

The Book of Kells Project- Maya Smith

Imgur Gallery for Entire project: <https://imgur.com/gallery/jnU00A7>

Imgur Gallery for close elements: <https://imgur.com/gallery/IXbeae3>

Video: <https://imgur.com/a/SHUIGkt>

Full Portfolio of Other Work: <https://mayaxsmith.myportfolio.com/>

Revised Methodology

Paper: The paper I used is a facsimile of parchment, having not being constructed of animal hide. While The Book of Kells manuscript is made of vellum, the procurement of vellum in the modern day is somewhat difficult and expensive. I have in my personal collection enough vellum for one sheet, which I used for one of the illustrated pages. The imitation parchment comprises the rest of the text block and was the location where I transcribe the Gospel.

Chords and String: I will use hemp cord as well as traditional waxed thread to form the chords on the spine of the book. The binding of the book will utilize 5 chords which will be comprised of the hemp chord alone.

Bookbinding loom: This is a necessary piece in the assembly of the text block. I have constructed a loom that is flexible enough to accomodate the specifics regarding the dimensions outlined above. Regarding authenticity, the loom was constructed without the use of power tools, however the wood was procured already milled.

Binding:

Assembly of the Bookboard: For the manuscript I used traditional modern bookboard. After multiple attempts and failures (due to splintering, issues with nails, etc.), I eventually decided to opt for a simple modern material. However, hemp cord was used and all of the holes in the bookboard were made by pounding various sized stakes through the cardboard and leather.

Glue: Another crucial component in assembling not only the text block but the manuscript as a whole is the use of an adhesive. For the glue I used rabbit skin adhesive. Regarding the adherence of the gold leaf, I used a albumen solution combined with vinegar, which is also a more traditional method of adherence. For a select few elements (the front piece), I resorted to using modern superglue, as I was unable to properly adhere the element without it.

Decorative Elements:

Leather: In this instance I used 1.2oz red goatskin. The original binding of the book is long lost, and it has rebound many times, but lamb or goatskin is frequently used in binding of books and is the material that forms the basis for this book as well.

Tools: I created decorative binding for the front and back covers as well as the spine. For the ornamentation I used a variety of tools. I was able to find mostly antique tools (browsing the annals of eBay searching for tools that would be appropriate). In the end I was able to locate a bowed brass tool, made in the 1890s, and a set of antique letters, which I was able to bring back to life after several hours of sanding (there is a picture contrasting before and after in the image set I have attached). The only non antique tool I purchased allows for the decorative elements on the corners.

Gilding: For the gilding portion of the design I continued avoiding “modern” tools and heating methods, and will instead heat up the brass tools mentioned above over a flame rather than a temperature controlled hot plate. I used imitation gold foil for this project.

Brass corners: I carved brass corners to fit onto the corners of the book and created a select brass feature for the front of the book. This was done with manual tools only (a hammer and nails and shears).

Doors: The front opening doors were a concept I developed inspired by a Bulgarian artist. For the decoration, I took brass sheets and punched holes through both doors. After this, I cut sections of tape and sanded around them, leaving the areas uncovered with a “brushed” look. I installed the doors by nailing holes into the leather, and screwing screw around the brass plates. I used premade hinges to achieve this look, and a dremel to sand down the screw heads on the inside of the doors to afford enough room for the hinges to properly function.

The Inner Embellishment: The process of devising an inner decorative element provided a number of design hurdles. First there was the question of period appropriate design. While the original Book of Kells cover does not exist, there are a number of manuscripts from Western Europe that have fortunately survived. The second question was a matter of ability, I wanted to create an element that would be within my abilities, but do a service to the rest of the work. I was unable to devise a sufficient plan for how to emboss the cover, ultimately leading me down another path. For the cover element I resolved to use a decorative sculpture, inspired by Ottonian ivory carvings that often acted as inset pieces for the front of manuscripts. The design was sculpted from clay, coated in faux gold foil and rubbed with black India ink to enhance the differences.

Notes on Deviation from the Project Outline: Most notably in the logistics of the project. I was unable to complete an entire rendering of the Gospels in insular majuscule, in the end only writing 50 pages of the book. The time constraints ultimately bound me to a shorter piece of work than I had initially anticipated. I was also only able to complete one full color rendering of the vignettes in the Book of Kells for the same reason. There were also a few instances where I utilized modern tools where I had not anticipated, these deviations are noted above. For me, this acted most prominently as a testament to the skills of the monastic federation in Kells that produced the work.

Notes on Decoration and Research, Connection to CLAS1250

Cover work: As previously mentioned we lack an original binding for the Book of Kells, and a fair few manuscripts (let alone bound books), exist from this era. Given this parameter, I elected to use the Ottonian relief technique as the primary decoration source for the covers. Ivory carving reliefs that decorated the front of books from the Ottonian period are fortunately fairly common relative to their Anglican manuscript counterparts. Front plates have been found throughout the Ottonian empire, deriving influence from both Carolingian and Byzantine heritage (Wixon). The depiction on the front of my manuscript is that of Christ in traditional Ottonian style, special attention has been taken to create the drapes and folds of his garments, the striations in his hair, and proportionally larger hands. These features were common throughout Ottonian art, and act as some of the main stylistic attributes in ivory carvings (Wixon, 279). I was unable to carve ivory for this manuscript, electing instead to use clay coated in faux gold foil and rubbed with black India ink to emphasize the carved divots. The Ottonian ivory designs (such as the one referenced for this piece) were constructed approximately a century after the Book of Kells was supposedly written. However, their geographical and temporal proximity is sufficiently small to have still been considered within the same time period and location for me. Reference photos for the front piece are located below.

Paper Design: The Book of Kells is composed on vellum sheets measuring approximately 12 x 9in. For my manuscript, I elected to write on 7.5 x 7.5 in pages, in the same form of insular

manuscript. As mentioned previously, due to budgetary constraints I wrote primarily on a facsimile of parchment paper. Boiled down to the essentials, the *Book of Kells* is essentially a gospel book written in an insular Latin majuscule. This form of writing is a distinctly Anglican form, and one that was influenced greatly by the diffusion of Christianity in England and Ireland during the 7th and 8th century. Insular majuscule stands as an example of the cultural synthesis created through writing after the fall of Rome. It is often referred to as a “half-uncial” script, as it derives heavily from the continental uncial writing, with a unique flair (Brown). This diffusion of writing styles offers just one example of the spread of culture and art after the fall of Rome. Art would spread around the continent, interacting with the local culture and reforming over generations until it developed into an entirely unique style. This writing font eventually fell out of favor around the 12th century, replaced by the more versatile miniscule text which more closely resembles modern script (O’Neill).

In order to reproduce this script required significant practice. I sanded down the handle and formed the nib of my pen from brass, and then assembled the pieces and practiced. I was able to successfully recreate the script from the *Book of Kells* after some time, but after a number of pages opted to use a modern fountain pen to reduce the time it took to write each page.

Art and Design: The most famous trait of the *Book of Kells* is its sumptuous decoration that adorns nearly every page. With each turn there are new colors flooding “o”s and “d”s, and fanciful lettering with bright colors. The visual additions to the Book of Kells are arguably the most important facets of the manuscript, as it reveals the artistic practices and priorities of the time. The visual landscape of a manuscript (especially one of a religious nature) would have been crucial in a time where gospels were largely visual affairs and an illiterate populace predominated (Brown, M). The emphasis put on certain iconography also offers insight into what was valued highest by the authors and artists. While there are numerous expected large scale images (for example, the rendering of Christ and Mary on the first page), there are a number of interesting artistic choices made by the monastic order that indicate artistic undercurrents of the time. The embellishment of the Chi-Rho in folio 283v, for instance, indicates its rising popularity as a religious symbol in the medieval British Isles. Once again, this element offers insight into the cultural synthesis that occurred across the continent and into the furthest reaches in Europe. After Rome fell, the cultural trends and religions did not disappear, but instead diffused across Europe and the Near East, with each culture choosing and incorporating them along with local flair. While Chi-Rho was emphasized in Celtic tradition, another icon might have been similarly venerated in modern day Poland or Italy. The art within the Book of Kells, while having Christian subject matter, also embraces traditional artistic techniques. The decoration on the letters and in the borders of the pages, for instance, emphasizes the Pictish and Urnes style native to Northern Europe (Carpenter). It is clear that the distinct clues left in the art within the *Book of Kells* offers unique insight into the artistic and cultural trends that shaped the British Isles after the fall of Rome.

For my depiction I ultimately decided on a rendering of the four Gospels, as depicted on folio 129v. I elected for similar design and color scheme, but did not directly replicate either. The colors appear garish in comparison to the Book of Kells, however in consideration for the aging process that would have affected the pages, this is what the original coloring might have looked like. I painted archival ink directly onto the surface of the vellum in order to achieve this look.

Final Notes and Reflections

The final bound manuscript I have created is a labor of love and pain. Creating this manuscript took over 30 hours, numerous cuts and burns, and a great deal of headaches and design issues. I have adhered for the most part to the design parameters that I have set for myself with a few notable exceptions. Clearly, this project was certainly more complex than I anticipated, offering a wide variety of design challenges and hurdles. What was most apparent was the immense skills of the artists that created the original Book of Kells manuscript, as well as the other medieval manuscripts from which I took inspiration. The skills of the monks of the monastic order that created this manuscript were ones that were honed over generations, and their devotion to this project is astounding. What is also evident from examining the various elements of the *Book of Kells* is the immense cultural connectivity that existed in Europe at this time. In an era that was supposedly the Dark Ages, immense artistic achievement bloomed. Connections from the British Isles to mainland Europe were clearly present, and while the material culture was not discussed in this analysis, even a cursory glance shows how diverse material selection was due to flourishing trade routes. The ability for people to persist in their endeavors despite the collapse and subsequent power vacuum caused by the fall of Rome is a testament to their resilience, and endurance of different faiths and artistic practices.

Daily Diary

	A	B	C	D	E	F
3	11/2/2019	0.5	Sanding of wood and body for pen			
4	11/3/2019	1	Continuation of pen work, writing testing			
5	11/4/2019	2	Page writing, leather treatment			
6	11/5/2019	1	Sanding of front brass plates			
7	11/6/2019	3	Assembly of doors for with brass			
8	11/7/2019	0.5	Page writing			
9	11/8/2019	0.5	Page writing			
10	11/9/2019	0.5	Page writing			
11	11/10/2019	null	null			
12	11/11/2019	0.5	Page writing			
13	11/12/2019	0.5	Leather treatment, addition of bookboards			
14	11/13/2019	1	Creation of fundamental holes and initial door work			
15	11/14/2019	1	Sanding of door posts and elements			
16	11/15/2019	0.5	Practice with gilding elements, experimenting for best result			
17	11/16/2019	1	Gilding continued			
18	11/17/2019	0.5	Page writing			
19	11/18/2019	0.5	Page writing			
20	11/19/2019	1	Pasting of all paper together			
21	11/20/2019	1.5	Loom setup and first stitches, sanding letter tools			
22	11/21/2019	1.5	Stiching, vellum lines drawn			
23	11/22/2019	0.5	Stiching			
24	11/23/2019	1	Assembly of the book			
25	11/24/2019	0.5	Inner portions padded			
26	11/25/2019	0.5	Page writing			
27	11/26/2019	0.5	Page writing			
28	11/27/2019	null	null			
29	11/28/2019	null	null			
30	11/29/2019	0.5	Page writing			
31	11/30/2019	0.5	Page writing			
32	12/1/2019	null (travel day)	null			
33	12/2/2019	2	Creating front element			
34	12/3/2019	3	Treatment of front element, clasp added			
35	12/4/2019	3	Final elements added, lettering			
36	12/5/2019	null	due			

Table indicating date (Column A), hours spent (Column B), and task (Column C)

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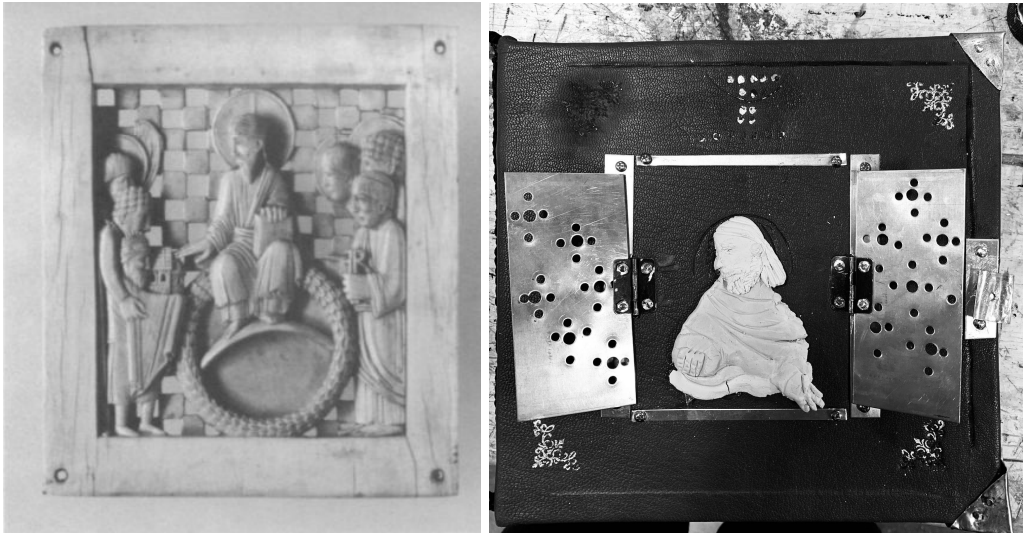
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Cover Illustration Examples



Comparison of reference sculpture and finished inspired piece





Ottonian ivory inset piece

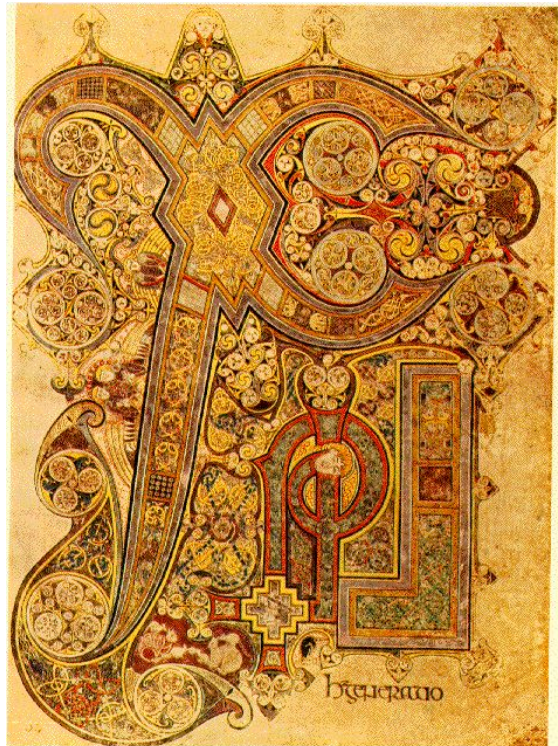


Image of Christ and the Virgin (Left), Chi-Rho (Right)



A Pictish Cross (left), and Urnes wood art from the Urnes Stave Church (Right)