

LITTLE BOOKS ON ART

**ILLUMINATED
MANUSCRIPTS**

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WITH 21 ILLUSTRATIONS



CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1909

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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

What is meant by art?—The art faculty—How artists may be compared—The aim of illumination—Distinction between illumination and miniature—Definition of illumination—The first miniature painter—Origin of the term “miniature”—Ovid’s allusion to his little book.

THE desire for decoration is probably as old as the human race. Nature, of course, is the source of beauty, and this natural beauty affects something within us which has or is the faculty of reproducing the cause of its emotion in a material form. Whether the reproduction be such as to appeal to the eye or the ear depends on the cast of the faculty. In a mild or elementary form, probably both casts of faculty exist in every animated creature, and especially in the human being.

Art being the intelligent representation of that quality of beauty which appeals to any particular observer, whoever exercises the faculty of such representation is an artist.

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Greatness or otherwise is simply the measure of the faculty, for in Nature herself there is no restriction. There is always enough of beauty in Nature to fill the mightiest capacity of human genius. Artists, therefore, are measured by comparison with each other in reference to the fraction of art which they attempt to reproduce.

The art of illumination does not aim at more than the gratification of those who take pleasure in books. Its highest ambition is to make books beautiful.

To some persons, perhaps, all ordinary books are ugly and distasteful. Probably they are so to the average schoolboy. Hence the laudable endeavour among publishers of school-books to make them attractive. The desire that books should be made attractive is of great antiquity. How far back in the world's history we should have to go to get in front of it we cannot venture to reckon. The methods of making books attractive are numerous and varied. That to which we shall confine our attention is a rather special one. Both its processes and its results are peculiar. Mere pictures or pretty ornamental letters in sweet colours and elegant drawing do not constitute illumination, though they do form essential contributions towards it; and, indeed, in the sixteenth century the clever practitioners who wished, in bright colours, to awaken up the old wood-cuts used to call themselves illuminists, and the old German books which taught how the work should be done were called *Illuminir bücher*. Illuminists were not illuminators.

In the twelfth century when, as far as we know, the word illuminator was first applied to one who practised the art of book decoration, it meant one who "lighted up" the page of the book with bright colours and burnished gold.

These processes suggest the definition of the art. *Perfect illumination must contain both colours and metals.* To this extent it is in perfect unison with the other mediæval art of heraldry; it might almost be called a twin-sister.

As an art it is much older than its name. We find something very like it even among the ancient Egyptians, for in the Louvre at Paris is a papyrus containing paintings of funeral ceremonies, executed in bright colours and touched in its high lights with pencilled gold. But after this for many centuries there remains no record of the existence of any such art until just before the Christian era. Then, indeed, we have mention of a lady artist who painted a number of miniature portraits for the great biographical work of the learned Varro. We must carefully observe, however, that there is a distinction between illumination and mere miniature painting. Sometimes it is true that miniatures—as *e.g.* those of the early Byzantine artists, and afterwards those of Western Europe—were finished with touches of gold to represent the lights. This brought them into the category of illuminations, for while miniatures may be executed without the use of gold or silver, illuminations may not. There are thousands of miniatures that are not illuminations.

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At the period when illuminating was at its best the miniature, in its modern sense of a little picture, was only just beginning to appear as a noticeable feature, and the gold was as freely applied to it as to the penmanship or the ornament. But such is not the case with miniature painting generally.

Lala of Cyzicus, the lady artist just referred to, lived in the time of Augustus Cæsar. She has the honour of being the first miniaturist on record, and is said to have produced excellent portraits "in little," especially those of ladies, on both vellum and ivory. Her own portrait, representing her engaged in painting a statuette, is still to be seen among the precious frescoes preserved in the museum at Naples.

The term "miniature," now applied to this class of work, has been frequently explained. It is derived from the Latin word *minium*, or red paint, two pigments being anciently known by this name—one the sulphide of mercury, now known also as "vermilion," the other a lead oxide, now called "red lead." It is the latter which is generally understood as the *minium* of the illuminators, though both were used in manuscript work. The red paint was employed to mark the initial letters or sections of the MS. Its connection with portraiture and other pictorial subjects on a small scale is entirely owing to its accidental confusion by French writers with their own word *mignon*, and so with the Latin *minus*. In classical times, among the Romans, the "miniator" was simply a person who applied

the *minium*, and had nothing to do with pictures or portraits at all, but with the writing. That the rubrication of titles, however, was somewhat of a luxury may be gathered from the complaint of Ovid when issuing the humble edition of his verses from his lonely exile of Tomi :—

“ Parve (nec invideo) sine me liber ibis in urbem :
Hei mihi quo domino non licet ire tuo.

Nec te purpureo velent vaccinia succo
Non est conveniens luctibus ille color.
Nec titulus minio, nec cedro carta notetur
Candida nec nigra cornua fronte geras.”¹

Tristia, Cl. 1, Eleg. 1.

There are many allusions in these pathetic lines which would bear annotation, but space forbids. The one point is the use of *minium*.

¹ “Go, little book, nor do I forbid,—go without me into that city where, alas! I may enter never more. . . . Nor shall whortleberries adorn thee with their crimson juice; that colour is not suitable for lamentations. Nor shall thy title be marked with *minium*, nor thy leaf scented with cedar-oil. Nor shalt thou bear horns of ivory or ebony upon thy front.”

CHAPTER II

VELLUM AND OTHER MATERIALS

Difference between vellum and parchment—Names of different preparations—The kinds of vellum most prized for illuminated books—The “parcheminerie” of the Abbey of Cluny—Origin of the term “parchment”—Papyrus.

AS vellum is constantly spoken of in connection with illumination and illuminated books, it becomes necessary to explain what it is, and why it was used instead of paper.

We often find writers, when referring to ancient documents, making use of the words parchment and vellum as if the terms were synonymous; but this is not strictly correct. It is true that both are prepared from skins, but the skins are different. They are similar, but not the same, nor, indeed, are they interchangeable. In point of fact, the skins of almost all the well-known domestic animals, and even of fishes, have been used for the purpose of making a material for writing upon. Specifically among the skins so prepared were the following: the ordinary lamb-skin, called “aignellinus”¹; that prepared from stillborn lambs, called “virgin parchment.”

From sheepskins was produced ordinary “parchment,” and also a sort of leather called

¹ Strictly *agnellinus*.