

# Illustrated Manuscript of Confessions for the Deaf

Illustrated Manuscript Confessory for Deaf People  
c.1770-1790

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## Title Statement

Illustrated Manuscript of Confessions for the Deaf  
Illustrated Manuscript of Confessions for the Deaf MSS 16803

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## Publication Statement

**Publisher:** Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

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## Profile Description

**Creation:** This finding aid was produced using ArchivesSpace on 2026-03-05 17:44:34 +0000.

**Language Usage:** Description is written in: English, Latin script.

**Descriptive Rules:** Describing Archives: A Content Standard

## Descriptive Summary

### Unit ID

MSS 16803

### Unit ID

[Archival Resource Key](#)

### Unit ID

/repositories/3/resources/1570

### Unit Date

c.1770-1790

### Mixed Materials

1 (box)

### Language

Latin Dutch; Flemish

### source

W.S. Cotter Rare Books

### Extent

.03 Cubic Feet 1 folder (letter)

### Condition Description

Fair. The vellum cover has contracted over time and is rigid and difficult to close.

## Repository

Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library

# Administrative Information

## Conditions Governing Access

The collection is open for research use.

## Immediate Source of Acquisition

This collection was purchased from W. S. Cotter Rare Books from Daniela Kromp of Munich, who acquired the manuscript from Libraire-Katz-Moorthammers of Paris for the Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia Library on 6 April 2023.

## Preferred Citation

MSS 16803, Illustrated Manuscript of Confessions for the Deaf, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Library.

# Biographical / Historical

Throughout the days of the early church and into the Middle Ages, the Deaf and hearing impaired were thought doomed to Hell, since it was believed they could not receive the uttered Word of God and related sacraments, including confession, confirmation, and the Eucharist.

Around 1520, Martin Luther, although he showed controversial views on this subject, argued that the Deaf were also God's children. He said, "the physical defect of hearing was no barrier to the Word of God; nor was infancy any barrier. All were spiritually 'deaf' until God's Spirit spoke to them; but "to the Word of God nothing is deaf" if only the inward 'ears' are willing to hear." In 1571 an edict was issued, at the Council of Besancon, that allowed Deaf people access to the essential sacraments.

Even then, deeply rooted local beliefs backed by regional coutumiers still held sway, and sacramental equality for the Deaf was still elusive. Deaf people have faced discrimination and marginalization throughout much of human history. For many years, people viewed them as intellectually and socially inferior to their hearing counterparts, and subjected them to cruel and inhumane treatment.

St Paul's maxim that 'faith comes by hearing' was a constant refrain of preachers, particularly those who saw sermons as 'the ordinary means of salvation' and who worried about people who would not properly listen to sermons, whether through wilfulness, ignorance or 'dullness' of spirit. There was a popular belief in early modern Europe that Paul's maxim effectively damned deaf people. As one contemporary put it: 'If faith comes by hearing ... there can be no saving knowledge' for deaf people, and 'the consequence is undeniable, since no man can be saved without faith'.

As a result, deafness and hearing loss were often presented as the most crippling of physical impairments. Preaching in Elizabethan England, Henry Smith argued that while blindness or muteness was a divine punishment, deafness came from the devil. These assumptions have fed into histories of deafness, with one historian arguing that Paul's maxim was 'disastrous' for deaf people in pre-modern Europe.

The seventeenth-century Dutch writer Anton Deusing attacked Paul's assertion that 'faith comes by hearing', writing that 'this is indeed a very hard saying that dismays the soul ... [since] those that are born deaf are no more guilty of neglecting their salvation than infants'.

Deusing's views were shared by many, prompting clergy from different confessions across Europe to explore how to accommodate prelingually deaf people in collective worship. The question of how deaf people could be saved was, however, a particularly urgent problem in Reformed Churches, which put sermons at the heart of worship, including the Church of England. As a result, English preachers in the pulpit used standardized rhetorical gestures of the hands, body and sometimes face, to make their sermons more accessible and more effective. Not only did this help people with hearing loss to follow the sermon; it also promoted manual sign language as an articulate form of communication.

In the 1670's the Franciscan divine Christopher Leutbrewer designed a confessor book of 700 printed sins allowing a Deaf person to communicate their sin to a confessor.

Charles-Michel de L'Epee, and Henri Daniel Guyot (founders of the earliest schools for Deaf children) advocated for the hearing impaired and inspired a new type of biblio-confessor which comprised of narrative illustrations of sins. These were always manuscripts and no printed exemplars have survived.

Today, Deaf culture is a vibrant and diverse community that spans the globe. Deaf people have their own unique language, customs, and traditions, and are proud of their identity and heritage. From Deaf artists and musicians to Deaf athletes and entrepreneurs, Deaf individuals continue to make important contributions to society and to shape the world around them.

Despite these gains, however, there is still much work to be done to fully recognize and honor the contributions of the Deaf community. Deaf History Month, which is celebrated every March, provides an important opportunity to raise awareness and educate the public about the history, culture, and achievements of the Deaf community.

Sources: Independent Living Institute website. Promoting the self-determination of people with disabilities Accessed 7/24/23 <https://www.independentliving.org/docs7/miles2005b.html>

Oates, Rosamund. "Speaking in Hands: Early Modern Preaching and Signed Languages for the Deaf." *Past and Present*. Oxford Academic. Volume 256, Issue 1, August 2022, Pages 49–85 Accessed 7/24/23 <https://academic.oup.com/past/article/256/1/49/6414569>

Community Services for the Deaf website. Accessed 7/24/23 <https://www.csd.org/stories/rich-heritage-of-deaf-people/>

## Content Description

This collection contains a single leather-bound illustrated manuscript for Deaf persons to confess their sins. They could identify their sins by the illustrations and ask to be absolved. Called a Confessory, it was made in Flanders or the Netherlands roughly between 1770 and 1790.

No title or author is present on the binding or internal board pages. The book is composed of ninety-two leaves, with ten leaves left blank. It appears to be a model book, with two sets of drawings made by different hands.

The first set contains thirty-six drawings featuring simple scenes, with a young man as the subject, completed in pen and ink, with pale washes of black and grey. Latin captions are underneath each image.

The second series has forty-six drawings, with a woman as the subject, in iron-gall ink and colored with gouache and watercolor. Most of the images have captions in Dutch.

These manuscript books were for the Deaf community. Sins represented in this book include gambling, drinking, "muttering" to one's parents, being distracted in church, petty theft, fighting, being late to service, missing confession, inappropriate libido, and wishing one's parents dead. Deaf students would have used this book to make and bind their own copies, most likely at a school for the Deaf in Flanders or the Netherlands.

The survival of manuscripts like this one is a testament to the devotional challenges faced by Deaf persons and the efforts to include them in the Church. It is valuable to have a manuscript that relates to Deaf persons as they have been marginalized throughout history.

## Related Materials

This collection is related ViU-2023-0078 *Emblemi sulla Dottrina Cristiana ad uso de' Sordo-Muti* [Emblems on Christian Doctrine for use by Deaf-Mutes]

## Keywords

Religious education

Church work with the deaf -- Catholic Church

Deaf culture

W.S. Cotter Rare Books