

Illuminated Initials

(art + history)

During the Middle Ages, the ability to read was rare and books were even more so. Documents in Europe and the Middle East were copied by scribes one stroke at a time. The practice of illumination — decoration of a page with ornate lettering, icons and designs — was developed to guide viewers through a document and increase their comprehension. Luminous color and precious metals emphasized ornamental text and illustrative scenes.

Medieval scribes would have loved a surface like Mirror Board as a base for their illuminations. In this project, students design one of their own initials and paint it on this highly reflective gold-foiled board.

Grade Levels 3-8

Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 25 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

- View examples of handwritten calligraphy and illumination from the Middle Ages and those of more contemporary artists. Recommended resources:
[“The Art of Illumination”](#) by Patricia Carter (68441-1001)
[“Decorative Initials”](#) Design Sourcebook (71300-1007)
[“The Calligrapher’s Bible”](#) by David Harris (71120-1001)
[“Medieval Design”](#) Dover Pictura Electronic Clip Art Books and CD-ROM (71310-1010)
- Provide lettering styles for reference or for tracing. A computer can be used to print out font examples.

Process

- On a plain white sheet of paper, students begin a preliminary drawing by defining a border measuring 1/2" to 1" wide and centering one of their initials inside the border. Provide capital lettering styles for reference or for tracing, or have students design their own. A computer can be used to print out font examples.
- Plan the “Illumination” of the letter and border with patterns and designs. Prompt students to design the illumination so that it interacts with the letter as a ribbon or vine would, by winding the pattern around the letter. Medieval scribes would often find inspiration in nature and repeat patterns and themes throughout a design. Students may use historic designs for reference or create something original that is beautiful or significant to them.



Materials

Mirror Board, Gold, package of 10, 8-1/2" x 11" (12486-9011); need one per student

Blickrylic® Student Acrylics, share one pint each of the following colors across class:

Transparent colors:

Phthalo Blue (00711-5146)
 Phthalo Green (00711-7066)
 Phthalo Red (00711-3406)
 Chrome Yellow (00711-4156)

Opaque Colors:

Mars Black (00711-2046)
 Titanium White (00711-1116)

Blick® Scholastic Red Sable Bright Brushes, size 6 (05944-1006); one per student

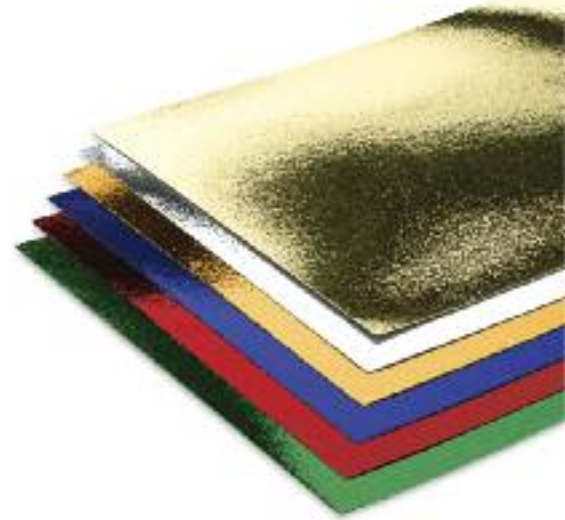
Blick® White Sulphite Drawing Paper, 60-lb, package of 100 9" x 12" sheets (10209-1003)

Process, continued

3. Place the drawing face-up on a piece of gold Mirror Board. Transfer the design by embossing it onto the board — tracing over each line with firm (not heavy) pressure, using a ballpoint pen.
4. Plan color placement before painting. The letter and other key points of the illustration will remain unpainted so as to appear gilded. Black and white colors are opaque, so they should be used sparingly.
5. Paint the design. Some helpful hints:
 - Use very small amounts of paint at a time. Thinner applications of paint will be more transparent, so the metallic gold will shine through and “illuminate” the design — making it appear as if it were lit from within.
 - Use white and black for lines and small areas to create contrast with the transparent color. Two coats may be required to make these colors completely opaque.
 - Avoid touching the board in areas that will be painted, as fingerprints may interfere with adhesion. Use a tissue over fingers to touch the board or the gold letter area, then wipe away fingerprints later.
6. After the paint is completely dry, glue the finished letter to a piece of black matboard or posterboard for extra support and to provide a dramatic display.

Options

1. The Illuminated Initial can be cut out, or certain areas can be cut out. The design doesn't need to be confined to a rectangle.
2. As an alternative to paint, permanent markers can be used to add color. Recommend [Blick® Studio Art Markers](#), assorted colors (22148-).
3. Mirror Board is also available in 5 other colors.



National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes

K-4 Students describe how different materials, techniques and processes cause different responses.

5-8 Students intentionally take advantage of the qualities and characteristics of art media, techniques and processes to enhance communication of their experiences and ideas.

9-12 Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques and processes they use.

Content Standard #4 Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

K-4 Students demonstrate how history, culture and the visual arts can influence each other in making and studying works of art.

5-8 Students analyze, describe and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art.

9-12 Students describe the function and explore the meaning of specific art objects within varied cultures, times and places.