

Calligraphy

Objectives

- To learn about activities the nuns completed when they weren't engaged in prayer.
- To learn about calligraphy and why it was so important to a religious order (glorifying the written word of God).

Activities

- To use reed pens to practise calligraphy
- To design and decorate their own illuminated letter, created with pencils and gold pens

Background Information

Books were rare until 1100 and were usually only to be found in religious libraries. This was because they were handwritten by monks and nuns who spent many hours in the 'scriptorium' (meaning a place for writing,) copying out religious texts. A long manuscript, such as the Bible, might take one scribe a year to complete.

The nun acting as scribe would rest the parchment or 'vellum'- made from the skin of sheep or goats, on a sloping desk which made it easier for her to hold her pen at right angles. The pen was made from a bird quill, reed or cane. A quill pen was lighter and more flexible and could be made from the feathers of geese, crows, peacocks or even eagles. The feather was usually removed from the quill because it could get in the way. A pen knife was an essential tool for the nun so that she could scrape off any mistakes. In fact many mistakes were made and some of the surviving texts contain a variety of errors. For instance, in the Book of Kells, the story of Mary Magdalene anointing Jesus was copied out twice. There were often misspellings too.

Manuscripts were beautifully decorated or illuminated with jewel-like paints and gold leaf. Some of their most striking features are the beautifully decorated capital letters that begin each page.

Capital Letters:

- Painted in bright colours and gilded with gold leaf
- Gesso (a kind of glue made from plaster, lead, egg -white and sugar) was applied to make a sticky surface for the gold. The gesso was left to dry then the sheets of gold leaf were laid over it using silk cloth. Any surplus was removed with a soft brush.
- The set gold leaf was then rubbed or burnished to make it shiny, often with a dog's or wolf's tooth attached to a wooden handle.
- The rest of the background was painted around the gilding so the finished letter was like a work of art.
- If the letter was correctly burnished it would never fade - most medieval manuscripts still shine brightly today.
- The finished letters were beautiful miniature works of art with leaves, flowers, people and animals used to enhance them.

Working as a scribe would have been very tiring and they would have needed good eyesight. Hours of copying would often damage the eyesight and Europeans first started wearing spectacles in the 13th century. Scribes would sometimes make comments in the margins of scripts to record their feelings about their work e.g. 'A curse on thee, O pen' - a poor workman blaming his tools perhaps!

Shaftesbury Abbey Psalter

There is a medieval parchment book, acquired by the British Museum, containing exquisite full page illuminations, psalms, prayers and a calendar . It became known as the 'Shaftesbury Psalter'. It is a 12th Century prayer book. Ultramarine blue was used to illuminate the pages - blue was associated with the Virgin Mary. It is the oldest manuscript in the British Library's collection that was made for a woman.



Illuminated Q, Shaftesbury Psalter



Illuminated B, Shaftesbury Psalter

