

Exhibition

Tolkien, Journey To Middle-earth

BnF I François-Mitterrand, Galleries 1 and 2
22 October 2019 - 16 February 2020

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” When J.R.R. Tolkien, a brilliant Oxford professor, published *The Hobbit* in 1937, he was far from imagining that his stories would lead to his becoming one of the most important literary figures of the 20th century. Revealing both the man himself and his works, the exhibition at the Bibliothèque nationale de France - the largest ever organised on the topic - will include close to 300 exceptional pieces spread out over 1 000 sq.m. In this exhibition, designed as a journey to Middle-earth, the public will enter the imaginary world created by the *Lord of the Rings* author and will discover its landscapes, its peoples and their languages, all of which were invented by the man who was a professor of medieval languages and literature at Oxford. For the first time in France, many original manuscripts and drawings by J. R. R. Tolkien will be on display. This is the opportunity to discover or to rediscover both the famous and lesser-known literary works that recount the story of Middle-earth. In parallel, a selection of exceptional pieces, most of which are from the BnF’s collections, will provide a context for this literary and artistic creation.

Writer, philologist and academic, J.R.R. Tolkien has built through his many stories what appears to be a modern form of “mythology”, with its own heroes, peoples, geography, architecture, art and history. In this manner, Tolkien sought a way of speaking about the real world, by releasing himself from the framework of our usual perceptions.

Journey to Middle-earth

Organised in collaboration with the Tolkien Estate and the Tolkien family and thanks to the exceptional participation of the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford and of the Raynor Memorial Libraries - Marquette University (Milwaukee, United States), the BnF exhibition invites you on a journey to the heart of Tolkien’s imaginary geography. The first part of the journey is divided into chapters which serve as stopovers through Middle-earth, from the Shire to Mordor, and further still, to Valinor. Each place, each territory offers an opportunity to address the underlying literary, cultural and linguistic details behind Tolkien’s work.

Tolkien’s original manuscripts and drawings - mostly on-loan from the Bodleian Libraries and the Raynor Memorial Libraries - Marquette University - are the very aim of this journey. Often in careful calligraphy, at times decorated with sketches, outlines and drawings, these manuscripts are artworks in their own right. Combined with the maps drawn by the author and his son, Christopher Tolkien, and with his many watercolours, they allow visitors to understand how Tolkien created the complex universe that is Middle-earth. The public will therefore be able to read famous passages from *The Hobbit* and from *The Lord of the Rings*, poems in Elvish languages, admire the tree of invented languages... The drawings provide a view of how Tolkien himself saw his world, the landscapes, the cities and the towers.

To highlight the unique nature and originality of Tolkien’s work, a selection of pieces provides a context for this literary and artistic creation. Norse tales and medieval manuscripts remind visitors of the stories that were dear to J.R.R. Tolkien, and to which he devoted much of his life as a student and academic. Other documents, including a rare edition of *Beowulf* illustrated by William Morris, provide an understanding of the author’s English

roots. Engravings, paintings, illustrations, objects and weapons reflect the “mental pictures” that continental readers have of Tolkien’s work.

These last pieces are all from the BnF’s most precious collections (Rare Books Reserve, Manuscripts Department, Department of Coins, Medals and Antiques, etc.) or from prestigious institutions such as the Musée de l’Armée, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, the Petit Palais, the Bibliothèque Nordique or the Musée d’Orsay. In addition, four of the tapestries recently woven by the Cité Internationale de la Tapisserie in Aubusson and based on Tolkien’s watercolours will be on display for the first time in Paris (*Bilbo comes to the Huts of the Raft-elves, Rivendell, Halls of Manwë - Taniquetil et Mithrim*).

Return to Oxford

Beyond his literary work, J.R.R. Tolkien himself is inseparable from an iconic place where he spent most of his life: Oxford. From the beginning of his studies in 1911 to his death in 1973, it was chiefly in this city that he both lived and worked. He was not only a writer but also an internationally-renowned specialist on the topic of medieval English and Norse literature. He was responsible for helping many readers discover treasures such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* among other medieval works which will be on display. Paradoxically, due to the success of *The Hobbit* in 1937, Tolkien was initially seen as a children’s author. The public will discover this aspect of his work thanks to the beautiful illustrations from works such as *Roverandom, Letters from Father Christmas* and *Mr. Bliss*, alongside watercolours from *The Hobbit*. However, by also presenting poems, watercolours, working notes and stories by the author which are sometimes not as well known to the public, this “Return to Oxford” unveils the colossal magnitude of Tolkien’s creation, and repositions *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* in a much broader “mythology”. This fictional universe, which is both unique and universal, has been acclaimed since the mid-20th century on all continents and it still holds a special place in the imagination of a wide audience.

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Galleries 1 & 2

BnF | François-Mitterrand

Quai François-Mauriac, Paris XIII^e

From Tuesday to Sunday 10am - 7pm. Thursday until 9pm

Closed Monday and bank holidays

Full price: €11 - Reduced price: €9 - Free entrance for the Pass BnF Lecture/Culture (€15 / year) and Research. Booking and ticketing on line from September 16th on bnf.fr, fnac.com (tel : +33 0892 684 694 - 0,34 euros TTC / min) and on site.


Curatorship

Vincent Ferré, Professor of comparative literature at Université Paris Est-Créteil

Frédéric Manfrin, chief curator in the Philosophy, History and Human Sciences Department, BnF

Associated curators : Élodie Bertrand et Émilie Fissier, BnF

In partnership with the Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford and with the support of the Raynor Memorial Libraries - Marquette University, the Tolkien Estate and the Tolkien family

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In partnership with Le Monde, Télérama, Connaissance des Arts, France Télévisions and France Culture

A cultural programme (conferences, seminars, events, etc.) relating to the exhibition will be offered. The detailed programme will be provided in the press pack.

More information on bnf.fr
#expoTolkienBnF



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Private view

Monday October 21st, from 9.00 to 13.00

TV recordings, radio interviews on appointment.

Legend and credit

Tolkien smoking his pipe in his study at Merton Street, Billett Potter, 22 September 1972

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