

Duke de Berry Style "O"

(an illuminated "O" in the late 14th/early 15th century style of the Court of France)

Entrant: Therasia von Tux

Category: manuscript arts

Specific art form: illumination

Entry contents: One illuminated "O" plus Harthan's *Book of Hours* which is referred to often in this documentation.

Design Elements of "Court of France" Style Illuminated Capitals (a necessary preamble which surveys several key features of illuminated capitals in this style)

The late 14th to early 15th century in France was a period of great upheaval and much warfare, including the murder of the Duc d'Orleans by the Duc de Burgundy, his cousin, plus other small family squabbles of the royal family of France. The Duc de Berry is perhaps much more famous for his fabulous collection of illuminated manuscripts and his patronage of artists, than for his cameo appearances in most of the family fights of the Valois court which punctuated the final phases of the Hundred Years War.

The books of hours of the Duc de Berry set a style precedent for a specific kind of illuminated capital, where on a round letter, the bordure lines would cross over one another and trade places, the inner passing to the outside and the outer passing to the inside. A simple example can be seen on p. 54 of Harthan¹ *The Book of Hours* (Harthan, J., 1977), from the Tres Belles Heures de Notre Dame of the Duc de Berry. The figure-8 shape made by the cross-over is distinctive and remains a common design element in illuminated capitals into the 15th century. The figure-8 sometimes is embellished as can be seen on p. 95 of Harthan, which is from The Hours of Philip the Bold, Duc de Burgundy.

Sometimes the voided areas of the figure-8 would be used instead of being left blank, which is the case for many of the illuminated capitals in the Belleville Breviary² and also for the Hours of Phillip the Bold (p. 95, Harthan). This example also illustrates another feature of the illuminated capitals in the "Court of France" style, i.e. the vine work on a solid background in the box which surrounds the letter. On p. 59 of Harthan is a further example of vine work of this type, on the Grandes Heures of the Duc de Berry. Other items of interest are the blue on blue background inside the D on p. 54 of Harthan, from the Belle Heures de Notre Dame.

Though not common, the wandering of feet, hands, swords and limbs from the inside of an illuminated capital to poke across the letter and towards freedom happened from time to time throughout the high and late gothic periods. Note the wandering foot of Christ as it sticks out of the letter D from a page of the Grey-FitzPayn Hours (p. 43 of Harthan)

¹ Harthan, J., 1977, *The Book of Hours*

² Avril, F., 1978, *Manuscript Painting at the Court of France, the 14th Century*

and the leafy bits inside the D from the Hours of Philip the Bold (p. 95 of Harthan), as they violate the border of their confines and poke out towards the outside of the letter.

The last things I'd like to mention are shading practices in the middle ages. Overall monochromatic or simple dichromatic shading in illumination was the norm north of the alps in the 14 to 15th centuries. The page from the Grandes Heures on p. 59 of Harthan is a good exemplar of these shading practices. Note the monochromatic blue-on-blue and red-on-red shading of the robes of the figures in the box and inside the D immediately below the box. Dichromatic shadings of blue-on-white, black-on-red, and yellow-on-red (note the bear holding the banner of France Ancient on the lower right margin of the page). These sorts of simple but subtle shading practices are common throughout the Gothic period in Western Europe, as any survey through illuminated manuscripts will show you, and is not confined to the 14th/15th "Court of France" style.

In order to achieve the monochromatic and dichromatic shading effects, the paints used needed to be opaque when laid on the vellum. This is not difficult to achieve with egg tempera or well-ground gum Arabic. The opacity of the paints led to the occasional practice of shading from one extreme color value to a different extreme color value by the use of painting very fine lines of gradational color next to each other, as opposed to the more modern blending of colors we are used to seeing in modern watercolors and oils. A good example of laying gradational fine lines of color can be found on pp. 74 and 75 in Harthan, which are two pages from the Visconti Hours (the white-to-blue and white-to-red on the border of the portrait on p. 74; the wings on the birds on p. 75; the Fleur-de-lilis in the ribboned annulet border on p. 74; etc.)

The Illuminated "O" - history and design element choices

This illuminated letter was originally part of a scroll for a Cynaguan viscounty. The layout and design of the overall scroll was dictated by the Sable Swan Scribe then in office; the calligraphy and illumination were both "shopped out," where I received the illumination assignment. The scroll was rejected by the Chancellor of the College of Scribes for the kingdom because the calligrapher made a mistake in the blazon and was unwilling to fix it. At the time, I had already started work on the "O." Rather than lose what I had started, I cut the letter out of the scroll and continued to paint on it.

I incorporated many of the design elements discussed above, particularly those from the Grandes Heures - I had access to the Braziller edition of the manuscript at the time I was painting the "O." I included a figure-8 cross-over, which I decided to paint with the fine-line gradation color change, going from madder-red to dark blue (there are nine colors in the transition, which are easiest to see on the left). I used the blue-on-blue quatrefoil patterning from the Tres Belle Heures inside the letter. The lions violate the borders of the O as the lower one attempts to jump out. The lions are shaded with the blue-on-white dichromatic shading. The vine work was inspired by the the Belles Heures de Notre Dame. The tiny little detail work in white on the letter and along the bordure was inspired by someone's snarky comment that I couldn't paint detail well.

Deviations from Period Practice

The letter itself is much too large for any period manuscript. Even the illuminated letters of the *Grandes Heures*, some of the largest ever painted, are a quarter of the size of the letter here. The size was specified by the Sable Swan scribe, who designed the scroll and was deeply into wallpaper scrolls instead of designs and sizes which were more period in character. (This was a very good lesson for me to never again get involved in scroll-by-committee). The palette of colors corresponds closely to that used in period;³ however, the paints themselves are modern Winsor-Newton gouache. While I could have used my own vermilion and lead white, I have always chosen not to do so. There's something about their relative toxicity that leaves me less than enthusiastic. Also, the letter is on paper, because it's cheap compared to vellum.

The gold is really gold, and I basically decided to go overboard with all the little gold bits in the vine work, frankly because I was having fun. The gold stars in the dark blue background is merely my goofing-off and trying out scrofitto for the first time. The radiant gold-leaf sun and the stars aren't really out of bounds for period practice (see p. 130 of Harthan), but I really don't think I can justify the stars AND the sun together without resorting to verbal horse pockey. Since the prime audience of this illuminated letter was myself, I was playing around and trying new stuff.

As the only thing I've illuminated in the SCA that I didn't give away, I framed my "O" and always hang it opposite a sunny window, because when the sun hits it, the way the gold lights up is glorious.

References

Avril, F., 1978, *Manuscript Painting at the Court of France, the 14th Century*, Brazillier Books, NY.

Harthan, J., 1977, *The Book of Hours*, Park Lane Books, NY.

Mayer, 1977, *The Artist's Handbook*, Viking Press, NY.

Thompson, D. V., 1956, *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting*, Dover Publications., NY.

*this isn't the best photo,
but it's the only I have of the
"O" at the moment*



³ Thompson, D., the first three chapters