

# THE ILLUMINATED LETTER: A FAR FROM FORGOTTEN ART

Inspired by *Word and Image: The Saint John's Bible* on view October 5, 2019–January 19, 2020 at Joslyn Art Museum

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Grade Level Middle-High School

## OVERVIEW

This lesson is to introduce students to the beauty of the Illuminated Letter and the place it has in the ancient manuscripts of the world. Students will choose a letter from those offered and draw it on grid paper at approximately, 2"x 2.5". They will then transfer the design via carbon paper to a nice paper that will perform well when painted and look nice when done. They are free to use patterns or filigree to fill in negative space. They will then paint the letter and the space around it. They may choose to do this with gouache, watercolor, or colored pencils, leaving empty an area to fill with transfer gold, gold paint, or gold ink.



## ANTICIPATORY SET

What is the purpose of an illuminated letter? Why, in your opinion, did people from ancient time value beauty in their written work? What value did written work have in the culture of people living centuries ago? Why do you think we stopped making hand written manuscripts? How could you use an illuminated letter today?

## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Student will get a glimpse into a culture that highly valued illuminated manuscripts, paid a lot of money to have them made, and even protected them when attacked by enemies.
- Students will learn how to copy/draw a letter within given measurements.
- Students will learn how to paint the letter, choosing which colors to emphasize its beauty.
- Students will learn how to add gold touches to add beauty to letter. Illumine means to add gold, or to illuminate it.

## RESOURCES:

- [Making Manuscripts](#), 6:19 minutes, YouTube video published by Getty Museum
- [Manuscript Illumination Workshop](#), 1:28 minutes, YouTube video published by Middlebury College
- [Twelve Greatest Illuminated Manuscripts](#), Joshua J. Mark, Ancient History Encyclopedia (See Lindisfarne Gospels)
- *The Illuminated Alphabet* by Patricia Seligman, (Running Press, 1994), pg. 9-10, "Why were Books Illuminated?"
- *Illuminating the World - The Making of The Saint John's Bible* by Christopher Calderhead (Liturgical Press, 2005)\*
- *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* by Michelle P. Brown (Getty Publications, 1994)\*

- *Calligraphy* by Fiona Campbell (Children's Press, 1998)\*
- *The Encyclopedia of Calligraphy Techniques* by Janet Mehigan (Running Press, 2005)\*
- *The Illuminator and a Bible for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (DVD, 2005, 40 minutes)\*

\*available through the Nelson Teacher Resource Center at Joslyn Art Museum

- Preview all resources before sharing with students.

#### VOCABULARY:

- |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|
| • illuminate | • gouache    |
| • scribe     | • manuscript |
| • quill      | • filigree   |

#### MATERIALS:

- Sheet with letters from which to choose
- Grid paper
- Tracing paper
- Carbon paper
- 5"x5" or 6"x6" Bristol board or card stock
- Very small paint brushes
- Gouache, watercolors, colored pencils
- Transfer gold, gold ink, gold watercolor, or gold colored pencil
- Water-soluble glue if using transfer gold
- Sharp pencil
- Water container to rinse water
- Paper plate to mix paint on

#### LESSON OUTLINE

1. Give each student a 4"x4" sheet of grid paper and sheet with letters.

One 4"x4" sheet of tracing paper

One 4"x4" sheet of carbon paper

One sharp pencil or mechanical pencil

One 5"x5" or 6"x6" sheet of either Bristol board, 90# hot press paper, or mixed media, 90# (or more) paper

very small paint brush

access to watercolor, gouache, colored pencils

gold transfer, if using

slightly watered-down water-soluble glue if using gold transfer

gold ink or gold gouache

eraser

2. Discuss why people in ancient times began making beautiful manuscripts, complete with illumination. See *The Illuminated Alphabet, Why Were Books Illuminated?* Page 9 as follows:

"Religious texts—gospels and psalters—were originally illuminated to honor God, but some of this decoration seems a little lavish simply for devotional purposes...Books in medieval times bestowed a certain standing upon their owners, and illuminated books, in particular, represented wealth and power. Missionaries could take full advantage of this, as well as Carolingian emperors, kings, and feudal princes. For example, in early medieval times, medicines made from water in which pages from a holy book had been soaked were taken in the belief that they were cures for certain illnesses. Equally, it was believed that books, if tampered with, could inflict great pain."

3. Read excerpt from Ancient History Encyclopedia as follows:

**Lindisfarne Gospels** (c. 700–715 CE) – Created at the Lindisfarne Priory on the "Holy Island" off the coast of Dorset, Britain. It is an illustrated edition of the gospels of the New Testament made in honor of the priory's most famous member, St. Cuthbert, and dedicated to the Glory of God. The priory was sacked by the Vikings in 793 CE—the first recorded Viking raid on Britain—but the book was somehow saved and moved to Durham, away from the coast, for safety. Along with the Book of Kells, the Lindisfarne Gospels is among the best-known and most admired illuminated manuscripts.

Watch any of the recommended DVD or YouTube links you think would be helpful.

#### A. Drawing the illuminated letter:

1. Choose letter to draw from sample page.
2. Draw 2x2.5" square on grid paper, may need ruler. This rectangle is only to give them perspective so it is easier to draw letter.
3. Once drawn, trace the letter on to tracing paper.
4. Place the tracing paper on top of the carbon paper, then place on top of nice paper.
5. Draw the letter, tracing lines on tracing paper so it makes a carbon copy on nice paper.

#### B. Apply gold paint, ink, gold color pencil or gold gouache to reserved area(s), thereby illuminating the letter:

1. If student chooses to use gold paint, ink, gold gouache or gold color pencil, they may color in the area designated for the illumination of gold.
2. To apply gold transfer, apply slightly watered-down glue to area, and wait until it is tacky. This is very important. Try not to touch the back side of the transfer gold with your finger where it will be applied to the glue, as it may be oily, and cause gold to not stick. Gently press gold transfer, shiny side up onto glued area. Press area so that it is completely covering glue. Rub gently and then remove transfer paper, brush away with a soft brush. Student may shine up with a swatch of silk, or a burnisher.

**C. Apply color to letter:**

1. Choose colors, from gouache, watercolors, or colored pencils, to use on letter. Encourage students to use a bold color for the letter itself, and warmer, less distracting colors for the areas around the letter, if they choose to paint around the letter.
2. Students may want to add a very small amount of white gouache to colored gouache or watercolors so that the color is opaque, and not streaky. But they may very well want the water color effect.
3. Carefully paint the letter with a small brush, being careful to not get outside of the lines. Wait for one color to dry thoroughly before beginning another color. When colors are completely dry, gently erase lines.

**D. Additional ideas:**

1. Use illuminated letter as a bookmark, or the front of a card.
2. Draw and decorate a letter on the front of an envelope you're sending to someone. It does not have to be big and fancy, they will love it!

**CONTENT STANDARDS**

[NEBRASKA CONTENT AREA STANDARDS](#)

[IOWA CORE STANDARDS](#)



# BYZANTINE ICON WRITING

Inspired by *Word and Image: The Saint John's Bible* on view October 5, 2019–January 19, 2020 at Joslyn Art Museum  
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Grade Level High School

## OVERVIEW

This lesson will introduce students to the world of Byzantine Iconography. Through this lesson students will learn about the history of Byzantine Icon writing and create their own work. The final product could be a self-portrait in the Byzantine style or a contemporary piece modeled off the illuminations in *The Saint John's Bible*.

## ANTICIPATORY SET

Begin by showing students portraits. These could be photos or contemporary paintings. Discuss the aspects of these images. Show students images of Byzantine Icons. How are these images different than the more contemporary works? Discuss why the portraits are not photo-realistic.



*Virgin and Child with angels and  
Sts. George and Theodore. Encaustic  
icon on panel, ca. 600 CE, Saint  
Catherine's Monastery, Egypt*

## STUDENT LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will be able to identify aspects of a Byzantine Icon.
- Students will be able to write their own Byzantine Icon.

## RESOURCES:

- [How to Draw: How to Draw Byzantine Icons](#), 3:25 minutes, YouTube video published by eHowArtsAndCrafts
- [Byzantine Icons in 2 Minutes](#), 2:17 minutes, YouTube video published by JohnMorganCurtis
- [The Light Within: How an Icon is Made](#), 6:34 minutes, YouTube video published by MuseumofRussianIcons
- [Byzantine Art PowerPoint](#), 86 slides, SlideShare resource published by smolinskiel
- [The Icons of Sinai](#), Department of Art & Archaeology, Princeton University
- [The Saint John's Bible, Tools & Materials](#)
- [Heaven and Earth: Art of Byzantium from Greek Collections, Icons](#), National Gallery of Art
- *Illuminating the World - The Making of the Saint John's Bible* by Christopher Calderhead (Liturgical Press, 2005)\*
- *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms* by Michelle P. Brown (Getty Publications, 1994)\*
- *The Illuminator and a Bible for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (DVD, 2005, 40 minutes)\*

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- Preview all resources before sharing with students.

**VOCABULARY:**

- Byzantine, Icon, Egg Tempera

**MATERIALS:**

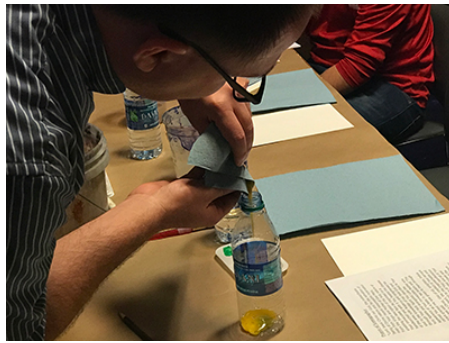
- Watercolors or Liquid Watercolor
- Egg (optional)
- Watercolor Paper
- Water Cups
- Palettes
- Paintbrushes (Round, Flat, Liner)
- Empty 16/20 oz. water bottles with caps
- Vinegar

**LESSON OUTLINE**

- Students will have the option to create a self-portrait in the style of a traditional Byzantine Icon or a more contemporary piece inspired by *The Saint John's Bible*.
- Students will lightly sketch out their drawing on the watercolor paper
- Preparing Egg Tempera:
  - Separate yolk from the egg white, careful not to break the yolk.



- Create a strainer out of paper towel and insert into the opening of a water bottle so it creates a funnel.
- Using a toothpick, pierce the yolk. The sack of the yolk should not go into the bottle.



- Repeat this process several times.
- Add a few drops of liquid watercolor until desired color is reached



- Add in a few drops of vinegar to extend life of the egg tempera
- Using a scissors pierce the cap of the water bottle–can now squeeze color into student palettes as needed
- Squeeze a small amount of egg tempera on to palette
- Students should dip their brush into the egg tempera and place in a clean area of their palette. Add a small amount of water to create a translucent color. Colors should be built up slowly over time.
- When working on their piece students should begin with the middle color first, then work on the shadow, followed by highlight
- Let area dry before adding a second layer of color
- Repeat this process until work is completed.



\*Note: Avoid pooling too much of the egg tempera so as not to warp the watercolor paper.

\*\*Note: If there are egg allergies just use liquid watercolor.

## EXTENSIONS

- Social Studies – History of the Byzantine Empire
- Science – Properties of egg yolk mixed with watercolor/pigment

## CONTENT STANDARDS

### NEBRASKA CONTENT AREA STANDARDS

FA 12.2.1.e – Synthesize knowledge of relationships between advanced technique, skill and craftsmanship

FA 12.2.3.c – Interpret and explain expressive qualities of artistic styles and movements

FA 12.2.4.d – Connect images, objects, and a personal work of art to convey a story, familiar experience, or connection to the world.

### IOWA CORE STANDARDS