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

Nancy Turner
The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1200 Getty Center Drive, Los Angeles, CA, 90049, USA.
nturner@getty.edu

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.