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An Illuminating Art: How Manuscripts were Decorated for Education and Edification

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The use of illustrations in illuminated manuscripts are a door into the art and culture of the Medieval era. There are key elements of illuminations that evolved through the time including the depth of detail, borders, and coloring. Many manuscripts were used in the churches or given as gifts among the wealthy. The status of the manuscripts were often distinguished by the illuminations, from the use of color and quality of the miniature, to the sketches and borders. The illuminations were used to teach people about morality and added symbolism in religious text. Borders, initials, and miniatures were all carefully crafted and made unique by the artists for manuscripts like in the 14th century manuscript, *Roman de Fauvel*. In the manuscript, the symbolism is clear through the personification of a horse. The character of Fauvel is depicted in a number of different illuminations where the character is sometimes depicted during his adventures, after, or as half-horse. They aid in telling the story in the manuscript and display the history of how literature has been illustrated and enjoyed throughout time.

Illuminated manuscripts are rarely identical. Each manuscript would have its own unique elements due to scribes' inability to perfectly match the writing, size, and organization of their predecessors, which resulted in differences in formatting. Scribes also had the freedom to make changes to the manuscript as they saw fit.¹ These can be changes in the music, layout, illuminations, or text size. Manuscripts were also made to suit the expectations of the purchaser.

The creation of illuminated manuscripts required careful planning. The layout was first drafted because it was critical to the cost of making the manuscript, as the materials were very expensive. The draft also took into account spacing between notes and text, the size of the text, and logistics such as page turns. The scribe then began to draft out margins with vertical lines, and marked text and stave placement with horizontal lines. Afterwards, he could arrange each size of script to take up a certain number of lines on the page. Next, their paper is collected into gatherings (four to six sheets which were folded and layered on top of each other) which will provide the spine for the later binding process. Small numbers were added throughout the pages as a guide on where to place artwork and letters, errors that need to be corrected, and the order of the pages.² Scribes would usually use color and gold leaf to draw filigree and other simple decorations, and illuminators would paint the more intricate designs. Filigree is the delicate patterns of curling vines, branches, and leaves used as a background or border for the page.

¹ Stanley Boorman, "Sources, MS", *Grove Music Online* (2001).

² *ibid.*

After the binding process, pages were trimmed to be uniform in size and placement, which resulted in some writing being cut away.³ The scribes would then collaborate with an illuminator and the illuminator would add their illustrations based on the guidelines provided.

The materials used to create the illuminations were crucial in distinguishing a grand manuscript from a routine manuscript.⁴ The paper was a great factor that could have decided the quality of the illuminations and the manuscripts. There are three main surface media the Medieval illustrator could have used for their illuminations: papyrus from Nile reed, parchment or vellum made from cattle skin, and wax tablets, though recorded use of wax tablets for illuminations is very rare.⁵ Parchment, or vellum, was the main medium used for sketching and painting illuminations, as well as the main medium used for the publication of Medieval manuscripts. Parchment indicated that the books were of high quality, since the process of creating the parchment was rather extensive. The parchment could be customized to desired dimensions, thickness, and even color. This was dependent on the cattle used to create the parchment. The skins would be stretched and dried to desired size and thickness. Due to the nature of animal skin and the process in which it was made, the parchment would sometimes have imperfections, such as holes, texture, and discoloration. The Medieval illuminators were not intimidated by the imperfections, but were instead inspired and would adapt to them. The artists would decorate the or embellish on the discolorations and holes in the skins.⁶ The manuscripts were expensive and the paper was of very high quality, so artists did not want a single page to go to waste.

Illuminators would use several different types of tools depending on the goal of the illustrations. They would use different types of styli and paints to achieve these goals. For drawing and sketching, the most common tools used were hard-point styli, made of metal or bone and styli made of graphite, the Medieval equivalent to a modern day graphite pencil.⁷ The sketches illuminators would produce would be elaborate and detailed (Ex. 1). Illuminators would also use colored ink for finer details as well as use a method of color tinting to preliminarily set the paint colors for the final version of their illuminated manuscripts. .

³ Stanley Boorman, "Sources, MS", *Grove Music Online* (2001)

⁴ Rowan Watson, *Illuminated Manuscripts and Their Makers* (London, England: V & A Publications, 2003). p. 56

⁵ Jonathan Alexander, *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work* (Hong Kong, China: Yale University Press, 1992), 35.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Alexander, p. 36.

Illuminators relied on natural resources in order to make their desired paints and colors. The paints were usually made from egg whites and were mixed with plant extracts or other materials, such as minerals, in order to achieve the desired color.⁸ Different colors required different materials, such as treated lead for white or brazilwood for red. It was the job of the illuminator to produce good quality paint for the manuscript they were to add to. The quality of the paint was another important factor in the making of a grand manuscript. The difference in paints, for example blue paint made from either lapis lazuli or blue paint made from azurite (copper ore), would often make the difference in the quality of an illumination. Gold and silver were commonly added to manuscripts of higher quality. While the gold and silver were often painted into the illustrations, gold leaf was often added to the highest quality of manuscripts. The gold would illuminate the page, which led publishers to adopt the name “Illuminations” for the illustrations in Medieval manuscripts (Ex. 2).

Miniatures, also referred to as “illuminations”, were the illustrations that illuminators would paint into the manuscripts. Miniature painting was its own trade before the illustrations were integrated into manuscripts. Once the illuminations were fully integrated, miniature painting became a separate specialization within the book trades. Color and detail were concerns that manuscript owners and commissioners prized in their illuminated manuscripts.⁹ Illuminators would be hired to paint their miniature into specific manuscripts, based on style and artistic ability. The quality of work put into the manuscripts, the chief factors being the illustrations and ornamentations, is what categorized them as routine manuscripts or superior manuscripts.¹⁰ Superior manuscripts were usually ones that contained more content and had been commissioned by those of higher status. These manuscripts had higher expectations for the material that was to be put into them. Larger manuscripts that would take longer periods of time to finish, required the collaboration of several illuminators.¹¹ Individually hired illuminators, as well as teams of illuminators would be commissioned to illustrate superior manuscripts. Miniatures were only part of the illuminator’s job, as they would integrate other ornamentations into illuminated manuscripts.

⁸ Watson, p. 23

⁹ Watson, p. 52

¹⁰ Watson, p. 48

¹¹ Watson, p. 56

The illustrators took advantage of all the space on the page that they could. Borders were another way an illustrator could add color to the manuscript pages. By the thirteenth century, borders and page frames started appearing in French manuscripts.¹² Illuminators in Paris had begun to add “ivy-leaf” initials that filled margins, blue and red bands that stretched across the inner and outer margins of the page (Ex.3). By the seventeenth century, marginal ornaments were becoming regionalized in the manuscript trade.¹³ Each country began to favor certain ornamentation styles in the margins. For example, the English manuscript illustrators favored thick, frame-like bands, with small ornamentations. German manuscript illustrators favored frames with pronounced moulding, often ornamented with leafy flowers. Dutch manuscript illustrators favored ornamented initials in colored inks.¹⁴ As border styles progressed and became frequented through the Middle Ages, historians observed patterns and have been able to identify specialists or teams of specialists.¹⁵ These specialists may have worked regularly with book publishers or illuminators, as many different illustration styles can be found in a single manuscript.

Manuscripts served multiple purposes. They would be used as presentation displays, as copies, or as gifts. A manuscript for presentation to a ruler or authority figure would have required a much higher standard of visual quality while a church would be more concerned with legibility. Both, however, require a high level of musical and non-musical organization. Illuminated manuscripts would have also been prepared for a specific institution, written by an employee of that institution. For example, the Vatican has manuscripts that were written by scribes who also worked at the Sistine Chapel.¹⁶ Other purposes of manuscripts include decoration, performance use, or as a reference or study. The function of manuscripts would change as different ideas came to the minds of the book publishers throughout the copying process or as sections needed further revision.¹⁷ As printing standard repertoire began to become more popular, manuscripts were seen more as working documents.

The use of illuminated manuscripts can be traced back to the Carolingian period. The Carolingian period ranged from the late 8th century through the late 9th century and was founded under the Frankish king Charlemagne. A reform that the Carolingian art had on the future of illuminations was the change of

¹² Watson, p. 33.

¹³ Watson, p. 34

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ Watson, p. 37

¹⁶ Stanley Boorman, “Sources, MS”, *Grove Music Online* (2001).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

the script and lettering used to make it more legible. The change in the alphabet was very successful and was completely accepted by the year 800.¹⁸ Much of the art during the Carolingian period was religious art and was used to decorate psalters or to preface the books of the Bible. The imagery associated with this time period includes the image of the Fountain of Life that became a prominent religious symbol. The popularity of the symbol came to be with the baptism of Pepin. The Fountain of Life was a metaphor for baptism and the power of the church. Illuminations featuring the Fountain of Life also made reference to other theological symbols. These symbols often included peacocks to represent the traditional value of immortality, a heart that represents the baptismal rite, and waterfowls that allude to the twelve apostles.¹⁹

The illuminations were used for teaching and became important aids for theology. These drawings were defended by Pope Gregory the Great in his apologia and letter to the Bishop of Marseilles. In this he justified the use of the illuminations as a way to teach about the saints and stories of the Bible. In a number of religious writings, the Canon of the Mass starts of *Vere Dignum* became shorthand in the monogram of VD. In a similar fashion to the abbreviated VD, the preface would include an intricate intertwined monogram. In another segment of religious text, the Canon of the Mass from Canterbury includes a monogram of a T (Ex. 4).²⁰ The symbolism of the monogram 'Te' became interpreted as the crucifixion. This was especially the case in Germany under the Saxon royal house in the 10th Century, during the Ottonian period.²¹

The Ottonian period was influenced by Carolingian art. However, there was a shift in the art that was being produced by the Ottonian scribes. The focus became less on the variety of liturgical books with new illuminations or specialization that was seen at places like St. Martin's monastery in Tours, France, which produced one-volume Bibles.²² The art created during this time was less focused on the Old Testament of the Bible, the standard practice during the Carolingian, but on chapters of the Gospel and other books of the New Testament. Many times the segments of the New Testament were used in public worship and the illuminations for these services spared no expenses. Similarly, the bindings included gold, ivory, and stone.²³ Looking forward to the Medieval era, most of the art was inside of Christian

¹⁸ Nordenfalk, "Carolingian Illuminations," pp.54-76.

¹⁹ Robb, "The Art of Illuminated Manuscript," pp.105.

²⁰ Pacht, "Chapter One Pictorial Decoration in the Organic Structure of the Book," pp. 32-44.

²¹ Nordenfalk, "Ottonian Illumination", pp.111-136.

²² Ibid.

²³ Nordenfalk, "Ottonian Illumination", pp.111-136.

papers and books. Observing the timeline of illuminated manuscripts, the most religious Illuminations were in the 12th century.²⁴

Other illuminations were used to express the universe and man's place in it through the macrocosm.²⁵ An example of this is the Regensburg-Prüfening diagram which expresses man as the microcosm, or a small universe or order. The point in the diagram is to express the idea that the universe is the macrocosm but man is the mirror of this on a small scale. There is special focus on the head in the diagram as it is covered in a halo to signify proximity to God and the idea of being created in God's image. A man with a halo which is used as a symbol of closeness to God and lines exuding from the man that explain how each part of the falls under the microcosm is how illustrators captured this idea (Ex.5). This idea of man as the microcosm is pulled from the ideas of the Greek philosophers and the Eastern idea of man being the mirror of the universe.

In the manuscript, *Roman de Fauvel*, the character of Fauvel is depicted and illustrated as a horse. The story is used as a commentary of the political state of the French court. The allegorical point is made through making Fauvel an animal who is foolish and scheming. While only the second book of the beast poem survived with multiple copies, there are a number of different versions of illuminations that have survived. There are a number of ways the allegorical Fauvel is depicted; he is depicted in some versions as a full horse (Ex. 6) and in other versions as half man and half horse.²⁶ The use of animals in metaphorical writing was not uncommon in the Medieval era. Many fables from this era are centered around animals. These fables were used as stories and to warn of vices. Each animal held an association with a theme or character type, much like the idea of stock characters. Illuminations allowed for these depictions to be easily understood by those who had access to illuminated manuscripts

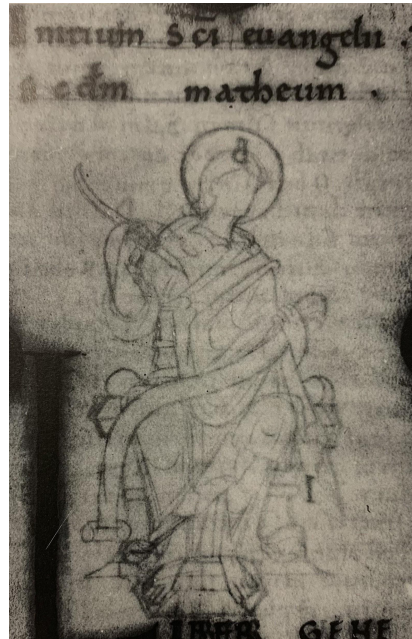
The history of illuminations goes beyond the surface skimmed in this paper. Illuminations that have survived through the eras include elements of those before them and separate themselves through common stylistic choices and use of manuscripts. The intricate art that has survived gives historians an understanding of what was important to people and what stories were highlighted throughout history.

²⁴ Nordenfalk, "Ottonian Illumination", pp.111-136.

²⁵ Pächt, "Chapter Four Didactic Miniatures," pp. 155-160.

²⁶ Heck & Cordonnier "Chapter 5 Hierarchies and Contraventions, Reason and Unreason," pp. 94-99

Example 1



Oxford, Wadham College, Ms. 2, folio 11. Gospels. Hardpoint drawing of St. Matthew photographed by ultraviolet light

Alexander, Jonathan. *Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work*. Hong Kong, China: Yale University Press, 1992

Example 2



Prefatory full-page miniatures of St. Christopher, and Christ with Mary Magdalen, From a Book of Hours made for use in Rheims. France. (?Rheims), c. 1300

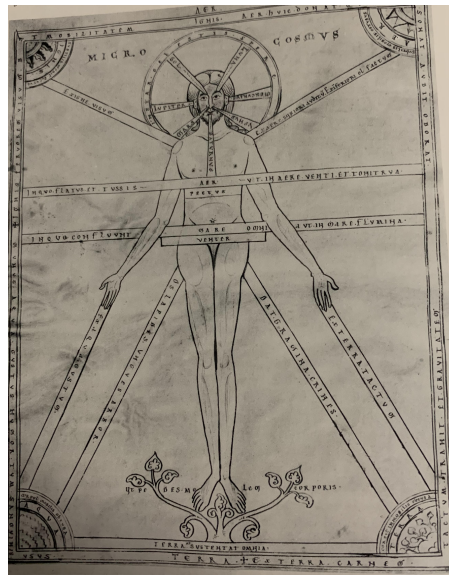
Watson, Rowan. *Illuminated Manuscripts and Their Makers*. London, England: V & A Publications, 2003.

Example 3



Border ornament from a Book of Hours made for use in Rheims. France. (?Rheims), c. 1300
Watson, Rowan. *Illuminated Manuscripts and Their Makers*. London, England: V & A Publications, 2003.

Example 4



Man as Microcosm. Salomo of Constance, Commentary. Regensburg-Prüfening, 1165
Pächt Otto, "Chapter Four Didactic Miniatures," in *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages: An Introduction* (London, England: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1994), pp. 156.

Example 5



"Te" monograph preceding the Canon of the mass. 'Missal' of Robert of Jumieges. Canterbury, c. 1020
Pächt Otto, "Chapter One Pictorial Decoration in the Organic Structure of the Book," in *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages: An Introduction* (London, England: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1994), pp. 42.

Example 6



Gervais de Bus, *Roman de Fauvel*, Paris, c. 1315-20 Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, MS fr. 146.
Heck, Christian and Remy Cordonnier. *The Grand Medieval Bestiary*. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 2012.

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