

MEDIAEVAL MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION: 14th - CENTURY NETHERLANDISH PAINTING TECHNIQUES

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The illuminations in *De Rijmbijbel van Jacob van Maerlant* (The Hague, Rijksmuseum Meermann-Westreenianum, MS 10 B 21) belong to the most important Early Netherlandish paintings. Under the full page painting of the *Destruction of Jerusalem* on fol. 152v is the inscription: “*Doe men screef int iaer ons heren MCCCXXXII verlichte mi Michiel van der borch*”; i.e.: “It was in the year 1332 that I was illuminated by Michiel van der Borch”. This makes them the earliest signed and dated Netherlandish works of art.

Stylistic features of these illuminations fit quite well into the idiom that was current in Flanders and Northwest of France, and suggest that Van der Borch may have been trained there.

These small-scale paintings were examined with infrared reflectography (IRR) and light microscopy, energy dispersive micro- x-ray fluorescence (μ -XRF), fibre optic reflectance spectroscopy (FORS), and some (radio) spectral imaging techniques.

The analyses helped to identify paints and pigments and the different strategies that were employed to deal with colour as a means to organise the composition. Often compositions were build up on the basis of a rhythmic contrast of colour. Shapes and forms were placed in such a manner that fields of pure or mixed colour appear almost as isolated puzzle pieces. Shapes of similar colour are carefully kept apart, and arranged in an alternating way or in some sort of symmetry. This principle, developed in the Middle Ages, was recognized also in renaissance painting. Shearman described this type of pictorial organization as ‘isochromatic composition’.¹

Comparison of analytical results with contemporary technical treatises helped to better understand those strategies.

Such compositions form the basis of a three-step system of colour application. The point of departure is the individual fields of colour. Such a field is usually done in a single pure colour, may occasionally consist of homogeneous mixture of two colours, *commixtones*, but always in a uniform, even layer. Each of these fields of colour tends to be provided with a specifically prescribed colour for the outlines or for the darker shades: *incidis*. In the next step, each field of colour is provided with its own fixed colour of a much lighter nature: *matizatura*. Also the incisiones and matizaturae are usually based on pure colours, but may in some cases be based on binary mixtures.

Concordance lists of several mediaeval treatises provided basis for comparison. Terminology and formulae in the *Liber de Coloribus siue Pictorum* (British Library, MS Sloane 1754), and in the *De Coloribus Faciendi* by Peter of St. Omaars (collection Jehan LeBegue, Bibliotheque Nationale, Ms 6741) both from North-western France are compared with results of scientific examination of Van der Borch’s illuminations. The ultimate source for both texts seem to be the instructions given in Theophilus’ *De Diversis Artibus*. Deviations from the sources were observed in the actual execution of the miniatures. These deviations may be caused by influences on strictly technical texts from more general concepts about colour in contemporary encyclopaedic tracts like Bartolomaeus Anglicus’ *De Proprietatibus Rerum* (especially Book 19), or Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum naturale* (II, 35-71).²

Comparison between these various approaches may elucidate the functionality of mediaeval

terminologies, painting techniques, formulae and methods. Scientific analyses of pigment composition, painting techniques and other technical aspects of the *Rijmbijbel*, will be examined in this context.

(1) J. Shearman, 'Isochromatic Color Compositions in the Italian Renaissance', in M.B. Hall (ed.), *Color and Technique in Renaissance Painting, Italy and the North*, New York (1987), pp. 151-160.

(2) Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, 1.5.3.1 Aug. fol. 302^v.