ILLUMINATION: a Progressive Development

In the beginning…

For millennia, art, in the form of repeating patterns, zoomorphics and, later, biblical records, has been a significant anthropological and natural history record of the nations of the world. Understanding their depiction (symbolized on the walls of stone-age caves, on the walls of an Egyptian pharaoh's tomb, in precious shards of pottery unearthed over time by water and wind) has been ruthlessly pursued by man in his quest to answer questions posed by the remnants of history. This quest has brought a continual and fundamental order to what might otherwise seem a decorative chaos.

Since monastic clergymen jealously competed to produce the most flamboyant designs for the two undisputed 'gems' of illumination: *The Book of Kells* and its great rival *The Lindisfarne Gospels*, scholars have argued indifinitively as to which of these two magnificent volumes is the best, or which came before the other. However, if the former is personal taste, and absolute proof of the latter cannot be found, why argue? Perhaps focus should be on the distinct beauty of each book, and on an appreciation of the enormous effect their content has had on calligraphy and design in this beautiful art from, in particular, from around the seventh century AD to the present day.

It is quite probable that designs developed independently in different countries, but there is an incredible similarity in patterns across different nations, evident in the remains of ancient carved stonework and more recent architecture. Each distinct decorative generation appears to have followed general rules, built upon previous foundations, which successively propelled the illumination revolution of each period in history.

BC to the 4th century AD

Around 4000 BC the Phoenician alphabet, which at that time consisted of 22 letters (rather than today's 24), was adopted by neighbouring developing nations, including the Greeks, which over time 'reformed' into the modern Roman style during the first century AD. The shapes, or letter models, inspired early scribes to develop complicated patterns and motifs around the capital letters at the beginning of a script which complemented the stories told.

The original square capitals of the Phoenician alphabet were not easy to read, so the move towards Roman (modern) lettering began, as the Roman empire spread and its laws were imposed upon the peoples of conquered nations. Education was paramount for the Romans to be able to exert power over their dominions, which resulted in the Roman letter styles becoming both easier to read and faster to write (as well as being easier and quicker to learn). This new informal style was known as 'Rustica'—which enabled 'quick' notes and informal letters to be written and read amongst the growing literate. Rustica was the dominant form of informal writing in the first to fourth centuries AD with the fall of the Roman empire, after which time, it continued to be used as a decorative art form well into the tenth century.

Letters *per se*

The basic forms of European alphabet letters have evolved over millennia, from Phoenician capitals, through Roman influences, and emerging as the modern forms of 'big' and little' letters in use today. We use capital letters for importance, and small letters to tell a story—a usage passed down from ancient times. Different names are given to capitals, such as 'upper case' or 'majuscules' (depending on the era historically), and these are the letters which artists have embellished and bordered to enrich a page of script. 'Little' letters are used for the prose on a page and are known as 'lower case' or 'minuscules'. The terms 'upper' and 'lower' case stem from the simple fact that when type was set by hand ready for the press (*circa* fifteenth century), capitals were placed in the 'upper' tray (or case) and small letters in the 'lower' tray.

Letters with ascenders, such as b, d or l, and those with descenders, such as g, p or y, in the lower-case form, are much easier to read in large blocks because of the differences in letter levels. This leaves much room for adornment of the sparse 'big' letters. Illumination takes an initial capital letter on a page and surrounds it with all manner of patterns, flora and fauna to propel its particular importance off the page to the reader's eye; other capitals on the page are given slighter importance by sweeping curves emanating from suitable points on a particular letter, or, for example in the Celtic style, completely surrounding a letter with rows of red dots.

There are too many illuminated letter-types in existence to portray all of them in this necessarily succinct paper, but it should be noted that some typefaces have greatly influenced the wealth of imaginative artwork which has been 'saved' for our pleasure today. (As successive generations of rulers and monarchs have either decried the Christian religion, or behested absolute obedience to it, it is really surprising that any of the old manuscripts has survived at all.)

The Progressive Development

A brief description of a few styles of illumination are given below, in chronological sequence which, incidentally, have no hard and fast boundary dates because the progressive development has incorporated the rules and patterns from one period to another. Thus styles have become interactive, overlapping and thoroughly entwined.

Embellishment of a script historically has been influenced by the particular style of lettering used. This is because the texts were set down initially and illumination of the characters followed. (Perhaps mistakes in illuminating were easier to cover up than errors in penning the text!)

Monks and Missionaries (Celtic, sixth to eighth centuries)

Ancient Celtic art, in the form of, in particular, stone crosses and other pagan stonework, obviously influenced the monastic scribes in the portrayal of Christian texts during this period. Most scribes of the day were monks who produced many manuscripts that were carried far and wide by missionaries and used to spread the word of Christianity to pagan Britain and Europe.

Usually four or more persons were involved in the production of a volume, each with a specific task. Firstly, all the text was penned onto separate 'skin' (vellum)

parchment leaves, then the illuminated embellishment of certain important letters followed. The individual leaves would then be bound, and finally the volume cover added and embellished with precious stones and gold and silver.

Gold leaf (which was available at that time, and was used liberally in illuminated designs in later times), for reasons unknown, was substituted by a rich yellow pigment called 'orpiment', made from arsenic sulphide. As well as the imitation gold (orpiment) yellow, the artists palette consisted only of a few other vibrant and contrasting colours, including dark brown or black, lemon yellow, deep green, crimson(s) and white—a tiny amount of which was added to any one of the other colours to make them opaque.

Celtic letter forms were usually rounded, being squeezed or widened by the artist to fit a particular design and text layouts. The letters were either insular half uncial (lower case) for the main texts, or angular capitals for initial and other important letters. Many texts had English translations (usually added some, or even hundreds of, years later) written between the lines of original text in tiny, but readable, letters.

Most illuminated letters are outlined with a dark colour and the complementary, vivid fill-in colours would abut so that no gaps were showing (except, of course, where it was intended). Not much evidence has remained about how the artists actually prepared and carried out their work, as no known drafts of works are in existence. However, quantitative assumptions have been worked out, which have produced the same (or very near) results.

Illuminated letters in the Celtic design follow similar traits, for example, outlining in a dark colour and filled with the vibrant orpiment 'gold', with strategically placed white space (either white pigment or the natural vellum) showing through. The stylized zoomorphics, or fictitious and contrived animal characters, and complicated, intertwining spiral, maze and knotwork patterns which surround the letters are filled with less bright, opaque tints (white with a bit of pigment added to ensure the eye is drawn immediately to the decorated letter itself.)

As well as bordering the text, in particular, these strange creatures, spirals and knots emanate from strategic parts of an illuminated letter which, although not part of its structure, nevertheless flow from it to form an intricate extension which either hangs away from or infills and complements the letter shape. The real give-away in the Celtic traditions are the uniform rows of bright red or crimson dots which surround the illuminated letter. This is perceived to show the great importance of a letter. Red dots also appear in some manuscripts around other smaller, but obviously still important, letters within the text itself. And, further, the red dots are used to fill in white space to encapsulate an initial letter and tie it to other important elements on a page.

The very limited palette was avidly compensated by the unbelievable creations that the scribes applied to the borders and motifs in the texts, particularly on the 'carpet pages (which existed as sheer flamboyant patterned pages within a manuscript, with no text) and on the 'incipit' pages (introductory or title pages). The highly complex repeating knotwork and spiral patterns are intricated amongst the zoomorphic characters to form a highly dense, but ordered and pleasing pattern. Although there are relatively few basic patterns, these were transformed into a myriad of pictures of which few were similar—so each appeared to be unique.

The Celtic style has proved to be the lynchpin in tying successive generations of the illumination art form together: in the twenty-first century, illuminated patterns have a structure which repeats and overlaps, albeit some (such as in the Renaissance era, fifteenth to seventeenth centuries) are more loose and flamboyant than others, but nevertheless the principles have remained the same: an ordered, contrived, patterned beauty. This writer found the absolute intricacies of this art form too tempting not to try. There are a wealth of books available which break down and demonstrate how to produce the delicate knots and spirals, which have proved invaluable to this artist in her first attempt to produce an illuminated letter.

The iconic scripts in the *Book of Kells* have been placed by one historian, Sir Edward Sullivan, as '9th century', but controversial legend sets its production by monks, led by St Columba in the Monastery of Kells (town of Kells, County Meath, Ireland) at around 650 AD.

Rumour has it that the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were produced in memory of St Cuthbert (born *circa 638*), a very kind person whose miracles were related to stories of animals. Janet Backhouse mentions that mid-tenth century, 250 years after its compilation, an English translation was added between each original line by a priest called 'Aldred'. He listed Bishop Eadfrith, and Bishop Ethelwald, both of Lindisfarne as the original author and binder respectively, and a religious anchorite (recluse) known as 'Billfrith' who crafted the pure metal and precious gems in the outside decoration of the volume. No mention is made of the artists employed to illuminate the script written by Bishop Eadfrith—but we may tentatively assume it was by several monks of the day who resided at the Lindisfarne monastery.

Charlemagne's standard form (Carolingian, ninth and tenth centuries)

Rulers of Europe through every era appear to have exercised a 'crown' right to impose their personal styles and beliefs on the ruled nations. Charlemagne (first king of Franks, and Holy Roman Emperor) was no exception. His insistence on informing and educating his minions led to what some historians term as the most significant letter form since the invention of the Roman alphabet. The very free form of his introductory letter style set the standards which are still in use in the twenty-first century. There was only one thing lacking: capital letters in the same style. To get over this hurdle, scribes continued to draw on the styles of Roman and Rustica, and later developed their own (missal versals) which were made up from several different strokes rather than one flowing line, which were then heavily decorated by artists with gold and lined with pictorial illuminations. The emphasis during this era points to an accessible script which was easier to read and write, rather than embellishment of key letters in a pompous manuscript.

Ottonian Glory (tenth and eleventh centuries)

The Carolingian style influenced the Ottonian texts, but in following the 'fashion' of the day, the illuminators had even fewer colours to their palette than did the Celtic artists, but this lack of colours was compensated by their extraordinarily heavy use of gold ornament in their work. The lettering style was more rounded than the Celtic, although the text manuscript was easier to read.

In contrast with the Celtic style, the illuminated capital letters sat apart from the text in their own gold shroud—the letter being nearly buried beneath a sea of twining and knotting which almost suffocated the shape of the letter itself. However, because the sheets of vellum were usually covered with purple dye, the gold 'blasted' from its dark background. This was the beginning of the more flamboyant floral designs at this time, usually in the borders, which were to grow and flourish in future eras. Also, the Celtic knotwork designs took on a vine-slant, with florets and leaves protruding from the letter intersections. But the basic knot pattern still encompassed the main letter—both within it and around it! This era also saw the introduction of geometric designs, based on flat Celtic maze patterns.

As well as the [over]-use of gold, the four main colours were blue or violet, green, scarlet and yellow.

The Monks diversify (Romanesque, eleventh to twelfth centuries)

By the eleventh century the production of religious texts in Europe had escalated and the church became very wealthy. To capitalise on its new-found wealth, the church also deployed its scribes to the production of herbals and bestiaries for scholars of plants (and their uses, particularly in the making of medicines) and of animals.

Romanesque illumination, like the Ottonian style, also had a lack of colours in the palette, but included deep green, brown and crimson, pale yellow, ultramarine blue and white. Colour application was again with opaque sections which were then outlined in a contrasting colour. however the new dimension to this style was the application of thin, darker or lighter, strokes applied strategically over the flat base colour to give a feeling of creases in the foliate patterns and other motifs. This was the beginning of adding tonal qualities to the letters, giving the heretofore flat artwork a more varied appearance—although the true 3-D effect had still not come into play.

Designs now made constant use of acanthus leaves (in many differing forms) which were placed at the unencumbered points of letters, for example, an 'X' would have four acanthus motifs protruding at the end of each salient point. The body of the letter would be raised by applied gesso and burnished gold leaf, and two or three primary colours (usually red and green) would be the colours in the motifs. White pigment would be added to one or both primary colours and this pale hue would be incorporated in the design to break up the harsh lines of the darker colours. The ribs of darker or lighter colour (including white) were painted over the base colour.

Other designs included Celtic knotwork at the endpoints of letters with a 'bow' of acanthus straddling the middle section of the letter. Others had patterns of acanthus leaves in their wide stems and round edges and the elements of the letter were connected by interlaced knotwork.

Borders and motifs also included repeating the florate patterns and interlaced Celtic knots and, in particular, some borders were based on Roman architecture and stonework, incorporating gargoyles and other zoomorphic creatures and pedestals and rounded arches.

The 'minions' take over (Gothic, mainly thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but also later into the sixteenth century)

The Middle Ages saw the beginning of the educated layman: a proliferation of bureaucracy and the entrepreneur led to an increasing demand to record civil and business matters, including government policy, law, general administration of companies and books for education.

The monks lost their absolute reign as scribes for, as well as religious texts, books for increasing numbers of scholars, reference manuals, almanacs, books of Hours (for private prayer and worship) were now needed. So the 'industry' opened up, giving craftsmen generally a chance to join the 'book club', which in turn pulled in artists from all directions—each probably contributing their own particular nuances to the traditional styles.

Gothic illumination saw the grotesque and invented animal motifs portrayed in margins and borders. But it is at this particular juncture also that the portrayal of these contrived creatures and flowers, including whole pictures—themed on the story written in the texts, came into being—these representations being much more accurately depicted than in previous eras. Heraldry also showed its face, so patrons often had their coats of arms included in a commission. Some pictorial depictions and illuminations showed a detailed understanding of the text to which they were attached, others involved hidden idiosyncratic or humorous meanings such as a modest portrait of the artist in a corner, or over-embellishment so that the pictures overrode the importance of reading the text. And, monkeys, for instance, could be seen riding on the backs of lions!

The general style of lettering moved away from the roundels of previous generations, which were replaced by the narrow, sharply pointed, almost indecipherable letters of formal documents of the time. This style was also known as 'Black Letter'. Alongside the Black Letter format a more informal style evolved, namely 'Rotunda', which was slightly more spaced and rounded and therefore easier to read. At this moment in time the need to mix generations of upper and lower case letters for illumination purposes ceased, as the Gothic-letter principles could be, and were, applied to both.

The colours in the Gothic artist's palette were still few, mostly scarlet, ultramarine blue, white and black. But the decoration had changed: rather than incorporating gold into the actual body of a letter, now the genre was to place the letters in a box or bordered shape with a background of raised gold into which the letter was 'sunk'. The gold was also dented to form extra patterns which in places subtly altered its shine. The straight trunks and bulbous rounds of the letters were filled with opaque (flat) colour and complementary patterns, florate and architectural, were fashioned by over painting in white and lighter hues of the base colour.

As well as the box-type illumination another Gothic style was to extend the ends of certain letters, in particular those with straight or angular letters such as T, P or A, and filling these with the borders mentioned above. Thin, long, wavy lines or slender vine stems were introduced, from which emanated prickly palmate leaves, attached to short stems, interspersed with circles and five-petal flower-shapes, including the now ever-present varieties of acanthus leaves.

Gothic-style illumination remained a huge influence on successive progressive developments until well into the sixteenth century.

What goes around, comes around! (Renaissance, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries)

And so, there was a move to revive something great from the past. Renaissance-style illuminators were fed up with the drudgeries of the cold, grotesquerie of Gothicism and cast out this dark cloud of dooming pictoriality and replaced it with a new, flamboyant and exciting elegance. Based on a combination of the old Celtic, through Ottonian, to Romanesque, 're-birth' is probably a better term than 'new' for this particular progression. The Renaissance style itself took on board all the wonderful patterns, knotwork, vines and flamboyant gold relief of the sixth to twelfth centuries and moulded them into a fresh, delicate and exact science: illuminary artists now exercised a remarkable understanding of the anatomy of both flora and fauna. Two distinct variations in design appeared within this new age, namely 'White Vine' (Humanist) and 'Neo-Classical' (Classical Roman).

The **White Vine**-style introduced vines intertwining amongst letters which bonded one letter with another. Rather excessive use of 'vinery' was encapsulated in heavy border patterns which surrounded the text and ran down one, two, three or even four sides of a page. The vine itself was cleverly twisted in and out of zoomorphic motifs, generally with less intricate floral cadenza.

In borders, rather than gilded or 'flat' painted, as in previous eras, the white vine was left blank (vellum showing), with occasional light-brown shading where shadows would fall on the cross-overs, but they continued to be outlined with a dark colour. The spaces between and around the vine to the straight border lines were filled in, usually with the three primary colours of red, green and blue, with a 'balancing' painted and raised gold areas and lines. The red dots which had surrounded Celtic letters in the sixth to eighth centuries now transformed into white dots, normally in triangular groups of three, on the red and blue-filled spaces. Round motifs of laurel leaves also appeared in the designs.

The overall picture in a white-vine illuminated page is one of really organised, balanced and tranquil beauty—which is rather surprising since most of the contents in the borders were not designed symmetrically and patterns and motifs which appear to match, on close inspection, do not. The vine itself would emanate perhaps from a central point, say, in the bottom border, and split into several branches which would 'grow' non-symmetrically along and around the text within a line border.

This type of illumination was indeed a beautiful re-birth of an ancient art. The basic palette for white vine used mainly the three primary colours, with dark brown for outlining, and white for the dots and other overlaid motifs. However, a new dimension to the flat-look was the introduction of shading, especially in and around the vine and its tendrils, and in the figures and animals portrayed within the border patterns.

But a whole new artistic development flowed when artist and scribes in northern Italy decided to base their 're-birth' on the inscriptions previously laid in ancient stonework and in architectural embellishments on old Roman buildings. This was the other variation of the day—'**Neo-Classical**'.

Artists during the mid to late-fifteenth century had a great advantage over those who had gone before in that the early printing press was producing a much greater volume of scripts which still needed illuminating by hand.

These new-age artists were already painting with ‘realism’ and they readily applied this naturalness to their illumination designs.

As well as solid gold letters similar to those of the White Vine, this style included letters with ‘cut’ elements, for example, a capital ‘R’ would be heavily outlined with shell gold and its straight and rounded elements would be hollowed out, leaving the background shading to show through. Shadows were also strategically placed within the hollows to lift the lines of the letter away from its background. These letters were usually adorned with thin and intricate gold filigree decoration with five-petal florets at the end of each part of the vine.

Some scripted pages, after embellishment, looked literally like the facade of a building, especially with laurel-stone arches and figurative stone pillars, with perhaps a fountain adorned with a coat of arms or similar, flanked by a couple of human figures. As this style was based on stonework carvings, the background was usually washed with a light colour and over the top, successive coats of a dark, complementary colour were hatched, giving the appearance of rough stone. It followed that the important letters in the script should also resemble stonework. To achieve this, shell gold was used, first in a thin smooth coat, then a second coat was applied using small, cross-hatched strokes. Burnishing then brought the gold to brilliance, which was then dampened by applying dark brown shading (again using cross-hatching) on one or other side of the letter’s elements to form shadows and shades which enhanced the ‘carved-in-stone’ effect.

The patterns which weaved (mostly) behind the letter consisted mainly of a cornucopia (a symbol of plenty, consisting of a goat’s horn overflowing with flowers fruit and corn) which was painted, using several bright colours, in layers—for instance leaves would have a base colour of diluted yellow, then a lighter green would be hatched over the top, leaving some yellow showing to indicate the direction of light, and a final top coat of dark green would be applied to areas in the ‘shade’. All the elements, including the letter itself, would finally be outlined with dark brown and thinly-stroked white highlights were added in appropriate areas. A new and very pleasing dimension was the absolute finishing touch: a shadow was placed along one side of the letters and around the accompanying motifs which miraculously lifted the whole letter and adornments from the background—3D had arrived!

Borders and motifs included the ever-present acanthus leaf, laurel leaves, heroic imagery (busts, etc), rosettes and strings of flower heads and beads, as well as ornate scrolls.

This style really is the forerunner to the next era (contemporary) of illumination, and paved the way for all manner of patterns and designs which have followed a truly wonderful re-birth in the art of illumination.

A second re-birth (Arts and Crafts movement, 1850 onwards)

It appears that the seventeenth century saw a huge decline in the need for illuminated scripts, probably because all books and papers were being produced by the printing press. This means that a few (and deprived) generations were unaware of the beauty and skills involved in the art of illumination.

William Morris (1834–1896) in the mid-eighteenth century, himself an accomplished artist and scribe, went against the new mass-production of the printed word, and

delved into the history of illumination by studying the surviving illuminated manuscripts. He felt it was very appropriate to rekindle the desire to learn this beautiful art form and brought it to the attention of the general public by designing and printing many wallpapers and fabrics based on the traditional illuminated letter designs. People again became aware of the extraordinary abilities of the 'old masters'—the monks who had sat endlessly painting in their cold, dingy monasteries as far back as the sixth century AD, and through the designs of William Morris again began to appreciate the beauty of this ancient art form.

The foresight of William Morris has elevated the craft of illuminated lettering to its well deserved place in the higher echelons of the history of art where it truly belongs.

Modern illumination has much media and method at its disposal, and, even though there are old rules to be followed, the modern-day artist who learns and uses it has a remarkable tool at their disposal. Although early depiction of the old patterns (Celtic/Gothic eras) requires a concise, measured system, as the art progressed, the free-flowing, naturalistic images of, for example, the renaissance in the late fifteenth century to those of William Morris in the mid-nineteenth century, have provided a wonderful array of beautifully detailed and accurate historical floral and zoomorphic images which are used by, and still influence the work of, designers and artists the world over, in the twenty-first century.

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