



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Presentation and Script

Slide One – Title Slide

Colour in Medieval Illuminations

By Rosie Nye

Third Year Archaeology Student



Speaker

Today I will be discussing the use of colour in Medieval Illuminations. During this presentation, I will be taking into consideration the different types of pigments and dyes used, how they can be examined and analysed, and what can be understood about these illuminations from the colours within the manuscripts.

Pigments and Dyes

- Illuminated Manuscripts are among some of the most precious artworks.
- Pigments – inorganic materials such as minerals and synthetics.
- Dyes – organic materials such as vegetable or animal.
- Different types of dyes/pigments can show how expensive the manuscript was to make.



Fig 1. Palettes of Paint on Parchment. (Aceto et al 2014: 3)

Speaker

According to a number of academics, including Aceto et al (2014), and John Harthan (1983), Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts are considered to be among the most precious pieces of artworks. They are stated as being a composite art form which ties together several artistic elements which, when combined, illustrate and embellish the text that it accompanies (Harthan 1983: 7). The actual creation of a manuscript is a complex and expensive undertaking. As a result, the science of codicology was developed in order to establish the order of the component parts.

Although there are a number of different components in the creation of manuscripts and their illuminations, I am going to be focusing on one specific aspect within this presentation. This aspect, as I have already mentioned, will be colour.

The two types of colour that were used during the creation of the manuscripts, were pigments and dyes (Aceto et al 2014: 1). Pigments are inorganic materials such as minerals or synthetic components. Whereas dyes are organic material such as plants and animals (Aceto et al 2014: 1).

Pigments and Dyes

- Blues and Reds had a hierarchy depending on what they were made of.
- Colours could be adjusted to suit the illuminator's needs.
- Metallic pigments; gold is the most popular and expensive.



Fig 1. Palettes of Paint on Parchment. (Aceto et al 2014: 3)

Speaker

What is interesting, is that the colours have a hierarchy in terms of pigments and dyes. Red and blue, as an example, have a definite hierarchy; a symbolic meaning to the colours accompanying the material value (Aceto et al 2014: 4). For example, cinnabar was the most prized of the red pigments with lapis lazuli being the most prized for blue. However, other dyes and pigments were concocted of less expensive materials. When looking at the red dyes, for example, madder was most commonly used, coming from *Rubia Tinctorum* (Aceto et al 2014: 4) a plant that is commonly found. Other colours, such as yellow and green, also came from organic origin and were therefore not as expensive. In contrast to these colours, when it came to the colour purple, an intricate methodology was followed of mixing the different dyes, or superimposing blue over red or vice versa, to produce the colour, as no purple pigment was available (Aceto et al 2014: 7). Tyrian Purple was extremely valuable; a social statement showing off the fact that you have the money to spare on such a manuscript.

Metallic pigments are another aspect of colour which is prevalent in medieval illuminations. These would often be used in powder or leaf form with the former being known as shell metal (Aceto et al 2014: 8). Expense again comes into play as the most popular and valuable metallic pigment was that of gold (Aceto et al 2014: 8). However, there were cheaper colourants that were used. For example, mosaic gold; so named due to its resemblance to pure gold although made of tin sulphide.

In this, very, brief examination of the different pigments, which has focused on the more valuable ones, it is clear that an illuminated manuscript is an expensive endeavour. Something that will be further discussed when examining the illuminations themselves.

Slide Four – How Pigments and Dyes are detected.

How pigments and dyes are detected.

- Raman spectroscopy.
- X-ray fluorescence spectrometry (XRF).
- Ultra-violet and visible spectrophotometry.
- PRAXIS

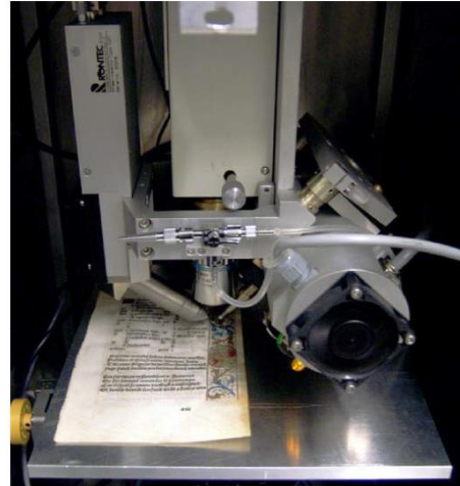


Fig 2. The PRAXIS instrument, analysing the colour of a medieval manuscript (Van Der Snickt et al 2008: 61)

Speaker

What I shall now quickly discuss, before examining the illuminations themselves, are the different ways in which pigments and dyes can be detected and identified. What first needs to be mentioned, is that the examination of the pigments and dyes within the manuscripts can be difficult due to issues with sampling (Scott et al 2001). However, there are non-destructive methods of detection and identification (Van Der Snickt et al 2008: 59), which is what will be discussed. Raman spectroscopy has been stated as being the most efficient in the identification of colourants (Aceto et al 2014: 1). Other techniques to identify the pigments and dyes, include x-ray fluorescence spectrometry, also known as XRF, and ultraviolet and visible, or UV-Vis, spectrophotometry as well as the use of PRAXIS (Wehling et al 1999: 253). When looking at XRF, there are clear issues due to the fact that x-rays go through the parchment foils and therefore do not provide pigment identification (Van Der Snickt et al 2008: 60) However, UV-Vis has been praised as being particularly suitable for the analysis of illuminated manuscripts as, when it is in diffuse reflective mode, it presents some of the characteristics which allow for pigment identification (Aceto et al 2014: 2). The benefits of all the methods mentioned can be seen in the fact that no physical or chemical damage is subjected to the area which is being analysed. Furthermore, it is relatively inexpensive.

Slide Five – The Lampeter Bible

The Lampeter Bible

Fig 3-7. The first page of the Lampeter Bible. (MS i)



Speaker

As interesting as it would be to use the equipment previously mentioned in the analysis of the next few manuscripts, unfortunately this is not a possibility. However, an analysis can be undertaken on the colours that have been used which will also allow for judgements to be made. The first being the Lampeter Bible (MS i). Finished in 1279, the first page presents the text with an illustrated border to the left of the page. The most prominent colour is blue with hints of gold and red. However, due to a lack of analysis, it is difficult to state exactly which pigments were used and to what value this could be; as previously mentioned, certain pigments and dyes were of more value than others. Even so, it can be suggested that the pigments which were used, were of value due to the religious nature of the book, as well as its size. Furthermore, each of the miniatures present in the illumination are meticulously painted; again blue is the most prominent colour which denotes symbolic and monetary value.

The Hours of the Virgin Mary



Fig 8-9. Extract from the Hours of the Virgin Mary (MS vi)

Speaker

When comparing the Hours of the Virgin Mary (MS iv) and the Lampeter Bible (MS i), it is clear that both blue and gold are two of the most prominent colours. Again, due to the lack of analysis, I am unsure as to the exact pigments that would have been used. However, if we assume that the gold is exactly that, it would not be wrong to imply that the manuscript would have been commissioned by someone with wealth. The majority of the colours which are used were considered valuable; both symbolic and monetary. What is immediately noticeable is that the gold is far more prominent in this illumination than that of the Lampeter Bible. What is also interesting is that the gold is present on key words within the text itself, something not included on the other manuscripts which are being discussed. Other colours can be seen in this illumination; pinks, greens and oranges have also been used.

Slide Seven – The Book of Hours of the Virgin Mary

The Book of Hours of the Virgin Mary

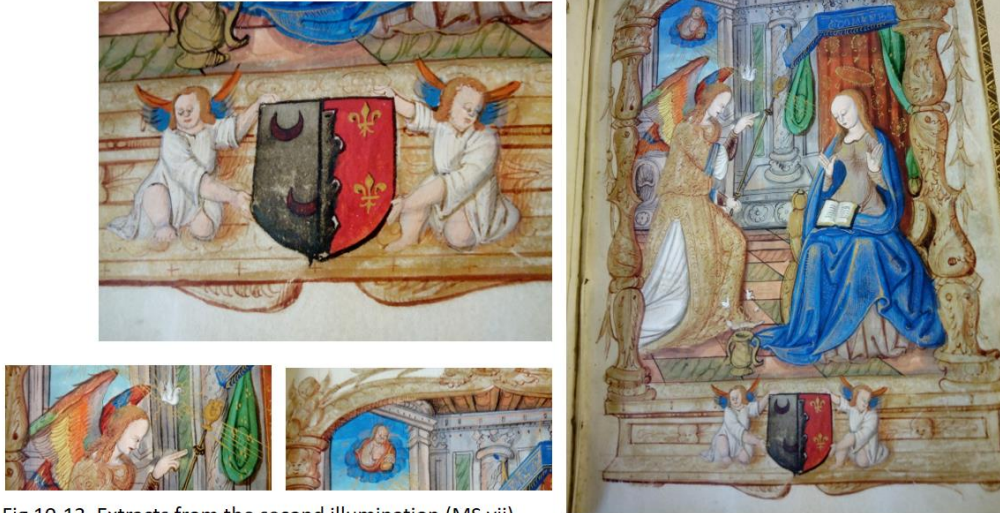


Fig 10-13. Extracts from the second illumination (MS vii)

Speaker

The illumination that will now be looked at is the second image in the Book of Hours of the Virgin Mary (MS vii). Showing the Annunciation, what is immediately noticeable is the contrast in the colour between this Book of Hours and the former. Although blue is still a prominent colour, it is used far less and also is a different shade; suggesting that the blue is either made of a less valuable pigment or has dulled due to age. What is also interesting when examining this illumination, is that there is more variety in the pigments and dyes used. Whereas, in the previous illuminations the colours used were predominantly blue, gold, red/pink and green, here there is far more variety. Immediately noticeable are the vibrant, rainbow-coloured wings on the Arch-Angel Gabriel. However, despite the variety, there is no gold; a stark contrast to Hours of the Virgin Mary and the Lampeter Bible. This could be due to the fact that gold pigment is, as has been mentioned, one of the more expensive pigments. It would not be altogether wrong to suggest that, due to expense, the Boddams, the family that commissioned the book (Roderic Bowen Archive and Library, 2018), could not afford the gold. Therefore, from just the colours used, or in this case not used, you can begin to deduce the wealth of the people who had owned the book. In this case, from the pigments, it can be stated that the people who commissioned this illuminated manuscript, although probably well-off were not substantially wealthy. As such, from just the pigments and dyes you are able to obtain an understanding of the people who commissioned the book.

Slide Eight – Disbound Manuscript

Disbound Manuscript

Fig 14-16. Illumination from the additional sleeve (MS viii)



Speaker

The final illumination that will be examined is a full-page picture of the Virgin Mary, Christ and Shepherds (MS viii). Again, as with the previous image, the colours are dull, although this could be due to age. Blue is again not as prominent, possibly due to cost, although there is a wider variety of colours. Yet again, gold is not featured. As all of these images are in chronological order, and both this picture and the Book of Hours on the previous slide, do not include the gold pigment, it could be implied that the use of gold in illuminations diminished over the course of the 13th, 14th and 15th Centuries. However, what needs to be remembered is that I have only examined four possible images. Therefore, a far more in-depth analysis of colour would need to be undertaken to draw such conclusions.

Slide Nine - Conclusion

Conclusion

- There are different pigments and dyes used depending on the hierarchy of colours and what can be afforded.
- There are specific techniques that can be used to detect and identify different pigments and dyes.
- The types of pigments and dyes used can give indications as to the wealth of the individuals commissioning the manuscripts



Fig 10. Extracts from the second illumination (MS vii)

Speaker

Over the course of this presentation I have attempted to discuss the different types of pigments and dyes, show how they can be detected and identified as well show how pigments can be used to obtain understandings of the populous involved with the creation of the manuscripts through the examination of four different illuminations. Thank you for listening.

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