

A guide for teachers to using imagery from the medieval and early modern period

1. What are illuminated manuscripts?

- A text supplemented by images, cartoons or colourful decorations including illuminated letters. Brightly coloured and often gilded with gold leaf.
- Mostly associated with religious books including psalters and bibles. The most common type of illuminations are to be found in Books of Hours and Christian devotional books containing prayers.
- Very costly and time-consuming process – therefore the wealthy more likely to own such works. (Philip the Bold is believed to have had 600 in his library).
- Often commissioned by wealthy or noble patrons.

What can they tell us?

- That, similar to today, a literate and wealthy class were able to show their status through material possessions. These items were often private.
- Help to illustrate the importance of religion (personal devotion in Books of Hours) in the medieval and early modern world.
- They predate the printing press. These manuscripts were written and drawn by hand.
- Many manuscripts were created by monks in scriptoriums under supervision. Many of these works were destroyed in England during the Reformation

Where can I find illuminated manuscripts?

The British Library has an online catalogue of illuminated manuscripts in the public domain
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/>

The Lindisfarne Gospels (eighth century)
<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/tp/lindisfarne/accessible/introduction.html#content>

The Winchester Bible (twelfth century)
<http://www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk/gallery/the-winchester-bible/>

2. What are icons?

- A style of religious painting often depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, a saint or images of the angels.
- Generally the term only applies to Christian works from Eastern Europe but from the thirteenth century onwards they became a part of Western Christianity and appeared in churches and monasteries.
- From the fifteenth century icons were printed on paper and sold, hand-painted, by churches. These were available to peasants.
- The Catholic Church supported images as a way to promote and develop the faith of the illiterate. Icons were also to be venerated and could be a focus of prayers.
- The Reformation under Edward VI saw the destruction of a significant majority of these images in England. Iconoclasm occurred in Germany, Switzerland, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and in Scotland. Many Protestants saw icons as incitements to idolatry.

What can they tell us?

- What churches may have looked like prior to the Protestant Reformation.
- The importance of faith with regard to owning icons which after the advent of the printing press did not depend on wealth.
- The stories depicted helped to educate poorer people about biblical stories and the lives of saints.
- The role of the Church across the Continent (and even beyond; many icons appear on walls in Egypt).

Where can I find icons?

In England, Winchester Cathedral has the most accessible collection of icons in the Byzantine style painted in the twentieth century to replace lost works. A general internet search will result in a plethora of images but most of them will relate to Eastern, rather than Western, Christianity. While they are beautiful examples of the artistic style they may not always be relevant if looking at England in the medieval period.

3. What are woodcuts?

- A print of an image previously carved into wood and then mass-produced to be sold cheaply.
- Originally started in China but spread to Europe in the early thirteenth century with the arrival of paper.
- Often used for book illustrations although the German artist Albrecht Dürer was responsible for the success of the sale of single-leaf images, especially through his use of cross-hatching (using closely set parallel lines to create the effect of light and shade) and the Apocalypse series of images.
- Enabled the spread of the Reformation. Often had a religious or educational purpose but often used as a cheap way of spreading propaganda.

What can they tell us?

- That a vibrant visual culture existed in the medieval and early modern period (era of the Renaissance).
- That cheap propaganda could be bought and sold (as it is today).
- Explain the spread of political and religious ideas such as the spread of Protestantism or the hunting of witches.

Where can I find woodcuts?

A collection of Dürer's works are available here:

<http://www.albrecht-durer.org/>

There are handy collections of woodcuts on the internet although the images tend to be quite small and lose a lot of definition when enlarged.