

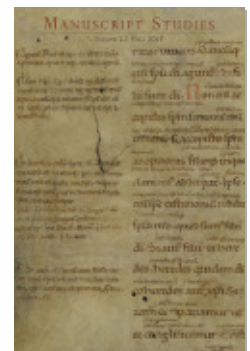


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Colour: The Art & Science of Illuminated Manuscripts ed. by
S. Panayotova, D. Jackson, and P. Ricciardi (review)

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Colour: The Art & Science of Illuminated Manuscripts. Exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University, 30 July 2016–2 January 2017. Curated by Stella Panayotova, Deirdre Jackson, and Paola Ricciardi. Catalog by S. Panayotova, D. Jackson, and P. Ricciardi, eds. *Colour: The Art & Science of Illuminated Manuscripts*. London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2016. £30. ISBN: 978-190-94-0056-6.

Illuminated: Manuscripts in the Making. Online resource. <http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/illuminated/>.

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THE TECHNICAL ANALYSIS OF illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance has lagged behind equivalent study of, for example, panel paintings and polychrome sculpture. The reasons for this are simple: on the one hand, advanced imaging and pigment identification have, since the 1950s, constituted a crucial first step in the conservation and restoration of large-scale works of art, and the resultant data has increased our knowledge of working procedure by leaps and bounds. On the other hand, manuscript books, whose painted pages so often appear pristinely preserved, have only recently been identified as occasionally requiring specialized conservation treatments that demand an understanding of their underlying material composition.

The Colour exhibition held this past autumn at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and the impressive accompanying catalog and online resource, provide a comprehensive survey of our current knowledge of manuscript illumination techniques, from both a scientific and a historical standpoint. More than that, these efforts also showcase several decades of exciting investigative work undertaken at the Fitzwilliam Museum, which benefits from what is in effect the largest and most important collection of illuminated manuscripts held by any *museum*. As such, it is fitting that the Fitzwilliam's Keeper of Manuscripts and Rare Books, Stella Panayotova, and her colleagues Deirdre Jackson—an art historian—and Paola Ricciardi—a research

scientist—have chosen to scrutinize their collection to gain a better understanding of artistic facture, and, for the purposes of the exhibition, employ well-selected loans of manuscripts from other institutions to fill in the gaps in the story.

The exhibition builds on the knowledge of local collections accrued during the *Cambridge Illuminations* exhibition and conference of 2005, but with a more focused purview. Rather than illustrating a millennial institutional history and the development of book genres and styles of illumination, the Colour exhibition is arranged by theme, not by chronology or geography. The result is an engaging synthesis, though one that occasionally elides important changes in the illuminator's practice that took place over time.

Upon entering the exhibition, after initially encountering the enchantingly kaleidoscopic frontispiece to the Fitzwilliam Museum's *Livre des propriétés de choses* (MS 251, fol. 15r), the visitor is presented with an introductory section dedicated to the illuminators' palette. While vitrines of sample pigments and tools have become a mainstay of even the most modest exhibitions dedicated to manuscript illumination, here the array of primary materials presented is apposite, as it serves as the basis for much that follows. Samples of dried plant cuttings and minerals bring to life the raw materials that sometimes transited across Europe and beyond to arrive on the illuminator's workbench. The vertiginous commerce of primary materials across much of the known world, and their use by illuminators working in vastly different cultural contexts, is represented by single codices stemming from the Byzantine, Armenian, Persian, and Nepalese traditions.

The very image of the artist-illuminator is dealt with in a small but meaningful section, accompanied in the catalog with an essay by Richard Gameson, that presents three famous portraits of illuminators, each exemplifying an important theme: the duo of layman painter and pigment-grinding assistant depicted on either side of an initial *S* in the Dover Bible (Corpus Christi College, MS 4, fol. 242v), a self-portrait of William de Brailles in the guise of a tonsured soul being rescued at the Last Judgment (MS 330.iii), and the standalone likeness of the elderly, bespectacled Simon Bening from the Victoria and Albert Museum (P.159–1910).

Another evocative grouping illustrates a section dedicated to paint recipes and model books. Though visually modest in comparison to the fine

illuminated miniatures that form the bulk of the exhibition, important loans like the Harley manuscript of Theophilus's *De diversibus artibus* (BL MS Harley 3915), the Göttingen Model Book (Niedersächsische Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, 8° Cod. MS Uffenb. 51 cim.), and an intriguing page of color swatches from the Historisches Archiv in Cologne (Best. 7010–293) flesh out, *pars pro toto*, our understanding of how knowledge could be transmitted through documents.

Nevertheless, the exhibition takes pains to explore the pervasive orality and practice-based nature of medieval artisanal traditions, or what Spike Bucklow terms in his catalog essay “the difficulties associated with transmitting tacit or embodied knowledge” (p. 108), through sections on alchemy and “masters’ secrets.” After all, putting recipes and procedures to paper in the pre-modern era was the exception rather than the norm, and one can wonder whether surviving compendia and instruction books were actually ever used as everyday reference tools, or whether, like Cennino Cennini’s *Libro dell’arte*, they simply happened to record broadly followed procedures.

The centerpiece of the alchemical portion of the exhibition is the so-called Ripley Scroll (Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 276), which was presented partially unfurled so as to reveal its uppermost portrait of a master alchemist holding an intricately historiated alembic. The specific connection of this system of pre-scientific practice to manuscript illumination, however, is not immediately clear, especially since, despite its mention by Cennini on several occasions, its most consistent goal—the transformation of base metals into gold—was only tangentially related to artistic practice. Still, the theme is well represented by a distinct chapter within the catalogue, with subsections dealing with the respective colors. The fact that each color is treated independently here, as well in the catalogue chapters dedicated to the palette and to trade, makes for a slightly disjointed experience for the reader. This is a minor point and to be expected given the format of the catalogue, but a clearer approach might have been to present each color comprehensively in a single, longer introductory essay, rather than parse out their different qualities over a number of chapters.

The exhibition and catalog truly shine in the section dedicated to masters’ secrets, where the substance of new methods of technical analysis, and the interpretative conclusions that stem from them, are brought to the fore. The sequence of noninvasive protocols developed by MINIARE, the

Fitzwilliam-based technical analysis project that since 2012 has examined nearly four hundred individual miniatures across over fifty codices and an equal number of cuttings, was demonstrated to visitors by means of clear, concise didactic panels. The procedure is also laid out clearly in the catalog: close visual analysis is followed by near-infrared imaging, site-specific spectroscopy (fiber-optic reflectance spectroscopy and X-ray fluorescence), optical microscopy, and finally additional methods such as Raman spectroscopy, X-ray diffraction, and macro-XRF scanning. The perfected use of infrared imaging revealed color notes in German and Middle Dutch in five miniatures by the Mazarine Master from the *Livre des propriétés de choses*, an equivalent to the discovery in the early 1980s of French notations under the enigmatic portrait of Gonella (Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum), vindicating its attribution to Jean Fouquet. The broad array of analytical tools deployed by MINIARE is also essential for pigment detection because each technique on its own is insufficient to identify the full range of compounds employed. The resulting comprehensive summary of pigments and paint binders allows for the confirmation of routine materials, but also, more interestingly, for intriguing discoveries. For example, an uncommon pigment obtained by grinding blue glass, smalt, was detected in a number of Venetian illuminations including those by the Master of the Murano Graduals, providing an early and concrete link to the vitreous arts so characteristic of Venetian industry. These and many other concrete results can be incorporated into the newfound disciplinary concern for materiality in the history of art.

Having established these material and technical bases, the exhibition goes on to consider more specific historical and artistic themes. The history of destruction and recuperation of illuminated manuscripts, including their later dispersal, censorship, forgery, and reconstruction, is dealt with succinctly, with examples of work by the so-called Spanish Forger (ca. 1880s–1920) and Caleb William Wing (1801–1875). A digital reconstruction of censored genitalia in the Primer of Claude de France (Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 159) is demonstrated, though the results, in the mind of the reviewer at least, don't show us anything that we didn't already know!

Next, discrete sections consider the myriad solutions derived across the centuries by illuminators when faced with common visual challenges. The uses of gold and silver, both as applied sheets of metal and as powdered

pigments, are considered across a range of periods. Nigel Morgan appositely summarizes their use in a catalogue essay. Further sections consider the modeling of draperies, the multifarious uses of grisaille, and the painting of flesh.

The final two sections, closely interrelated, are dedicated to color theory and the meanings associated with colors throughout the period under consideration. These are perhaps the most challenging portions of the exhibition from a didactic and conceptual point of view. The pervasive Aristotelian framework of Medieval and Renaissance color theory, filtered through Roger Bacon, is difficult to elucidate visually to a modern audience by means of manuscript illuminations alone, and, historically speaking, it is doubtful that most illuminators would have been cognizant of even the most watered-down concepts of intramission and extramission. The symbolic associations carried by colors throughout the period are perhaps easier to communicate, as they were far more widely held, judging by certain unchanging literary and iconographic conventions (the most famous example of the latter being the color of the Virgin's mantle).

The catalogue itself is accompanied by a useful appendix by Paola Ricciardi succinctly summarizing the analytical methods and equipment discussed throughout the publication. There is also a welcome index of manuscripts cited, but the real resource underpinning the continued appreciation of the years of research and analysis that went into the exhibition is the permanent web resource, *Illuminated: Manuscripts in the Making* (www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/illuminated). This website provides not only high-quality digital images of a selection of the most impressive manuscripts from the Fitzwilliam's collection, but also, by means of a "lab" section, an engaging and visually compelling overview of the primary analytic techniques discussed above; a compendium of pigments and other materials; and a content-rich explication of the variety of artists' techniques considered in the exhibition. Taken together, exhibition, catalog, and web resource contribute to a masterful "state of the question" monument for the technical analysis of illuminated manuscripts and our understanding of their production.