McGinty, and published by the Center in association with the Yale University Press, will accompany the exhibition. The book will feature an essay by the book historian and designer binder James Reid-Cunningham, written from his perspective as a practitioner as well as a historian of contemporary book arts. The Wendy’s Company has generously supported the production of the publication.

ADDITIONAL VENUE
The Grolier Club in New York City will exhibit a version of the display in spring 2016, entitled “Brush Up Your Shakespeare”: Miniature Designer Bindings from the Collection of Neale and Margaret Albert.

OPENING LECTURE, June 15, 2016
The opening lecture will be delivered by James Reid-Cunningham, who will offer insights on the Alberts’ collection gleaned from a thirty-year career as a designer binder, conservator, and book historian. Reid-Cunningham teaches, lectures, and writes about the history of bookbinding while serving as the proprietor of Hematite Press and Wages of Fear, small presses specializing in limited editions and designer bindings.
YALE CENTER FOR BRITISH ART

The Yale Center for British Art houses the largest collection of British Art outside the United Kingdom. Presented to the university by Paul Mellon (Yale College, Class of 1929), the collection of paintings, sculpture, drawings, prints, rare books, and manuscripts reflects the development of British art and culture from the Elizabethan period onward. Visit us online at britishart.yale.edu.

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