Art of Illumination Project: Teachers

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OVERVIEW
Students create and evaluate their own illumination of a word in a simulated medieval scriptorium.

The project pulls together various disciplines and, ideally, teachers of different subjects (especially English, History, and Art History) will collaborate. Students should have read, or at least started to read, Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales and should choose a character/role to illuminate. The class should study Illuminated manuscripts and understand the parts of an illuminated page: the large decorative initial, the miniature, the border, and the text. If there is time, students working together can expand the Illuminations Project to create a Book of Hours.

GRADE LEVELS
This project was originally designed for 10th grade as a cross-curricular lesson involving World History, Art History and English. The illuminations themselves can be created in grade levels 5 through 12. The teacher can simplify the historical content for younger students or reduce the artistic requirements.

GOALS
Students will experience the process of illumination as authentically as possible in a short time and within practical limitations. They will develop an understanding of Illumination both as an art form and as an aspect of a medieval culture with limited access to information. The project allows students to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of illuminated texts, understand Church control over the manuscripts, and explore the medieval roles and characters in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales.

Essential Questions
- To what extent has Western scholarship been connected to religious institutions?
- How does visual interpretation of texts reflect both the larger society and the individual vision of the artist?
- How does art record the human experience?
- How does technology affect human and cultural development?
- Why were Illuminations important? What did they reveal about society? Who created the Illuminations and who used them/could afford them?
- What are the differences in the ways information was transmitted between medieval, Renaissance and modern times?

Special Project
The Archer School for Girls World History students created a secular adaptation of a Book of Hours in honor of the school’s tenth anniversary. Students chose important events, celebrations, and symbols that reflected the character and life of our school. They carefully examined medieval books to consider how they might adapt their own Book of Hours to the norms of ruling and design that existed in the Middle Ages. Tasks were then divided, and students chose to work on initials, text, borders, or miniatures. Finally, students worked in monastic silence to complete the book.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION
- Scratch paper
- 11” x 4 1/4” high-quality multi-media art paper
- Pencils
- Erasers
- Rulers
- Calligraphy pens (optional)
- Colored and black markers (“Sharpee Fine” and “Ultra Fine” suggested)
- Gold and Silver pens or markers
- Scissors
- Scotch tape (several rolls)
- Templates (2 per 8 ½” x 11” page)
- Transfer paper (Saral) or carbon paper; carbon paper is messy
- Dover lettering books
- Parchment paper (“Astroparche Premium Cardstock” or “Wausau paper”, available at Staples, is suggested)
- Reproducible letters (see Resources)
- Reference books about illuminations
- Reference books about the Middle Ages and the Renaissance
Interdisciplinary Preparation

**English**
By the time they begin work on the Illuminations, students are well advanced in their reading of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and they are well acquainted with the characters and roles. There are no proper names in *The Canterbury Tales*, so students will be illuminating a word that actually represents a role in medieval society: parson, knight, squire, bishop, parish priest, clerk, etc. The teacher should prepare the students by discussing the qualities and characteristics of each person. Are there any colors, symbols, or images associated with the person’s role in Medieval Europe? Did the person use any particular instruments or tools to perform his/her duties? How can the artist incorporate these elements into the initial and the border of the illumination?

**Art History**
Students explore artistic qualities of illuminated manuscripts. Additionally, they study the characteristics that distinguish the work of particular monasteries and the ways in which illuminations changed over time. They examine the process of creating the books and consider the stylistic components of a page and initial.

**History**
Students examine the role of the Christian Church in medieval life and learning. They examine the role of monasteries and the consequences of limited and controlled access to learning and texts.

**CLASS TIME**
Approximately three 45-minute periods are needed, one to introduce the project and illustrate the illuminated manuscripts, and two to carry out the project.

**PROCEDURES**
The teacher introduces illuminated manuscripts and explains the parts of an illuminated page: a large decorative initial, a border, and a text.

The homework on the night before Illumination Day is to read an excerpt from Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* to provide a vivid description of a monastic scriptorium.

The Illumination Day is an event for the students, and comes as a nice break, ideally on a Friday. Classrooms are set up like scriptoria, with desks in a long line facing a window. Medieval music is playing and silence is required of all “monks.” Using the templates, reproducible letters, carbon paper, and markers, students create an illuminated word. During this time, art books are open throughout the room to provide ideas and inspiration. As they work on their illuminations and start to personalize the process, students really begin to study the books and admire the work of medieval illuminators.

On the following Monday, students must submit their completed illumination along with a Curator’s Report that explains and evaluates the work of the scribe.

**The Illumination Day**
The materials should be organized so that every student has easy access to them. It is helpful to make photocopies of the pages of the lettering books and cut them so individual letters are easily copied or used as models. The parchment paper should be cut in half lengthwise, as should the transfer or carbon paper. The template can be photocopied on one 8 ½” x 11” sheet of parchment and cut in half lengthwise; it can also be enlarged or reduced.

The students choose or are assigned a person or character common in medieval Europe. Then, using the templates, reproducible letters, transfer paper and markers, students create an illuminated word describing one of these characters.

It is important that as many characters as possible be represented to increase the learning for the entire class. The following is a suggested list:

- Apprentice
- Bishop
- Clerk
- Friar
- Journeyman
- Knight
- Lady
- Lord
- Master
- Merchant
- Pilgrim
- Priest
- Prior
- Scribe
- Serf
- Squire

The process of illuminating is simplified by giving each student the template showing the location and size of the large initial letter and the following smaller letters. The template also indicates possible borders.
The teacher must choose whether to use the books of illuminated letters as inspiration or to allow students to copy letters exactly. To use letters exactly, the students simply need to photocopy or trace. The letters in the books are usually smaller than needed for the templates, but they can be enlarged. Ideally, students will use the books as inspiration, but will create their own original art work; this also simplifies the process.

In pencil, the student writes the chosen word, embellishing the first letter, sketches a drawing symbolizing the word, and adds border decoration. The template is then taped to higher-quality parchment paper after a piece of transfer or carbon paper has been placed between the two pages, dark-side (ink-side) down on the parchment.

The students transfer their letters and drawings to the final paper by tracing them, and then color them in with markers.

**Assessment**

Students are graded on their illumination and whether it is a faithful recreation of the work of medieval scribes. They also write a two-page report that analyzes the style and composition of the illumination from the perspective of a museum curator and provides an explanation of the process and medium.

This must include a paragraph on:
1. the art of illumination in general
2. the role of the character in medieval society
3. the artistic and historical merits of the illumination.

In this paragraph students can address both the process and outcome: how their creation reflects the work of medieval scribes, the use of symbol and color, and the craftsmanship reflected in the illumination.