

When Books Were Rare and Beautiful: The Traveling Scriptorium

The Traveling Scriptorium, an educational outreach program based on the Leaves of Gold exhibition, was a series of twenty workshops for children (3rd-6th grade, although some younger students attended some workshops) held at branches of the Free Library of Philadelphia March - June 2001. This page presents the project in pictures and can serve as a model for similar projects.



Brother Patrick (Ed Stivender) and Lady Margaret (Meg Kennedy)

The Traveling Scriptorium display



The three-panel display shows, left, types of illuminated manuscripts; center, steps in manuscript production as seen in medieval illustrations; right, steps in creating an illuminated initial. Its conception and execution are the work of Meg Kennedy. The illustrations in the center panel are reproduced in *The Story of Writing* by Donald Jackson (scribe to the Queen and maker of the St. John's Bible), and taken from a 13th c. German manuscript owned by Kongelige Bibliotek, Copenhagen. The illustrations are color photocopies and inkjet prints mounted on construction paper.

Surrounding the triptych are materials from an art trunk created by Diane V. Horn of the Museum education staff. The trunk contains:

- examples of sheepskin, cow skin, and finished vellum
- mortar and pestle
- shells for holding mixed paints
- a stone slab and glass muller for grinding ingredients into powdered form
- bottles of natural ingredients used for making pigment, including cochineal (dried insects) used to make purple pigment
- bottle of *gesso*, used to prepare a surface to receive gold leaf
- writing and drawing instruments including a reed pen, quill pen, inkhorns, paint brushes
- bone folder, stylus, and burnisher.

To the right are examples of a finished book (actually a contemporary blank diary purchased from a bookstore or stationer's), a wax codex, and a scroll. (See supplier list for information on where to purchase some of these items.)

Not pictured: laminated photocopies of illuminated pages.

The Presentation

The Scriptorium presentation begins with Brother Patrick teaching the children to chant "ego sum puer" or "ego sum puella pulchra." He then introduces the topic of hand-made books, using the materials shown above. The skins are passed around for hands-on experience, as are the laminated pages. When the audience is multicultural, as with this one, he stresses manuscript traditions outside western Europe (e.g., manuscripts of the Koran).



Lady Margaret, who has been working on an illuminated initial while Brother Patrick speaks, then talks about some of her illumination projects, which are on the table in front of her. She describes her work until the children appear to be restless, then calls for additional purple ink because she's almost out of it.

Brother Patrick has used the stone slab and glass muller to grind up some cochineal for the purple ink. Eeeeeuw! When the children realize that this purple ink is made of ground-up dead bugs, they're eager to try painting with it.



Lady Margaret then calls for helpers. She has a big job ahead of her -- a gold letter that must be finished. Would anyone like to help her put real gold on this letter? Small groups of students come up at a time to be instructed on the art of illumination.

Breathe, burnish, brush!

Lady Margaret has applied a substance called *gesso* to the places that will get the gold leaf, and has cut half-inch squares of gold leaf for the students to use. Here, a student is breathing on the gesso three times. The moisture from his breath will make the gesso sticky enough for the thin sheet of gold to stick to it. His burnishing stone and brush, which he will use in the next two steps, are laid out next to the work.



Breathe!



Burnish!



Brush!

Once the student has burnished the gold leaf, he uses a soft brush to remove any loose flecks of gold. Lady Margaret then brushes the gold flecks into the student's hair.

While the small groups are burnishing gold leaf, the rest of the participants are creating their own illustrated initials. To streamline this process, Kennedy has created outlined versions of each letter of the alphabet on card stock which the children embellish with colored pencils to reduce mess in a library environment. In other classes she would use paints, inks, or markers



If some children have completed all activities while others are still working, Brother Patrick entertains them with stories until the others have finished.

Although the program was conceived for groups of twenty students, it proved to work well, if noisily, with groups as large as sixty students, as long as librarians, teachers, and parents or other caregivers were available to act as supervisors.

Writing in the journal of the Delaware Valley Calligraphers' Society, Meg Kennedy comments:

I have always loved working with children, but the groups that came to our Scriptorium were especially endearing. Although most of our programs were after school, their interest, enthusiasm, and willingness to suspend disbelief and pretend this Irish monk and medieval lady were "for real" consistently delighted and inspired Ed and me.

When initially planning the program, we wondered how we would manage to keep it fresh throughout four months and twenty sessions. Each new group at each new library welcomed the Traveling Scriptorium with eager questions and amazement at how books were handmade and valued as treasures.

We met with an estimated 600 children and uncounted adults. Being able to impress these audiences with extremely "low-tech" activities that are, quite frankly, quiet and obsessively detailed, awakened in me

a new appreciation for our medieval heritage. It was a wonderful experience!

~~This project is the result of a collaboration among Philadelphia Museum of Art Department of Education staff, especially Diane Victoria Horn and Marla Shoemaker, and the Free Library of Philadelphia. It was produced as part of the Leaves of Gold series of exhibitions and public programs in the Philadelphia area during spring 2001. Funding for this special program was made possible by a grant from the William Penn Foundation. Additional funding for the Leaves of Gold exhibition and related programs was made possible by a grant from the Philadelphia Exhibitions Initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts and by contributions by private donors.~~

Lady Margaret and Brother Patrick are available for group presentations at greater Philadelphia-area institutions. Contact Meg Kennedy at meg@book-arts.com. For information about storyteller, Ed Stivender call Nancy Clancy, 5138 Whitehall Drive Clifton Hts., PA 19018 610-259-8825, storyclan@aol.com.

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