

14th Century French Illumination

by Merewen de Sweynesheie

Purpose:

This scroll is to serve as the Scroll of Honour for King Nigel I and Queen Adrielle I (from backlog). I chose these images because I loved the theme, it fit the personas of Nigel and Adrielle, it was beautifully illustrated with amazing detail, and it even has a king narrating to a scribe, which is beautifully fitting for a scroll of honour.

Manuscript:

Designs come from an early 14th century (ca. 1300-1316) French manuscript containing, "Estoire del Saint Graal," "La Queste del Saint Graal," and "Morte Artu," owned by King Charles V of France. It is currently a part of the collection of the British Museum. It goes by all three titles because it contains (incomplete) portions of all three stories. The illuminator is not listed, but the museum's listing notes that its style is very similar to former Amsterdam, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, MS 1 (sold at Sotheby's, December 2010, lot 33), both containing Arthurian cycles. In fact, it is a part of a set of three or four manuscripts containing parts of the same stories, all illustrated by the same group of artists, unknown. It illustrates the stories of King Arthur and the crusades, and the quest for the holy grail.

Size:

The original size of this manuscript was 485 x 335 mm, with images falling into a space 345 x 245 mm. I have made the images slightly smaller than original to fit the size and border requirements for the Scroll of Honour, 318 mm x 232 mm. Unfortunately, as the images were already incredibly detailed miniatures at that size, probably stretching to the full capabilities of the original illuminator and materials, this means I have had to leave out some detail, but I have tried to maintain most of it.

Images:

The specific images I used have been compiled from multiple pages of the text, replacing and augmenting the images found on one single page to create a scene more appropriate to the context. I used images from f.3, f.21, f.72v, f.89, f.91, f.140, and f.155. The first three images come from "Estoire del Saint Graal," the next two come from "La Queste del Saint Graal," and the final two images come from "Morte Artu."

Materials:

Original was on parchment, ink, and what I can only assume was opaque watercolour, given the non-translucency of the colour. There was also both raised and flat gilding.

I have used pergamenta, as per Scroll of Honour requirements. For painting, a combination of Windsor and Newton and Reeves Gouaches, and mostly a Grumbacher 000 round paintbrush, other than starter bits with a Bravura 00 paintbrush. For gilding, Rolco Aquasize, fish glue, zinc oxide, and French pink clay, with a 00 paintbrush. For fixing places where I had made poor decisions about what kind of gilding was used, FineTec watercolour, mixed to be as close in colour to the real gold as possible.

Outlining and detail was done with the paintbrush, other than outlining the gold scene frames, which were done with a black pen and ruler.

Colours:

I liked many of the colour choices used, especially in architecture, so I didn't aim to change a lot, but to better reproduce. As the project went on, I decided to take more liberties with colours, while still honouring the period colour scheme reasonably well.

For blues, I attempted to replicate ultramarine/azurite/smalt and indigo. For oranges and reds, I tried to imitate minium, vermillion, alizarin crimson, carmine. For greens, I attempted to imitate malachite and something similar to bohemian green earth or terra verte.

Process:

1. Assemble desired image on computer and print out. 5 hours
2. Trace onto pergamenta using graphite paper. Although using light to trace images through the paper was also a period method of transfer, it would have taken longer to interpret the images, and I didn't have the time. 10 hours total.
3. Create raised gilding media. This was my first time gilding, in any form. The original raised gilding was completed on what now looks like a dark green background. I do not know what colour this would have been to begin with, but regardless, I did not feel I had appropriate materials to do this. I opted instead to create a pink gilding size, which is similar to many gilding applications in the Middle Ages. To make this, I started with modern Rolco Aquasize water-based gilding size, and then added zinc oxide and French pink clay. I mixed the clay for colour and the ZnO for thickness. At about 1 1/2 tsp ZnO and 1/2 tsp clay to 1 Tbsp size, the gesso was about right. It flowed nicely, though some spots were a touch gritty. Zinc oxide is a reasonable (and safer) substitute for white lead, which would have been a material of choice in the Middle Ages. About 2 hours.
4. Complete raised gilding. First, I painted all the spots with my homemade gesso and allowed it to dry. The water content caused some bubbling of the perg, but such is life. Next, I forgot to breathe on it, and laid my gold leaf on the dried gesso. Luckily, due to modern conveniences, it stuck. I put a piece of glassine on the gold, and burnished with a piece of polished hematite I've had laying around for a while. Then I found out that gold leaf sticks to lines from graphite paper, too. I used a Q tip to remove the excess gold where I could. 6 hours.
5. Complete flat gilding. The only place I used flat gilding was the chapel window in the top left hand side. I originally tried fish glue, a period adhesive size made from boiled fish heads (purchased, not homemade), but I found the ambient conditions unsuitable for effective use of this adhesive. No matter how much I breathed on it, the gold was not staying. Not having another option (I am egg intolerant, so no eggs in the house and thus no glair, and no garlic around right now), I decided to use the Rolco size again, this time with no additives. This produced a moderately reasonable result, though not quite as good as desired. In retrospect, the original manuscript may have used raised gold on the window as well, but it was a new experience at least. 1 hour
6. Outline some of the gold, using a Micron Pigma 01 archival ink pen. I tried the Prismacolor Premier fine line marker, but it did not stay put as well on top of the gold. 1/2 hour
7. Paint. 134.5 hours
8. Finish painting
9. Touch ups and corrections

Considerations:

- a) The bottom of the page in the original manuscript was badly degraded, and I have attempted to restore it as best I could through interpretive tracing. Unfortunately, the motto of this artist seems to have been, "Never use blank space when you can give it texture or a pattern, no matter how small the image," which makes any possible interpretation never entirely accurate. I changed some designs in borders, etc. Partly because of degradation or inaccurate tracing, and partially for aesthetic reasons, or because I couldn't believe the illuminator would leave the object blank when everything else was so intricately detailed, I made up detail. I also made up detail or adjusted detail to make it easier to tie the various images together visually. I also changed the background of two scenes to a light blue rather than gold so that they wouldn't blend in with the gold bars they were touching (I had removed some borders to try to tie things together better).
- b) I have decreased the image sizes from the original (various amounts - not a lot, but some), making it impossible to portray all of the detail used in the original manuscript. I have attempted to include as much as possible, because I'm a sucker for punishment and I love that the original illuminator tried to do this. From viewing images close up on the computer, I can see that the quality of detail used in some places in the original manuscript did seem to suffer because of the tiny nature of it, indicating that that original artist did stretch a bit beyond even his impressive capabilities, so I don't feel bad in leaving some out.
- c) I chose to make the raised gilding size pink instead of green because it was a common gesso colour, meant to bring out the colour of the gold, and because I didn't have appropriate materials to make it green.
- d) Some of the heraldry was too far gone to interpret effectively. I have used simpler heraldry or heraldry used on other period sources to fill in the missing pieces.
- e) I removed some barbaric/obscene images. Sorry.
- f) Although there were originally more tournament scenes below the bottom border, they were badly degraded and I felt the page was busy enough, so I left them off.
- g) Much of the original manuscript was outlined in black. White highlights and black outlines and shadows were probably painted. I can tell because of the quality of the line. There is a noticeable difference between black line quality and white line quality, but this was probably due to how well the paints flowed, as I experienced the same thing. I tried to stick with the convention of using mostly black and white lines for shaping, though I couldn't resist adding shadows occasionally.
- h) The original manuscript had no major colour in faces or hair, nor in fish or food. I assume this was partially because of the size, and also because other illuminators of that time were also doing that. I preserved this convention.
- i) The page is meant to have three columns of text, which makes sense with the ink detail and the pop-out image on the right hand side.
- j) His Highness Nigel's heraldry is in the shield hanging in the top right.
- k) The gold stuck to the graphite paper marks. This made it really hard to clean it up for painting without rubbing off gold from places where it belonged. I erred on the side of more gold left on the page, but that also made it really hard to paint cleanly, and took a lot of extra work and time.
- l) I'm pretty sure the main artist would have been a cartoonist if he was around in modern days. It shows in the fish, horses, and some of the faces.
- m) Red gouache is not really opaque. In order to paint red on top of blue, I had to mix red with white and yellow to create something more opaque that would look red but stand out more against the blue.

- n) Some of the red paint went through a few iterations before I was happy with the colour. This resulted in some more thickly painted areas. Also, two of the red colours had a really high ratio of gum arabic to pigment, from the tube, resulting in shininess.
- o) A number of places I had assumed were shell gold were actually flat gilding. As such, I didn't gild them from the start and then couldn't once I'd painted near them. These are the places I changed to other colours or used gold watercolour to fill. In places where the background wasn't entirely filled with gold as it should have been, I filled in with shell gold, because I can burnish it to be a bit closer in texture.

What I'm happy with:

I love how a good portion of the detail has turned out. I like the fighting grotesque's paint job, and the rabbit on the left hand side. I also love the castle bricks and subtlety of the shading in some of the same. I am proud of all the tiny fleur-de-lis I managed to get into the top left-hand side's windows, and of the snail that shrunk down more than most things did and still retained almost all of its detail. The draping worn by the horse on the lower left is also pretty neat.

What I'm not happy with:

The amount of red (and how close together similar reds lay) and use of some other colours, such as malachite/mid green in architecture. Also the fact that I missed gilding places while I still had the chance, and that the gilding down the left hand side should have been raised, but I painted the media on too thinly.

Next Steps:

Do or have calligraphy done.