Illuminated Manuscripts:
How Medieval Books Were Made

- **Welcome:** handmade books still fascinate visitors, students, and book lovers
- Each manuscript is unique — months or years of work by many hands
- **Definition:** hand-written book decorated with gold, silver, and bright colors
- **"Illuminated"** comes from Latin *illuminare* — "lit up" with metal
- **Manuscript** = written by hand (*manus* + *scriptus*), not printed
- **Only** about 5% of medieval books were richly illuminated
- **Roadmap:** parchment, pigments, scribes, scripts, painting, binding, patrons, close looking



What Counts as an Illuminated Manuscript

- Hand-written books decorated with gold or silver and bright colors
- Not grisaille: monochrome grey decoration does not count
- Forms range from a single gilded letter to full painted cycles
- Earliest survivors date from late antiquity, c. 400–600 CE
- Flourished through the Middle Ages; declined after printing in the mid-1400s
- Latin West, Byzantine, and Islamic traditions; comparable Asian works are 'painted'



The Evidence in the Object:
How We Know What We Know

- Manuscripts are our best-preserved medieval paintings — often the only survivors
- Primary evidence: parchment, script, pigments, sewing, colophons, wear marks
- Secondary evidence: recipe collections and treatises like Cennini's 1390 handbook
- Workshop pattern books and unfinished manuscripts reveal production steps
- Modern tools — microscopy, infrared, spectroscopy — identify pigments and underdrawings



From Animal Skin to Page: Making Parchment and Vellum

- Parchment: prepared animal skin, usually sheep, goat, or calf; vellum means fine calfskin
- Soak skins in limewater for days to loosen hair, then scrape with a crescent-shaped lunellum
- Stretch on a frame and alternate scraping, wetting, and drying for several days
- Finish with pumice and chalk so the surface accepts ink
- One calfskin yields about three and a half medium sheets — so a large Bible took hundreds of animals
- In the case: hair side is yellower with follicle marks; flesh side smoother and whiter
- Look for natural flaws, veining, and holes stitched or decorated







Inks, Pigments, and Gold: The Illuminator's Palette

- Iron gall ink: oak galls, iron salts, gum arabic — acidic, can burn pages
- Color families: mineral (azurite, malachite, lapis), earth, manufactured, organic
- Ultramarine blue ground from lapis lazuli, traded vast distances at great cost
- Binders: glair (clarified egg white) or gum arabic turned pigments into paint
- Toxic pigments (lead white, vermilion, orpiment) handled with care; 'mosaic gold' substituted



Writing in Gold: Gilding Techniques

- Two forms of gold: tissue-thin leaf and shell gold kept in mussel shells
- Water gilding: raised gesso cushion over reddish bole, then gold leaf burnished
- Burnish with agate, stone, or animal tooth for a mirror shine
- Gilding came first, before pigments, so polishing would not spoil painted surfaces
- From the 12th century, burnished gold became the hallmark of an illuminated page



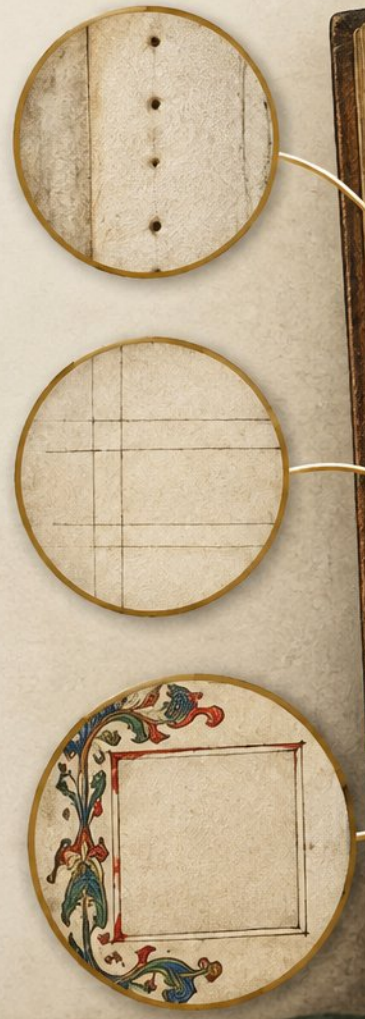
The Scriptorium and the Scribe's Work

- Scriptoria: monastic rooms, cathedral workshops, later urban ateliers run by a *libraire*
- Copyists included monks, nuns, and lay professionals; records name women as *scriba* or *scriptrix*
- Tools: goose or swan quill, penknife, ink horn, awl, ruling tools, spectacles from the 1300s
- Scribes complained in colophons of exhausting work bending the neck
- Roughly 200 lines a day, so a large book meant months of labor

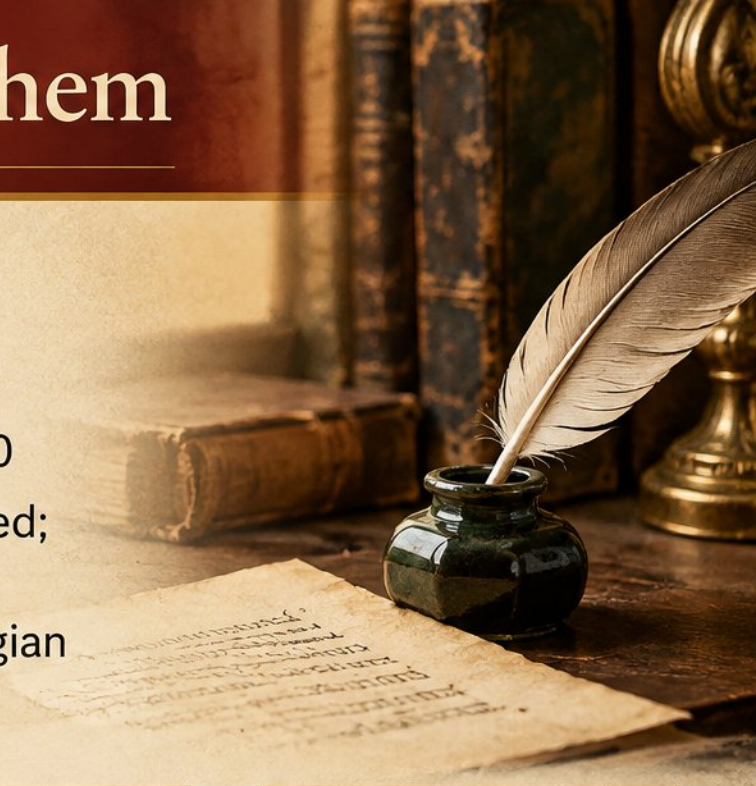


Laying Out the Page Before the First Word

- **Pricking:** awl-pierced holes along the margins guide evenly spaced lines
- **Ruling:** dry point, plummet, or ink — often trimmed away in binding
- **Page architecture:** text columns, margins, red rubrics, running heads, ranked initials
- **Decoration** planned before copying; blank spaces sometimes never filled
- **Short lines**, roughly four to nine words, shaped page and decoration



Scripts and How to Read Them



- Four major families: uncial, Carolingian minuscule, Gothic textualis, humanist minuscule
- Uncial: round capitals, c. 4th–8th centuries
- Carolingian minuscule: clear four-line system, after c. 800
- Gothic textualis: angular, compressed, heavily abbreviated; pen at 45° for thick-thin shading
- Humanist minuscule: 15th-century Italy, reviving Carolingian forms; ancestor of 'antiqua' type

DOMINVS
ILLVMINA
TIO MEA

Uncial

in principio
erat verbum
et verbum
erat apud deum

Carolingian minuscule

Omnis homo
mortalis eſt
et quasi flos
fili apparet

Gothic textualis

ad maiorem
dei gloriam
et ad bonum
omnium

Humanist minuscule

Uncial: round capitals, c. 4th–8th centuries

Carolingian minuscule: clear four-line system, after c. 800

Gothic textualis: angular, compressed, heavily abbreviated; pen at 45° for thick-thin shading

Humanist minuscule: 15th-century Italy, reviving Carolingian forms; ancestor of 'antiqua' type

Painting the Page:
Techniques and Regional Styles

- Sequence: underdrawing in leadpoint or ink, then gilding and burnishing, then paint
- Paint in stages: mid-tone base, darker shadows, then pale highlights
- Vocabulary: decorated and historiated initials, borders, miniatures, line-fillers, marginalia
- Regional idioms: Insular, Carolingian, Ottonian, Romanesque, Gothic, International Gothic
- Centers: Paris, then Bruges, Ghent, and Valenciennes; workshops split the labor
- Unfinished books like the Douce Apocalypse reveal each step


Insular


Carolingian


Ottonian


Romanesque


Gothic


International Gothic



Binding and Assembling the Book

- Folded sheets nest into gatherings, ordered by catchwords, sewn all-along onto cords
- Carolingian: cords laced through the board edge; Romanesque: thick tawed-skin supports, chemise
- Gothic: supports laced through the board face, rounded spine, raised bands, clasps
- Heavy oak boards keep springy parchment flat; leather, blind tooling, metal corners
- Worn joints, torn endcaps, replaced clasps: clues to centuries of use









Patrons, Readers, and Uses of Medieval Books

- Commissioned by churches, rulers, universities, merchants, and lay readers
- Production moved from monasteries to commercial urban workshops from the 12th century
- Genres: Bibles, psalters, books of hours, law, medicine, chronicles, romances, cookbooks
- Books of hours: a lay 'bestseller' with personalized saints and owner portraits
- Clues of use: coats of arms, feminine prayers (*famula tua*), rub marks, added prayers



Close Looking: Reading a Manuscript in the Museum



- Check support, script, layout, ruling, pigments, gold, then later marks
- Spot evidence of making and use: corrections, doodles, thumbprints, repairs, inscriptions
- Read openings together: rubric, miniature, and new section working as one
- Lights stay dim: about 50 lux, UV filtered, pages rotated and time-limited
- Light damage is cumulative and permanent; parchment needs stable humidity

Hands-On Practice and Where to Explore Next

Takeaway: books were made by many hands from skin, pigment, and gold

Try it: match scripts, sketch a page layout, spot pricking and ruling

Explore online: Digital Bodleian, Gallica, DigiVatLib, e-codices, IIIF search tools

Visit in person: special-collections galleries, facsimiles, and handling sessions

Keep learning: printed reading lists and glossaries for further study



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