

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Manuscripts Gallery 32



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The Fitzwilliam Museum houses a collection of over 1000 illuminated manuscripts. The conservation of manuscripts demands that they can only be displayed for short periods. The display changes frequently and, consequently, these notes do not make specific references to individual exhibits. They aim to give background information which will be useful to teachers wishing to use these objects.

The development of books both coincided with and greatly depended upon the spread of Christianity. In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity and the Christian church was established throughout the Empire. In order to spread Christianity, missionaries needed copies of the Bible and other texts conveying the Christian message in a portable form. The word 'illuminated' means literally 'that which throws light on'.

Papyrus was the traditional writing material of the southern Mediterranean. However, papyrus was preserved in scrolls rather than in book (or codex) form and the scrolls cracked with constant rolling. Moreover, papyrus is not well suited to the damper climes north of the Mediterranean. Parchment, made of the skin of sheep or other livestock, provided a sturdy substitute which could be folded and gathered into a book shape which then needed only covers for protection.

Manuscripts (from the Latin *manu scriptus* meaning 'written by hand') quickly became regarded as precious objects in their own right and were cherished for their beauty as well as for their content. The importance of the content and the wealth and strength of the Church were emphasised by the illustrations, illuminations, bindings and locks. Books became symbols of great power in a society in which the literate minority were most frequently connected to the Church. The distinctions in literacy became even more subtle: in the early Middle Ages, most religious works were only written in Latin, the language of monks and clerics, and even if a knight were capable of reading French or English, he would be considered illiterate (*illiteratus*) if he could not read Latin. Illuminations and illustrations served a practical purpose in guiding a reader through a book which did not have page numbers (and therefore, no index) and which might not be divided into chapters. When chapter divisions were marked, then the chapter headings or rubrics served as a further guide through the text since they were frequently written in red ink (the word 'rubric' derives from the Latin word for red).

Books were made almost exclusively by monks for use within their monasteries until the 13th century when the establishment of non-monastic schools at universities such as Bologna, Paris, Oxford, Cambridge and Heidelberg provided an impetus for book production to move outside the monastic context. This, together with the growth of lay literacy, created a greater demand for books. Professional artists and scribes began to help the monks, and eventually these skilled craftsmen, scribes, illuminators and bookbinders set up their own workshops away from the monasteries. Beautifully executed manuscripts, with either sacred or secular contents, developed into luxury items eagerly sought by wealthy laymen. Lavishly decorated Psalters, Apocalypses and Books of Hours were greatly prized, and even in the later Middle Ages (13th to 15th centuries) a layman's library containing twenty manuscripts would be considered a large collection. In 1469 the Duke of Burgundy had the largest library in Europe with 850-900 volumes. In the mid 15th century, the production of books changed with the European invention of printing with moveable type (which had existed in the East for centuries). Combined with the growing availability of paper, the emergence of printing led to the decline of the manuscript since it enabled the fairly cheap production of multiple copies of a text and ensured both speed and accuracy.

Materials and Methods

Illuminated manuscripts were very much the product of teamwork. This was true both for the monastery workshop (the *scriptorium*) and the individual workshops of the craftsmen which became common later on. A different person completed each separate stage in the process and the basic method did not change over the years.



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After rinsing, the skin was stretched over a frame to dry in the sun, and finally rubbed with pumice and water. The stretching was important: the thinner the parchment the better the quality. The two sides of the parchment remain distinct: the hair side is darker and the inner (flesh) side is smoother.

Once it had been treated, the parchment was trimmed. The size of the book determined the finished size of the parchment: the sheet could simply be folded in two for a large book. Four of these folded leaves would be placed one inside the other to give a gathering (or quire) of sixteen

Parchment

Skins, from animals such as sheep or goat, served to make parchment. The best parchment was vellum, made from calf skin. The finest vellum, both in terms of weight and strength came from foetal animals. Some monastic orders, the Cistercians in particular, were excellent sheep farmers and must have used the skins for the production of their own books. Parchment was a crucial commodity, since a large book, such as an edition of the Gospels intended for ceremonial use in a monastery church, would have used as many as two hundred skins.

The process of turning skin into parchment or vellum was complex. The skin was first soaked in water for several days, then in a solution of lime and water for about two weeks. The skin was scraped with a round-edged knife to remove residual hairs and pigment, and the skin re-soaked in the lime solution.

sides. For a smaller book, the original piece of parchment could be folded in half again and trimmed to give four leaves, or in half yet again to give eight leaves. The conventional shape of a book today, taller than it is wide, stems from the most efficient shape which can be cut from a piece of parchment.

The parchment was now ready for the scribe to begin work. A few leaves, or a small gathering, would probably have been written at one time. Once book production moved out of the monastic scriptoria and into independent workshops, a scribe was probably paid by the quire. This improved the speed of production since a book could be copied quickly by a team of scribes working simultaneously on different sections of the same book. Many contemporary illustrations, particularly frontispieces, portray scribes writing in a bound book, but this is probably intended to indicate that the scribe is writing a book rather than a letter or other document.

Writing Materials

A quill pen, which is hard and sharp, suited the smooth writing surface of the parchment. The quill was made from the wing feather of a goose or other similar large bird. The feathers from the left wing fitted the right hand most comfortably (and most people who could write wrote with their right hand).

Ink was either carbon-based or made from a mixture containing gallic acid. This acid was obtained from dried oak-galls, which are the small growths on an oak tree caused by the presence of the gall-wasp. Parchment retained its importance as a writing material because the acidity of many medieval inks destroyed paper.

A scribe usually held a knife in one hand as he wrote. The knife was used to hold the parchment leaves down flat, to sharpen the quill and to scrape out any mistakes. Because parchment is so strong, mistakes could be scraped away and the correct text superimposed.

Design and Layout

There were no rigid standards by which a book's design and layout were determined: it might have one or two columns, illustrations, chapter headings, illuminated initial letters or decorated borders around the edges of the pages. Once the basic outline had been decided, a grid of lines was scored or drawn on the parchment to help keep the text straight and regular. Either a hard, sharp instrument, called an awl, was used for scoring or a lead plummet (like a pencil) for drawing lines. Small holes were then pricked through a stack of parchment leaves at the end of the lines. When the page was turned, the holes marked the position of the lines, and the layout of the book was uniform. A very complex system of Latin abbreviations developed in order both to speed copying and to aid the scribe in justifying the right-hand margin. Many of these abbreviations were later used for vernacular texts as well.

Once the pages had been ruled, the first step in book production was usually to copy the text. However, the overall plan of a book was important, since space would have to be left for illustrations and decorated initial letters. Some scholastic texts had elaborate commentaries or *glosses*, which had originally been squeezed into the margins, but which later copies would accommodate as a central element of the text. They were often written in columns of their own on the outside of a page (where a decorated border would fall in another manuscript) and in a different, often smaller script (or hand). Some unfinished manuscripts attest the order of copying- although the text might be complete, only the illustrations at the beginning of the book might have been completed.

The process of copying a text was laborious and involved many people. If a mistake was not noticed and scraped out while a scribe was writing, then a correction might appear in the margin, either by the same scribe or in a different hand, suggesting an editor or a later corrector.

Sometimes the signals between scribe and illustrator got muddled, so that the wrong initial letter appeared at the opening of a text (this is unusual, but very difficult to correct, and would probably go unchanged). If several scribes were working on separate quires of the same book simultaneously, then a means of assuring that the book was joined up in the right order was necessary. To this end, scribes frequently used catchwords, putting the first word of the next quire under the last word of the quire which should precede it.

Illustrations

Once the text was copied, an artist would draw in the design of an illustration or an initial letter - sometimes an historiated letter (literally 'telling a story'). The drawing was done lightly, using a lead plummet or ink, and the colouring was often left to another person, the illuminator.

If it was to be used, gold was applied first to the design because it was easier to remove any surplus from an undecorated parchment surface than from a painted one. In general, the gold was applied in the form of very thin gold leaf which was burnished or rubbed onto a layer of size (glue) mixture. This foundation was made from an egg-white mixture, or later from a mixture of plaster, sugar, lead and size known as 'gesso'.

The colours were now built up, layer by layer, starting with the pale tones and working through to the dark ones. They were applied using a combination of quill and fine brush. The preparation and mixing of the colours was a skilled job in itself. Pigments were made from earth colours, minerals and vegetable dyes. The pigments were mixed with water and bound with a medium such as egg-white to attain the correct fluidity of consistency.

Once the colours had been applied, the final stages were to outline the design in black to make it stand out and to put in highlights in white.

Binding

When the pages were complete with both text and illustrations, the quires were assembled, stitched together and sewn onto horizontal tapes or thongs of leather. These were then threaded through grooves in the wooden boards which would serve as the covers and pegged into place. The boards were covered in leather, sometimes stamped with a design or elaborately embellished with gold and jewels. This work would have been done by a specialist binder, and a goldsmith and jeweller might also have been involved. The finished book might have clasps fitted to keep it shut and the pages flat.

Subjects

The Museum's collection reflects the range of different texts that were in circulation by the 15th century:

Bible - complete, large scale bibles were produced by the monasteries in the 12th century but in the 13th century bibles became smaller and more portable.

Psalter - book of Old Testament psalms.

Choir book - these needed to be large so that a single copy could be viewed by a group of singers.

Book of Hours - late medieval prayerbook containing psalms and devotions (primarily invoking the Virgin Mary) for the eight canonical hours of the day. They were intended for private reading and meditation by the laity and were the first books to be made in considerable quantities. Most surviving Books of Hours were made in the 15th and early 16th centuries and reached an audience that had never before owned books.

Liturgical books - for example the Missal, the Breviary, the Pontifical (one of the examples in the Museum's collection, the Metz Pontifical, was made specifically for a Bishop and contains services and ceremonies that someone of that office might be expected to perform).

Bestiaries - these were very popular in England in the 13th century and were a mixture of legend, folklore, natural observation, moral guidance and Christian theology.

Decretum – in 1140 a monk from Bologna, named Gratian attempted to piece together the many different papal decretals (a letter laying down an aspect of canon law) into one volume called the 'Decretum'. Other compilations followed and these were circulated around the European universities. Students at universities such as Cambridge could study canon law until 1535, when Henry VIII removed it from the curriculum, after the break with Rome.

Secular works – the growth of lay literacy from the 13th century created a demand for non-religious texts and works by contemporary writers such as Boccaccio, Dante Alighieri and Guillaume de Lorris were popular texts to illustrate. An example of the latter's 'Roman de la Rose' is in the Museum's collection.

Manuscripts as Objects

Although we think of books primarily as a means to an end, that is, to provide a copy of the desired text, elaborately executed manuscripts held significance both as symbols of power and wealth and as artistic objects in their own right.

Illustrations often contributed to meaning, particularly in the context of Christian works, since the Christian artistic tradition has a rich vocabulary of signs and symbols. The opening of a Gospel book, for instance, might well show a seated man either writing or holding an open book, indicating the authority of the Gospel. The illustration might also include the particular Evangelist's symbol or 'identity tag': a man or angel for Matthew, a lion for Mark, an ox for Luke and an eagle for John.

When pictures or patterns of representation become familiar or stylised, they can be read in a similar way to how we read printed texts. Several of the objects in the gallery demonstrate this. The ivory diptychs and triptychs, for example, frequently represent scenes from the life of Christ; either one scene per panel or a series of scenes which can be read in order to tell a story or relate a series of events. Of course, one must recognise the symbols and imagery in order to read the panels, just as one must know an alphabet in order to read a text.