

# An Illuminated Leaf from a Book of Hours

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## *WHAT, WHERE and WHEN:*

- A leaf from a Book of Hours, illuminated with white vine decoration
- This type of illumination is found in many parts of what is present-day Italy, but many examples are from Florence
- White vine illumination became popular in the first half of the fifteenth century, and continued to be produced through the rest of the century and into the sixteenth.

## *MATERIALS:*

- Vellum
- Period pigments (synthetic ultramarine, viridian green)
- Gouache
- Glair as a binder, with gum arabic

## *PROCESS:*

- Prepare glair
- Cut vellum to size of finished leaf, plus extra for binding
- Draw out design lightly in pencil
- Ink in outline of design
- Write text
- Mix pigments with glair binder
- Paint main areas of color
- Add details, such as white dots

## *SOURCES:*

- Alexander, Jonathan J.G., ed. *The Painted Page : Italian Renaissance Book Illumination 1450-1550*. Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1994.
- Cennini, Cennino. *Il Libro Dell'Arte: The Craftsman's Handbook*. Dover Publications, New York: 1960.
- De Hamel, Christopher. *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1997.
- Thompson, Daniel, V. *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting*. Dover Publications, New York: 1956.
- Wieck, Roger S. *Painted Prayers : The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*. New York: George Braziller Inc. 1997.

I began this project by considering what kind of manuscript a wealthy lady of 15<sup>th</sup> century Florence would have owned or had access to. That was an easy question to answer. Books of Hours were the medieval “bestsellers” for centuries. They allowed lay people to perform their daily devotions on their own at home. They provided a means for wealthy collectors to flaunt their fortunes. Many of the existing examples of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts are pages from Books of Hours; there are even whole manuscripts still surviving, such as the Master of Mary of Burgundy Hours (Franco-Flemish), the Sforza Hours (Ferrarese) and the Visconti Hours (Milanese).

Renaissance Italy was especially known for its love of learning and the classics. A trend started early in the 15<sup>th</sup> century for collecting manuscripts of classical texts, with humanist scholars tracking down treasured examples of the writings of Roman historians and philosophers. If they could not buy manuscripts outright, they had them copied, continually expanding their collections. Wealthy businessmen such as Cosimo de’Medici began getting in on the act, amassing impressive libraries over the years. A thriving business of scribes flourished in Florence as well as in other Italian cities during the Quattrocento.

The next question was which style of illumination would be most suitable. Several styles were popular at the time throughout Italy. The so-called “white vine” style of illumination derived from an earlier style, though not, as the humanists thought, from classical art. It is taken from the eighth and ninth century styles, which developed around the time of Charlemagne. One need only compare the initials with floral elements of the eighth and ninth centuries with the white vine initials and borders of the fifteenth century to see the resemblance. The humanist hand that developed along with this style of illumination is also derived from the earlier Carolingian miniscule script. I chose this style because it is simple and elegant, and does not include figures or complicated miniatures, which I still find difficult to execute cleanly.

The first thing I did for this project was to prepare the glair, the binding medium that adheres the pigments to the page. Glair is made of egg whites and was readily available in period. I put the white of two eggs in a bowl and beat it with a mixer on high speed, until the whites were very stiff and I could turn the bowl upside down without them sliding out. Then I let the bowl sit for a while, and poured off the liquid that formed underneath the whites. I put this in an airtight container and kept it in the refrigerator until I needed it (carefully marked!). Based on correspondence with a wide variety of scribes, I learned that old glair is more effective than fresh, in that it flows more smoothly off the brush. I also added a couple of drops of liquid gum arabic to the glair to help the colors come through more clearly, as suggested by Daniel Thompson in *The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting*.

The next step in the project was to prepare the vellum for working on. The flesh side was very rough and coarse but the hair side was very smooth so that was the side I chose to use for my project. In period both sides would have been used, but the piece of vellum I had available was not of the fine quality that would have been required for a Book of Hours commissioned by a wealthy patron. As my vellum had been given to me as a gift, and its availability is limited in general, I had to make do with what I had. I cut a piece to the size I wanted, about 4.5 inches by 6.5 inches (leaving a margin for “binding”). Existing examples and depictions of devotional books show that they could be quite small, since they were for personal use rather than liturgical. I prepared the surface by lightly sanding it to give it some tooth and help the ink and paint adhere to it. Then I buffed it with a square of silk to smooth any rough spots and remove any remaining traces of grease or oil from it. Fortunately, this piece of vellum was not greasy at all.

The next step in the process was to lay out the design. I had decided on a decorated initial and a side border with a white vine motif. I marked out the space for the border and then the space for the initial. Based on those measurements, I ruled lines a quarter of an inch apart for the text. I sketched in the initial, using examples in de Hamel’s *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* as a reference. Sketching in the interlacing vines was the hardest part, as I had to keep track of the over-under movement. I did a similar design for the border, but with three central vines intertwining with each other. Then I inked in the lines so that I could erase the pencil marks and neaten up the sketch.

My next step was to write out the text. I chose the Hours of the Virgin (Matins) as my leaf, partly because it was very popular as a devotional prayer, and partly because I have always been partial to depictions of the Annunciation in period art. I found in several sources the Latin text for this prayer, and wrote it out using a Humanist miniscule hand, which was very common in Italian manuscripts of this time, as I said earlier. I used an iron gall ink, with a quill pen. (I have made both of these on my own before but for this project I used commercially prepared ones. I didn’t have time to make them again this time around.)

The next step was to paint the initial and border. My intent was to use period pigments which I had purchased at Pennsic a few years ago; this plan was partially completed. I used a synthetic ultramarine for the blue areas. Genuine ultramarine pigment was extremely expensive in period, as it came from lapis lazuli, which came from the Middle East, and required very careful processing in order to yield the best color. Cennini discusses this pigment in depth in his *Il Libro dell’Arte*. Even today actual ultramarine is hard to come by and expensive, so I used what was available to me. I used viridian, a copper compound, for green, also mentioned by Cennini. Both of these pigments worked out well, mixing in smoothly with the binder. Alas, I had major problems with the alizarin lake, my red pigment. Apparently it is a “hydrophobic” pigment and does not mix well. Since this was my first time using period pigments, I hadn’t foreseen that issue. There are ways around this problem, but I was feeling a time crunch in getting the project finished, so I resorted to using gouache of the same color.

I also resorted to using Dr. P.H. Martin’s Bleedproof White for the vines and dots, since I didn’t have a suitable white pigment. Lead white was most commonly used in

period, but it is highly toxic, so I hadn't purchased any at that time when I acquired the other pigments. There are many examples of white vine illumination where the vines are left unpainted, hence they are the same color as the background parchment. However, I have seen a few examples where the vines are actually painted white, and I decided I liked that effect better.

My last touch was something I hadn't originally planned on, but it made the end product look much better. I painted the initial **D** white with the rest of the vine work, but I didn't like the result - the initial was flat and uninspiring. After looking at contemporary examples again, I realized that most of the initials had been gilded. I was concerned about gilding after the paint had been laid down, as gold leaf has a tendency to stick to pretty much anything, and I was afraid it would adhere to the glair in the paint rather than just to the area where I would apply size. I opted instead to use gold gouache, mixed with a smidge of red gouache to give it some depth and richness. This worked out fairly well, and the end result looked similar to shell gold (which I unfortunately had none of at the time).