

The Art of Illumination

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Second edition in 2024 updated by Suzanne Hertzberg and Shelby Brown (J. Paul Getty Museum)

This project focuses on medieval manuscripts in the context of life in the Middle Ages and provides an opportunity for cross curricular integration of history, literature, art history, and hands-on art-making. Students participate in a classroom “scriptorium” and invent their own illuminated initial letter of a word, using existing examples as models.

Acknowledgments: Many teachers contributed to this project over the years, including Jane Friedman, Karen Pavliscak, and Michele McFaull.

Overview

Before the spread of the printing press in about 1500, writing was the key technology for transmitting ideas, and books were written by hand. Medieval scribes in Europe developed the practice of decorating their manuscripts with designs and pictures in bright colors and gold or silver leaf. The delightful books they produced are called illuminated manuscripts. There were also beautifully illuminated Jewish and Islamic texts. To re-create the experience of a medieval scribe, students choose a medieval character and draw upon authentic medieval styles to design and create their own illuminations.

- The teacher can expand the project with a write-up component or have students create a book together or create digital media and presentations.

Grade levels

5-12. The teacher can customize the illumination project for grades 5 through 12 by simplifying or expanding the historical content and artistic requirements.

Goals

Students will experience the process of illumination as authentically as possible in a short time and within practical limitations. They will develop an understanding of Illumination both as an art form and as an expression of medieval culture. The project allows students to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of illuminated texts, understand religious control over literacy, and learn how book production started in monasteries and later expanded to non-religious (secular) workshops.

Goals for this project are for students to:

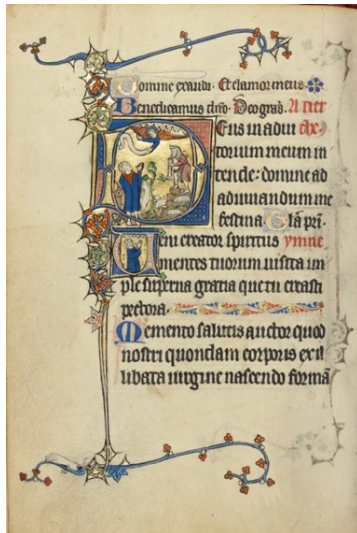
- learn basic information about the Middle Ages.
- understand medieval social roles and identify individuals, both historical and fictional.
- recognize the role of religious institutions in preserving and transmitting literacy.
- appreciate illuminated manuscripts as an art form and as an expression of medieval culture throughout the British Isles and Europe (the teacher can also reference Jewish and Islamic texts).
- experience the process of producing illuminated texts as authentically as possible.

Time needed

Approximately three 45-minute periods are needed, one to introduce the project and illustrate the illuminated manuscripts, and two to plan and carry out the project.

Cultural/historical context

Books produced throughout the Middle Ages, from about 500-1500, are among the most beautiful examples of medieval art, and the historical information they contain is equally striking. Styles of dress, housing construction, courtship, architecture, daily life, superstitions, religious beliefs, and social customs are all documented on the pages of these manuscripts.



Folio of a book of hours (Ruskin Hours), about 1300. J. Paul Getty Museum. Public domain.
Initial D: The Annunciation to the Shepherds <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/105VDP>

The D is the initial letter of “Deus.” An angel appears in the heavens holding a long scroll announcing the birth of Jesus. A shepherd on the right, playing bagpipes, stands on a rocky hill where sheep are climbing. In the middle, a goat on hind legs stretches to nibble the branch of a small tree near another shepherd.

Every book was made by hand. The paper, created from animal skin, took weeks to prepare, soften, and smooth. Examination of medieval books indicates that the pages were ruled with lines and borders to create uniformity. The text of an illuminated page was written by a scribe,

and the border, initial letters, and pictures were painted with colors, often by others, and even decorated with precious metals. Scribes slowly and patiently transcribed each page in daylight, word by word and letter by letter. The work was done at slanted worktables, and gilding was added on flat tables. The style of handwriting varied. The finished books were bound by hand with covers that could be simple but were often very elaborate and sometimes even decorated with precious gems. In early books, the script was relatively large, but over time the letters grew smaller and narrower as vellum or parchment became more expensive.

Elements of the illuminated page

The basic elements of a medieval illuminated page are the **initial**, the **miniature**, the **border**, and the **text**.

- The initial was an enlarged capital (uppercase) letter at the beginning of a section of text. (See glossary for details.)
- The miniature was a small illustration relevant to the text, often in the margin of the page. The Latin verb *miniare* means to write or paint in vermilion (red pigment), and the *miniator* was the artist.
- The third element, the border, surrounded the miniature and often the whole page.
- The text was introduced by a word featuring the decorated initial letter.

Who made illuminated manuscripts?

In the early Middle Ages, the chief makers of books were monks, and in every large monastery there was a writing room, a scriptorium, that required good lighting. There were clear rules about no candles (no fire). Women, although less well recorded, also made manuscripts in their convents (religious houses). Specialization often led to the division of labor. Some monks or nuns decorated borders, while others specialized in elaborate initials or miniatures. Medieval Jewish and Islamic scribes also created magnificent illuminated manuscripts. Beginning in the 1200s, books began to be produced outside of religious institutions, by artisans in urban craft shops. The most talented illuminators were well known, and wealthy nobles commissioned them to create personalized prayer books. Sometimes a craftsman had a particular patron.

Books of hours

Books of hours were personalized prayer books and devotional guides for the educated. They always included a calendar highlighting feasts of saints and other holy days. Although primarily decorated with religious images, they also included secular illustrations that show daily life in the country and in castles and provide some insight into the people who created and commissioned them. Beautiful editions became collectibles, status symbols for the nobility.

For this project, students can imagine they are in a workshop where a scribe and illustrator create a book of hours (or another religious or secular book).

Glossary

Atelier	Secular workshop where illuminated manuscripts were produced
Bestiary	Collections of fanciful images of animals (both real and imaginary)
Border	Decorative pattern around the perimeter of an illumination
Book of hours	Medieval prayer-book
Carpet page	Page completely covered with ornamental designs and scenes, like a carpet
Chrysography	Gold (or silver) mixed with glue to make ink for decorating a manuscript
Drollery	Humorous figures that sometimes appear in the corners or margins of a page
Foliated	Decorated with leaves or vines
Illumination	Hand-produced manuscript decorated with colors and often with gold leaf
Initial	Enlarged, decorated letter introducing an important text section. Four kinds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Anthropomorphic initial: composed wholly or partly of human figures ▪ Decorated initial: embellished with non-figural designs ▪ Historiated initial: containing a scene, usually related to the text ▪ Inhabited initial: containing human or animal figures (not part of a scene)
Manuscript	Book written by hand
Miniature	Small scene, image, or design added to a page
Parchment	Writing surface made from sheep or goat skin
Provenance	Record of ownership of a book (or work of art)
Rubrication	The addition of small red dots to outline and decorate an initial
Scribe	Person who copied out documents by hand
Script	Style of writing used in manuscript <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Bilinear script (uppercase): confined between two horizontal lines ▪ Quadrilinear script (lowercase): extended to four horizontal lines
Vellum	Fine writing surface made from the skin of young animals
Scriptorium	Room in a monastery devoted to producing manuscripts
Zoomorphic	In the shape of an animal, real or imaginary

Source: Brown, Michelle. 2018 (revised and expanded edition). *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications and the British Library.



The monk Eadwine shown in his scriptorium. Full-page miniature from the “Eadwine Psalter” (formerly “Canterbury Psalter”), about 1150, copying the ninth-century Utrecht Psalter. Trinity College, Cambridge. CC By NC 4.0. [MS R.17.1, f.283v.](#)

Eadwine holds two tools, a writing quill in his right hand (top) and a knife in his left hand to erase any errors by scraping the surface of the calf-vellum pages.

Choosing a character

Students can choose among generic medieval roles and characters, such as those found in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, or they may pick historical or legendary figures. Below are lists from which the teacher can add or delete. If students select a **generic role**, they should place the character in a specific medieval time and location.

Examples of generic characters

abbot/abbess	alchemist	artisan (what kind)?	crusader
friar	innkeeper	jester	knight
lady/lord	merchant	midwife	monk
nun/priest	peasant	physician	scholar
scribe	shepherd	troubadour	pope

Examples of historical and legendary characters

Abbot Berno	Benedict	Charlemagne	Charles Martel
Christine of Pisan	Clovis	Eleanor of Aquitaine	Geoffrey Chaucer
Henry II	Hildegard of Bingen	Joan of Arc	King Arthur
Lancelot	Leo III	Louis VII	Maimonides
Marco Polo	Morgana	Richard I “Lionheart”	Richard III
Sir Gawain	St. Augustine	St. Dominic	St. Francis
Thomas Aquinas	Thomas Becket	William the Conqueror	

Interdisciplinary preparation (English, History, Art History)

By the time they begin work on their Illuminations, students should have been introduced to medieval historical or literary texts such as *Beowulf*, Arthurian legends, or Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, ideally in a collaboration between English and History or Art History. Students may be inspired by a role in medieval society (such as knight, shepherd, or jester) or by a specific character, real or legendary.

Background information includes the role of religious institutions in medieval life and learning both in Europe and globally, how monasteries both preserved and controlled access to education and texts, and how women and non-religious (secular) artists contributed to the rich tradition of illuminated manuscripts.

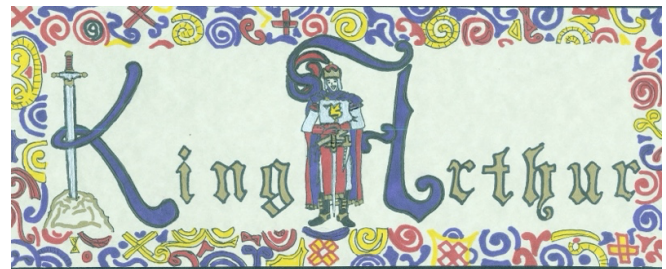
Students will need to see examples of manuscripts showing colors, symbols, images, animals, instruments or tools, and clothing that identify characters.

Materials needed

- Pencils/erasers/rulers
- Calligraphy pens (optional)
- Black and colored markers, including gold and silver (fine and ultra fine)
- Scissors
- Scotch tape (several rolls)
- Masking tape (several rolls)
- Transfer paper (Saral graphite)
- Parchment paper (Astroparche cardstock)
- Pre-cut templates for a draft of an illuminated word or text
- Books of illuminated letters, borders, animals, and more (Dover)
- Letters photocopied from books of illuminations
- Reference books about illuminations, if available

Classroom procedures

The teacher introduces illuminated manuscripts and explains the parts of an illuminated page: the large decorative initial, the border, the miniatures, and the text. Students explore artistic



Left: A student illuminating a character-word, "Bishop," with a miter and border design.

Right: A student's illumination of a legendary name, "King Arthur."

qualities of illuminated manuscripts and perhaps compare some of the ways illuminations changed over time and in different locations. They examine the process of creating the books and consider the stylistic components of a page and initial. The students choose or are assigned a person or character from medieval literature, history, or legend.

Students or the teacher can pre-cut two 11" long templates from a vertically-folded sheet of 8 ½" x 11" paper (landscape orientation), or three 8 ½" long strips horizontally from the paper (portrait orientation). Draft template, transfer paper, and parchment should all be cut to the same size.

On the pre-cut template, students create a draft sketch in pencil, writing the word associated with their assigned character and showing how the illuminated letter will look and what decorative and symbolic elements will be included.

If the teacher would like students to include more text, they can fold and cut the draft template horizontally to create two 8 ½ x 5 ½" pages, as below.



A student's manuscript page with text and illuminations inspired by *Beowulf*.

Preparation in class precedes an Illumination Day. Ahead of time, perhaps as homework, older students might read an excerpt from Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* for a vivid if fictionalized description of a monastic scriptorium, or the teacher might show a short clip from the film version (see Resources for link to video).

Illumination Day can come as a nice break in routine, ideally on a Friday. The classroom is set up like a scriptorium, with desks in a long line facing a window if possible. Medieval music plays, and silence is required of all "scribes."

Illustration Day

Materials should be organized so that every student has easy access to them. A supply of photocopied and pre-cut pages of lettering books allows students to take individual letters and other designs to their desks. The parchment and transfer paper should be cut to match the draft templates. Using the templates, reproducible letters, transfer paper, and markers, students create their final illuminated word or text on the parchment.

- The draft template is taped to higher-quality parchment paper cardstock with a piece of transfer paper in between the two pages, graphite-side down on the parchment.
- The students transfer their letters and drawings to the parchment by tracing them, adding to them as desired, adjusting the final product to correct any errors. Finally, they color their illumination carefully with markers.

Art books or projected images provide further inspiration, although students ideally create their own original artwork. As they work on their illuminations and personalize the process, students' appreciation of the detailed work of medieval illuminators should grow.

The following four elements are required for every student's illumination:

- Large initial, one of the four types listed above (anthropomorphic, decorated, historiated, or inhabited)
- Additional figurative image(s)
- Border
- Text, in a medieval font, of the rest of the letters in the character's name (and other text as desired)

The write-up should include:

- a 1–2-page explanation of the student's artistic choices for each element.
- A list of sources that influenced the character, illuminated letter, font, design, and text.

Assessment

Students are graded on their faithful recreation of medieval practice and on their report.

Illustration

Does the illumination reflect careful work recreating medieval craftsmanship?

Initial _____ /15 points

Figure(s) _____ /15 points

Border _____ /15 points

Text _____ /15 points

Written explanation _____ /40 points

Overall Grade _____ /100 points

Comments

Alternative write-up: Curator's Report (for advanced students, if there is time)

This works best with a full page and not just a word. Students pretend to be museum curators who have discovered a page from a medieval illumination. They do not know who the artist is. As a specialist in illuminated manuscripts, a curator can analyze the illumination in specific terms, using the glossary, and consider the character, text, and elements of decoration. The goal is a 2-page report about the art of illumination and the student's own creation.

The curator's report must include a paragraph each on:

1. the art of illumination in general
2. the character's role in medieval society or literature, and/or description of the source text.
3. the artistic and historical merits of the illumination. Here students discuss both the process and outcome: how their creation reflects the work of medieval scribes, the use of symbol and color, and the craftsmanship of the illumination.

Resources

All about illuminated manuscripts

Brown, Michelle. 2018. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms, Revised Edition*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications and the British Library. (Resource for technical details, especially useful for art teachers/students)

Keene, Bryan C., ed. 2019. *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World Through Illuminated Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications. (Balances a European focus)

J. Paul Getty Museum Trust. n.d. "Looking at Illuminated Manuscripts: Illuminating Fables." http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/curricula/manuscripts/ (With useful links)

The British Library. 2019. "Emanating Light: Illumination in Islamic Manuscripts." <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2019/08/emanating-light-illumination-in-islamic-manuscripts.html>

The British Library. 2012. "Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts Online." <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2012/02/hebrew-illuminated-manuscripts-online.html>

Women in the scriptorium

Wade, Lizzie. 2019. "These 1000-year-old teeth belonged to a skilled female artist, pigment remains reveal." *Science*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/these-1000-year-old-teeth-belonged-skilled-female-artist-pigment-remains-reveal>

The medieval world lives on

Grollemond, Melissa, and Bryan C. Keene. 2022. *The Fantasy of the Middle Ages: An Epic Journey through Imaginary Medieval Worlds*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications. (Medieval imagery in visual and storytelling culture from fairy tales to video games)

Making a medieval book

J. Paul Getty Trust. 2014. "Making Manuscripts." YouTube video. 6.19 long.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuNfdHNTv9o>

Robertson, Bruce, and Kathryn Hewitt. 1999. *Marguerite Makes a Book*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum. (Classic, beautifully illustrated picture book suited for younger students)

The J. Paul Getty Museum. 2003. "The Making of a Medieval Book," about a Getty exhibition.

<http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/making/>

The scriptorium

Cains, Alysia. 2022. *An Introduction to the Medieval Scriptorium*, July 26. Glastonbury Abbey.

<https://www.glastonburyabbey.com/blogs/the-glastonbury-bible-project/an-introduction-to-the-medieval-scriptorium.php> (With useful links)

The Name of the Rose. Annaud, Jean-Jacques, director. 1986. United States: Twentieth Century

Fox. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDUXdUO7PHI>

(1.06-minute scene showing the scriptorium of a 14th-century abbey)

Inspiration and templates for student scribes

Victoria and Albert Museum. 2024. National Art Library. *The Illuminated Manuscripts*.

<https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/illuminated-manuscripts>

Noble, Marty. 2013. *Illuminated Manuscripts Coloring Book*. Garden City, N.Y.: Dover.

(Religious and secular scenes, including books of hours, Persian, and Jewish texts)

Solo, Dan X. 1998. *Celtic and Medieval Alphabets*. Garden City, N.Y.: Dover.

Tymms, W.R., and M.D. Wyatt. 2006. *Masterpieces of Illuminated Letters and Borders*. Garden

City, N.Y.: Dover. (Especially useful resource for border designs)

Fun with medieval monsters, dogs, cats, and even snails!

Kempf, Damien, and Maria L. Gilbert. 2015. *Medieval Monsters*. London: British Library.

(Fanciful creatures to spark creative possibilities)

Nishimura, Margot. 2009. *Images in the Margins*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.

(Small, amusing creatures from the margins of many medieval manuscripts)

Walker-Meikle, Kathleen. 2019. *Cats in Medieval Manuscripts*. London: British Library.

Walker-Meikle, Kathleen. 2020. *Dogs in Medieval Manuscripts*. London: British Library.

(Along with medieval monsters, whimsical cats and dogs amuse students and offer animal-themed possibilities for decorating manuscripts)

Biggs, Sarah J. "Knight v Snail." September 26, 2013. *The British Library Medieval Manuscripts*

blog. <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/09/knight-v-snail.html>