

# INSPIRATIONAL ILLUMINATIONS: Reacting to Medieval Manuscripts

In July 2017, the students of HIST 119D: "Sex in the Middle Ages," a course that explores gender relations and sexuality in medieval Europe, visited "Illuminating Women in the Medieval World," an exhibit at the J. Paul Getty Center. As the students explored the manuscript room, they reflected on the "many facets of and attitudes toward medieval womanhood," the theme of the exhibit.

The program also featured a special tour of the museum manuscript study rooms by Bryan C. Keene, assistant curator of the Department of Manuscripts. Bryan introduced the students to the rich language of illuminations. He demonstrated how manuscripts tell a story through text and image as well as how each manuscript has its own story of creation and preservation. Manuscripts were objects of prestige and power as well as cherished artifacts that were carefully compiled, stored, and protected (or forgotten) by their patrons and owners. The movement of these artifacts from hand to hand, century to century gives insight to the values of the societies that produced them, used them, and now preserve them.



Illuminating Women in the Medieval World  
June 20–September 17, 2017, GETTY CENTER



After visiting the manuscript study rooms, students were asked to stroll the other pavilions of the museum and gardens all the while reflecting on their tour of the manuscript rooms and using any aspect of manuscript studies—artistic style, color, juncture of text and image, narrative structure, thematic message, provenance and purpose, etc.—as a lens to view and interpret their experience at the Getty Center, the Getty's permanent collection, the architecture of the museum and gardens, and visitor interaction with the art and the space.

## HIST 119D's visit to the Getty Center sparked creativity and reflection.

The students completed reaction projects.

They had four choices:

1. An annotated manuscript intended to engage the students' analytical skills.
2. An inspired drawing of the Getty Center or an encounter they had while visiting the museum influenced by medieval illumination techniques, shapes, and forms.
3. A mixed-media reinterpretation of a manuscript illumination reacting to contemporary social issues. This choice was intended to hone the students' comparative analysis skills by considering the application of the past to the present.
4. A comic strip narrating the events leading up to or succeeding an illumination.



After careful deliberation, a panel of judges comprised of the students themselves, graduate student mentors, representatives from the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and UCLA Senior Scholars carefully selected the top projects to be featured in exhibition.

I proudly introduce "Inspirational Illuminations: Reacting to Medieval Manuscripts," an exhibit by the students of HIST119D: "Sex in the Middle Ages."

**Kristina Markman, Ph.D.**  
**History**  
**UCLA**

# The Art & Craft of MANUSCRIPT MAKING

Ethan Patterson  
History, Class of 2018  
UCLA

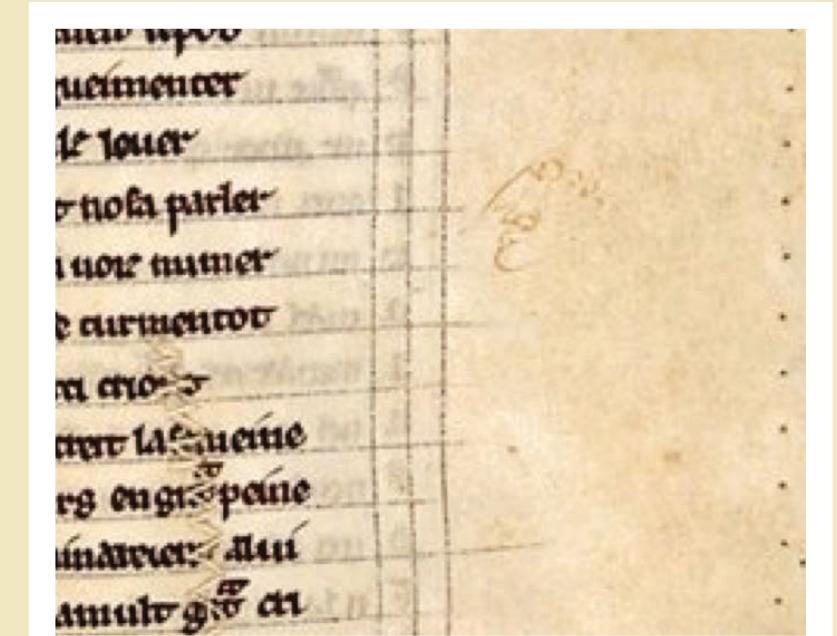
The process by which illuminated manuscripts were produced during the Middle Ages was complex, and demanded an extensive amount of resources and time for a single book. The creation of these artistic works typically required five major steps: (1) the production of parchment, (2) the dusting and sizing of the parchment, (3) the writing of the script, (4) illumination, and (5) the final binding of the completed manuscript.



**1.** The production of parchment, a paper-like material used as the surface for medieval scripts and illuminations, was time-consuming and arduous. Parchment was made from animal skin, usually goat, sheep, or calf. The skin was immersed in a mixture of water and calcium hydroxide (called limewater) for up to ten days, which loosened the hairs on the skin. Once all the hair was removed, the skin was doused with water to remove any remaining calcium hydroxide. The skin was then stretched to varying degrees of tension on a frame while being thinned with a rounded knife over the course of several days.

**2.** Once the appropriate thickness was reached, the parchment was dusted with pumice powder and sticky powder to stiffen it and smooth it for the application of ink. The parchment was then measured, cut to the desired size, and folded into quires of eight leaves.

**3.** In preparation for writing, scribes pricked the parchment at regular intervals with a knife or spoked-wheel and ruled it with a straightedge. To ensure clear and precisely lettering, scribes carefully carved their quills and chose inks. Black inks were produced from plant materials such as oak galls or from carbon solutions. For rubrication, or red lettering, scribes used minium, a naturally occurring form of lead tetroxide. The durability of the parchment itself allowed the scribe to correct any errors made by scraping the ink off of the surface.



**4.** Following the completion of the texts, the manuscripts were illuminated. The illumination of medieval manuscripts entailed multiple steps and involved the meticulous application of waxes, paints, and precious metals. Before any colors were applied, sketches were made of the desired illumination on the parchment in the spaces left by the scribe. Waxes like gesso were then used as a base for the application of precious metals such as gold leaf. After the precious metals were polished, paints derived from various plant or mineral substances were applied, beginning with the lighter colors. After the paint dried and additional tracings of black ink were completed, the illuminated manuscript was prepared for binding.



**5.** The binding process required a combination of materials including wood, leather, cloth, and precious metals for decoration. Gatherings or collections of folded parchment sheets were sewn with threads onto leather supports, and end bands were attached to fasten the edges of the gatherings with the spine of the book. The supports were then secured along the spine through multiple gaps carved into wood boards. At near completion, the book was covered with leather and tightened with clasps, which were attached to flatten the parchment. The binding of the illuminated manuscript was finally decorated with materials varying from leather and silk to precious metals and gems.



# MANUSCRIPT as ARTIFACT

Stephanie Truskowski  
History, Class of 2017  
UCLA  
edited by Kristina Markman, Ph.D.

An artifact is an object of historical significance that offers insight into the mores and values of the society in which it was created, used, and preserved. Manuscripts are highly significant artifacts that were commissioned, meticulously prepared, cared for, and passed down from generation to generation. Every manuscript not only tells a story with its text, but also reveals its own story as an object created for a particular purpose and use. Just like the manuscript itself, its illuminations (especially the artist's choice of imagery in connection to the written content) reflect the historical context of its creation and can be used to study medieval political, economic, cultural, and social values.

## Cultural Artifact

Books of hours were devotional objects popular in the Middle Ages. Each book of hours was unique and contained a different collection of religious texts, prayers, and psalms often chosen by the patron who had commissioned the book. Like the text, the illuminations in books of hours provide clues to the cultural context. The subject matter of each illumination was carefully selected based on the expectations of the patron and prepared with the artist's personal touch. This folio from a book of hours attributed to Master of Sir John Fastolf depicts St. Anne teaching her daughter Mary to read. Given the subject of this page—two women teaching and learning from each other—it is highly likely that a woman commissioned this book. The female owner of the book would have related to Anne and Mary because they are figures dressed in contemporary clothing meant to mirror the reader. As options for women were limited in mainstream religious institutions, women often exhibited personal devotion by reading books of hours. By teaching Mary to read, Anne is giving her the tools to continue this tradition. Both the subject matter of this illumination as well as the fact that it is contained in a book of hours provides insight into the religious lives of women and their importance as the buyers of books in medieval society.

## Material Artifact

As objects of personal devotion commissioned by the nobility, books of hours offer insight into religious practices as well as the lifestyles of their commissioners and owners. This folio is an example of the luxurious commodities owned by the European nobility in the fifteenth century. The generous use of blue pigment and gold leaf in this illumination indicates the expense that was lavished onto its creation. The fact that richly illustrated books of hours, such as the one depicted here, are the most common genre of surviving medieval illuminated manuscripts suggests that the nobility actively participated in the book trade. Books were symbols of wealth and prestige that the nobility commissioned both as objects of devotion and as luxuries.

## Social Artifact

The subject of the illumination also provides valuable evidence on female literacy and the expected role of mothers in medieval society. St. Anne is presented here as an ideal mother whose actions as a maternal saint should be emulated. The depiction of Anne teaching Mary to read in private implies that girls were educated in their homes and their lessons depended on their mothers' knowledge and skills. Moreover, the fact that Mary is learning to read suggests that respectable women were expected to be literate and to pass down their skills to their daughters.



**Saint Anne Teaching the Virgin to Read**

Master of Sir John Fastolf  
Book of Hours

*France or England, about 1430–40*  
JPGM, Ms. 5 (84.ML.723), fol. 45v  
4 3/4 x 3 5/8 in.

# COLOR: THE ART OF ILLUMINATION

Michael Law  
History, Class of 2018  
UCLA

Color was very important in the illumination of medieval manuscripts. It brought the images on the page to life and captivated the readers. Context was crucial and each hue conveyed a symbolic meaning. For example, green could signal new life, while red could symbolize Christ's wounds or the flames of hell.

Illuminators employed a wide range of colorants. Organic pigments were derived from plants or insects. Inorganic pigments were derived from metals such as gold and silver, or produced from minerals ground into powder and mixed with a liquid binder such as egg whites. Many pigments were extracted from locally sourced plants, but others required ingredients from as far away as South East Asia.



## GOLD LEAF

The term "illuminated" refers to a manuscript containing gold or silver. Gold leaf was applied to a manuscript before the paint, as a careless application of the delicate gold leaf could ruin any paint already present on the page. Gold would be hammered into thin leaves. The illuminator would then spend countless hours applying the leaves. This was a labor of love; careful application of gold was seen as a form of religious devotion. The light-reflecting properties of gold leaf symbolized divine wisdom and spiritual illumination, and comprised the golden halo in depictions of Christ.



## RED

Red was associated with power and importance. It was the most commonly used color in medieval illuminations and came in a variety of shades. Red was the color of selfless love associated with the wounds suffered by Christ because of his love for humanity. It was also used to represent fire and the flames of punishment in purgatory or hell.



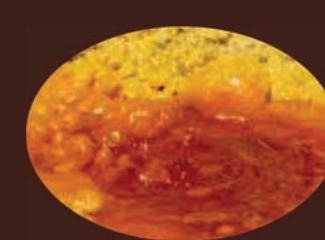
**Dragon's Blood** was a shade said to be made by mixing the blood of elephants and dragons that had killed each other in battle. In reality, it was sourced from *Dracaena cinnabari*, also known as the Dragon Blood tree native to the Arabian Peninsula.



**Minium** was a less expensive shade made with naturally occurring red lead tetroxide. It was used for the addition of red letters to text, a technique known as rubrication. The pigment was called *minium* for its frequent use in text and other miniatures.



**Crimson**, also known as *kermes*, was extracted from the insect *Kermes vermilio*, which is native to the Mediterranean region and lives on the sap of the Kermes oak.

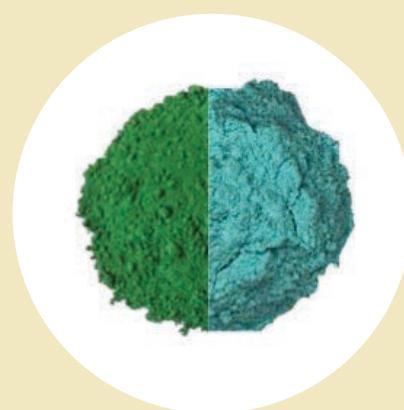


**Vermilion** was made from heating a mixture of mercury and sulphur, and then collecting and grinding the deposits. Since it was almost as expensive as gold leaf, it was reserved for only the most important illuminations.



## BLUE

Blue symbolized faithfulness, spirituality, and heavenly grace. It was used in images of the Virgin to communicate hope or good health. Its most common source was azurite, a dense stone rich in copper found throughout Europe.



## GREEN

Green symbolized nature, fertility, bountifulness, and freedom from bondage. It represented the season between Easter and Advent.



## YELLOW

Yellow symbolized hope, renewal, light, and purity. It was made by drying the stigmas of the *Crocus sativus* flower, more commonly known as saffron, to create a rich golden yellow powder. It was highly expensive, owing mostly to the labor needed to collect the stigmas.



## PURPLE

Purple was associated with royalty, as purple togas had been worn by the Roman emperors. Purple also symbolized will power in the form of penitence and the observance of Lent. Purple pigment was made from the mucus produced by *Bolinus brandaris*, a predatory sea snail found in the Mediterranean Sea.

**Ultramarine** was a shade of blue prized above all others and notorious for its cost. It was more expensive than gold during the Renaissance because it was made from the semi-precious stone lapis lazuli, found only in Afghanistan. It was transported in bags from camel trains, to carts, and ships, before being purchased in Europe. In manuscripts, ultramarine was often reserved for the cloaks of Christ or the Virgin Mary.

**Verdigris** was a shade of green created by boiling copper plates in vinegar or urine. Verdigris paint is known to destroy parchment. As a result, some manuscripts have holes in the areas of the page where this paint was applied.

**Malachite**, a copper carbonate based mineral found in the British Isles and other parts of Europe, provided another, darker shade of green.