

ILLUMINARE: THE USES AND EMBELLISHMENT OF GOLD AND OTHER METALLIC LEAF AND INKS IN MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE MANUSCRIPT PAINTING

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The history of gilded backgrounds and metallic elements in painting is not limited to the history of monumental painting or gold ground panels. The lavish use of gold to decorate letterforms, backgrounds of images, elements within compositions, as well as border decorations has come to characterize the art of painting in codices through the entire history of western medieval and Renaissance European and Byzantine manuscripts.

The term used to refer to paintings within books --'illuminations'-- derives from the Latin 'illuminare' and thus refers to the painted decorations in codices being 'lit up with gold' by the elaborate and luxurious application of gold in its many forms on the pages of books. For its spiritual connotations in addition to its value as a material, gold was used to embellish the word of God. The use of gold leaf and metallic inks on the page elevated religious and secular codices alike to a visually dazzling level that was appreciated not only by the reader close at hand, but by a wider audience of viewers when displayed below an altarpiece as part of the liturgical furnishings on an altar.

Featuring manuscripts mainly from the collection of The J. Paul Getty Museum, this paper will consider the variety of uses of gold in illuminated manuscripts from the 9th to the 16th centuries. Chrysography-- that is gold and golden inks for display letterforms and for the writing of whole texts -- will begin the discussion, using Carolingian, Anglo-Saxon, and Byzantine examples from the 9th and 10th centuries. Various methods of application including water gilding, mordant gilding, and painted gold, and the range of grounds, including colored boles, for gold leaf will be discussed within the context of surviving medieval recipes given in the technical literature. The identification of silver leaf as well as alloy metals used in inks and in metal leaf applied to grounds also will be presented. In addition, embellishment techniques applied to gold, including the use of stylus decoration, tooled designs, and surface painting over gold leaf will be discussed and illustrated, and the use of colored glazes over gold will be presented within the wider context of the use of organic colorants in manuscript painting. The full range of golden effects on the page will be explored, including the use of 'mosaic gold', a pigment traditionally associated with manuscript illumination. This survey aims to elaborate upon the variety of uses and the range visual effects achieved by book illuminators with elemental gold, metallic inks, and other golden hues.