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"Tracing is Period"

A Discussion of Techniques used to Reproduce Art in Medieval Europe

Overview

Newly minted scribes are often assauged of their fears by the axiom "Tracing is period." This can be a big stress relief to one not confident in their ability to draw or produce a scroll from an extant. This leads to the purchase of light boxes, the use of high definition printers, windows, and other tools in order for scribes to better understand the layouts and elements of period illuminated pages and other documents.

Tracing from exemplars and creating your own model book is a great way to learn the basics of element design for your chosen period, as well as layout and other stylistic norms.

So what was tracing like in period?

While there are extant instructions and recipes for tracing papers and techniques from the 15th century, for both illuminators and other craftsmen, it is difficult to prove how tracing was accomplished earlier, and from manuscript to manuscript. Tracings are intermediary works, and are likely to not survive past their usability. The core evidence is the finished works - comparing illustrations from one manuscript to another, and even within the same manuscript, and looking for signs of backdrawing, pricking and pouncing, and other hints, help piece together a story of how illuminators worked.

Backlighting and Backdrawing

Tracing in western Europe may have been used as early as the 8th century (Hourihane, 2012, p. 143) with the Lindisfarne Gospels (c. 715, British Library Cotton, MS Nero D.IV) (Backlighting, n.d.). Prior to the development of tracing papers, backlighting and backdrawing were used to transfer a drawing from one page to another. In backdrawing, the artist draws a guide on the back of the leaf (Backdrawing, n.d.). A strong light source is then place on the other side of the leaf (backlighting), with a secondary light behind the artist so that the guide can be traced (Backlighting, n.d.).

The Lindisfarne Gospels features backdrawings (Brown, 2003, p. 217), done with a leadpoint stylus. These backdrawings are similar to underdrawings (Underdrawing, n.d.) in that they were both done with a hardpoint or leadpoint stylus, but the chief difference is that they were drawn on the reverse side from where they were inked and painted. Brown (2003, p. 217) points out that this was likely accomplished using a sloped angle and with the vellum mounted in front of a window. Italian painter Cennino Cennini (c. 1360 - pre-1427) describes a similar method of using light and backdrawing for painting on both sides of silk in his *Il Libro dell' Arte* (1933).

139r. and 139v. of the Lindisfarne Gospels, example of backdrawing

137r. and 137v. of the Lindisfarne Gospels, example of backdrawing

The British Library's Egerton MS 2019, f. 2r and 2v may be an example of the use of backdrawing and backlighting (Hamel, 2001, p. 62). This French Book of Hours was made around 1440, and the layouts of the calendar pages - the acanthus leaves, medallions/roundels, and borders, are mirror images from the recto and verso of each page for every page of the calendar section.

2v. and 2r. of Egerton MS 2019

Tracing Paper

Along with the use of paper for manuscripts in the 14th century came the use of tracing paper (Hourihane, p. 143). Cennino Cennini's *Il Libro dell'Arte* is one of the primary sources with information about 14th century tracing. His instructions for creating a tracing medium include getting a parchment-maker to scrape a piece of kid parchment so that it would be extremely thin; brushing glue onto a slab of rock to form sheets which are peeled off; and impregnating clean, white paper with linseed oil (1933). Other primary sources for tracing paper/techniques include Jehan le Begue (composed in 1431) and Giovanni Volpato (1735-1803). These instruction manuals all date to the 15th century and later, but tracing paper made from rubbing paper with oils may have been used as early as the 8th century by apprentices (Hourihane, p. 143).

The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture describes two methods of copying designs, each utilizing colored chalk or soft leaded pencil on the reverse of a drawing in order to transfer it (Hourihane, 2012, p. 143), much like the "diy carbon paper" technique used by contemporary artists.

Pricking and Pouncing

Pouncing was also used as a means of copying images in a variety of crafts (Ward, 2008, p. 526-527), though evidence of illuminators using it to reproduce an image for book decoration is difficult to verify. When pouncing, the drawing is placed over the substrate it is to be copied to. The outlines of the drawing are then pricked with a needle or stylus - think "connect the dots." The drawing is then rubbed with pounce - black chalk powder or dust, charcoal, pumice, white chalk, gesso, depending on the the color of the working surface - in a "pouncing bag" (Ward, 2008, p. 527). Cennini's *Ill Libro dell'arte* includes instructions for pouncing. The majority of primary sources for pouncing apply its use to frescos and other arts, not book illumination (Ward, 2008, p. 527). It is more difficult to date when manuscript has been pricked for pouncing. This is the case with several medieval bestiaries with pricked illustrations where no known copies exist (Clark, 2006, p. 66).

Aberdeen Bestiary (Aberdeen University Library MS 24), f. 68v - an example of an illustration pricked for pouncing

It should be noted that such treatment of finished designs for copying may not have been a period practice, due to the damage it causes to the work being copied both by the pricking and the residual dust. Ward (2008) points out again that the pricking of such manuscripts could happen long after the book was made, and they "do not usually show rubbed pouncing-dust" (p. 527). Pouncing was known in pre-16th century Europe - there are extant examples of pouncing used to reproduce patterns in the Dunhuang caves (China), dating from the mid-10th century (Ward, 2008, p. 527). These examples, coupled with Cennini's inclusion of pouncing in his handbook, may point to the technique traveling along the Silk Road to Western Europe after Marco Polo's return to Italy in 1295 (Ward, 2008, p. 527).

Final Thoughts From Ceninni

In Chapter 27 of his *Il Libre del Arte*, Cennini warns the artist against copying from too many masters, saying (emphasis mine):

> Having first practiced [p. 14] drawing for a while as I have taught you above, that is, on a little panel, **take pains and pleasure in constantly copying the best things which you can find done by the hand of great masters**. And if you are in a place where many good masters have been, so much the better for you. **But I give you this advice: take care to select the best one every time, and the one who has the greatest reputation. And, as you go on from day to day, it will be against nature if you do not get some grasp of his style and of his spirit. For if you undertake to copy after one master today and after another one tomorrow, you will not acquire the style of either one or the other, and you will inevitably, through enthusiasm, become capricious, because each style will be distracting your mind. You will try to work in this man's way today, and in the other's tomorrow, and so you will not get either of them right**. If you follow the course of one man through constant practice, your intelligence would have to be crude indeed for you not to get some nourishment from it. Then you will find, if nature has granted you any imagination at all, that y**ou will eventually acquire a style individual to yourself, and it cannot help being good; because your hand and your mind, being always accustomed to gather flowers, would ill know how to pluck thorns** (1993)**.**

In period, copying was seen as a step in the artist's learning process. It was a way to develop one's own style. Of course, Cennini is writing about larger works than manuscript illumination, and as we are trying to simulate specific styles, I'm not certain well can apply his words exactly the way he intended them. That being said, we can "take pains" to find good, period examples of the styles we wish to recreate, and focus on learning that style before we jump whole-hog into something completely different. Cennini was telling his students that they would eventually develop their own style, which isn't necessarily a goal for SCA-related scribal arts. For my own part, I will be happy to reach the "could be period" level of original art after developing an internal knowledge and understanding of how to execute, for example, a 13-14th century French bar-and-ivy.

Further Reading

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