

Illuminated Flower Border

Description

This is an illuminated border piece, inspired directly from a facsimile piece in the book, *The Macclesfield Alphabet Book*, folio 44r. The original has three columns of flowers, of which I chose to recreate as best I could the one farthest right. The book generally dates in style from the 15th century, with some additions from the early 16th century, which this folio may date to. The book is otherwise not dated.

I can only presume that those of some wealth who had interest in owning illuminated books and could afford to purchase them would be the sorts who would have had a piece like this in their collection. This would be literate wealthy merchants, gentry and nobility of Northern Europe.

The Supplies

I used modern paints for my work, as I have only a little classwork in using period pigments, although I do understand some of the process involved. However, as I have small children and no really secure area for dealing with pigment powders at this point, I'd prefer to use the tube paints for the time.

With some trial and error during the painting process, the following paints were used on this illumination. All are Windsor and Newton Gouache paints. Most were purchased in bulk from an eBay auction at a good price.

- Spectrum Red, because of its warmer hue when mixed with white.
- Ultramarine Blue
- Olive Green, because of its warmer hue
- Primary Yellow (I have no Spectrum Yellow).
- Zinc White for mixing with the above colors
- Permanent White for highlights
- Gold (imitation)

Other supplies include:

- Sharpie Pen (acid free) in black to outline the image.
- Pigma Micron (acid free) .05 pen in black for the squiggles.
- Bristol board paper, smooth finish in a 9"x12" size.
- 5/0 sable brush (my finer brushes are missing in action)

The Process

I first scanned the image into my computer at 125% of original, so that I would have a working copy instead of my book. I printed the copy at the limits of my printer size, which shrunk the size a little but it is still larger than the original. However, my printer did not want to print properly, so the printout was rather washed out. I used the printout instead to act as my drawing guide, taping it to a light board.



Illustration 1: Original illumination from The Macclesfield Alphabet Book, folio 44r.

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I marked the center of the Bristol paper with my ruler and drew a line vertically. I then placed one horizontal line an inch below the top edge to help with placement. I marked a center vertical line on the printout to help with placement. I placed the printout underneath the bristol board, and lined up the pattern best I could to keep it centered.

Turning off all the lights in the room, I lightly traced the outline of the image using a hard drawing pencil. I found that I needed the book to guide my hand anyway as the colors in some areas were hard to see.

After tracing and turning the lights back on, I began selecting and preparing my paints. In the period, the artists would grind and prepare their various pigments, from various sources. My paints come in a tube and only require a few drops of water to prepare. As I've done some illuminations before, most of my colors were already mixed on small plastic trays for me to just add drops of distilled water and go.

The book noted that the pencil tracings would have been traced again with minium, then the pencil marks were erased. I had to look this up in Maestra Flavia's booklet (Trimble, 2007), and found that minium is red lead oxide, which gives a red-orange color. Not having such a color among my tubes, I chose to use the unmixed spectrum red I already had, and colored the stems of the small offshooting flowers, and the border. I kept the pencil tracings for now, which can be seen behind some of the light pink.

I first filled in the base colors of medium red, medium pink, light pink, medium blue and medium green. For the red, I had tried Alizarin Crimson, which I thought would be a warmer red, but it was more on the blue side when mixed with white. Unfortunately, a small amount of red ended up on a finger and smeared onto the image when I applied the first coats of spectrum red. I promptly covered the non-working areas with paper to prevent further problems.

After the base colors were dried, I then went back and added in the light blue and the light green. I tried to blend in the colors to fade in some areas, but that was hit or miss. It was easier but took longer to add in layers of the lighter color to strengthen the tint.

I realized that the red needed some lighter tone, and realized that what I thought was a more orange red, was actually portions that appear to be orange blended with the red, and other areas just straight red. My first thought was to try yellow ochre with the red, but that made a muddy dark orange. So, I made a mix of orange with primary yellow and a little of the spectrum red. It took a few tries to get this to look right. I had to add in a little white as well to make it work. It gave a much better orange to match the original image.

I then painted in the gold circles for the flower shoots, and painted them twice for good coverage. In period, layers of real gold leaf would have been laid onto a sticky base or bole first, before any paints were added, then burnished to a shine. I don't have the money to afford real gold at this time, so paint will do.

Eventually I added in highlights of permanent white to the blue and pink portions, which took less layers to strengthen. I then added in primary yellow mixed with zinc white as highlights on the green and red. I had tried the yellow alone and found it faded too much when dry. I also painted the mess of red with the permanent white, after having carefully scraped off as much of the red as I could with an X-acto blade.

I let the whole dry for a time, then removed the pencil drawings with an electric eraser, and removed the eraser bits with a large soft brush.

Finally, I used a black Sharpie writing pen to outline the image. This pen is acid-free and slightly thicker than my usual pens, and gave a bold look. My hand is too shaky to use a brush for the outlines, especially after a few days of concentrated painting and my hand cramping. For the little squiggles that fill up the

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background, I used Pigma Micron .05 pen in black, as it is a finer width pen. A shaky hand was perfect for making squiggles.

Thoughts

I decided to work on this piece as I am trying to work on a scroll in a similar style, but much larger in scope. I felt I had bitten off more than I could chew with that project, and felt that if I could practice with this, with flowers that are much larger, I might get comfortable working on the other project. This style is rather chaotic to my mind, with no symmetry, and odd ways of the colors coming together that I don't quite follow. But the colors appeal to me, the use of it the way the colors plays off each other, and the way the vines flow. I nearly gave up on this project as I was halfway through as I could not see how it would come together, but continued anyway. It was only near the end with the highlights in place that I could see it working and blending into the whole. There are a number of mistakes, but I am learning what works, and what doesn't.

I do wish I had used a darker green tint for the base color, as the green is too light in general. But I am happy with how the orange blended with the red to provide the base coloring for the many, many dots of yellow in the upper and lower flower.

Bibliography/Sources Cited

British Library, The (2010). *The Macclesfield Alphabet Book, A Facsimile; BL Additional MS 88887*, The British Library, London, UK.

Trimble, Bjo (writing as Maestra Flavia Beatrice Carmigniani) (2007). *Exploring Period Pigments*, Monrovia, CA USA.

Next page: A photo of my illumination as entered (a gold frame is not included).

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