Pearl at Home

Art projects designed for family fun, for suggested ages of 5 and up to be completed at home with easily-accessible art materials.

ILLUMINATED LETTERS

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6815 Cypresswood Dr, Spring, TX 77379 | 281.376.6322 | pearlmfa.org
Before the year 1440, all books were handwritten. Between the 5th and 15th centuries, important books (like religious texts) were made with special pages. Professional scribes and artists, known as illuminators, painted illustrations on these pages.

The artists often decorated in and around the oversized first letter of the first word on the page. Many times they used gold or silver to “light up” the message, giving this kind of art form its name: **illuminated manuscript** (from the Latin words *manu* ‘by hand’ and *scriptus* ‘written’).

The production of illuminated manuscripts began to flourish around the year 1100. This “golden age” of manuscript illumination lasted until the invention of the printing press in 1440.

The names of many of these artists remain unknown, but with a gradual rise in status from artisan to artist, more illuminators in the late Middle Ages began to sign their work. Often times, the artists added a small picture of themselves somewhere in the illustration. The whole process of hand-copying and illustrating a book took a very long time and was expensive, making an illuminated manuscript a luxury item for wealthy customers. The speed, ease, and lower cost of reproducing a book on a printing press sent the expensive illuminated texts out of fashion by the 16th century.

Decoration on letters continued, however – just in different ways. In this project, we’ll make an illuminated letter using materials you have at home.
1. Use a pencil to lightly draw a letter on your paper. Keep it simple, and write in a normal writing style, but make it large on your paper. Draw LIGHTLY.

2. Next, add LIGHT lines around the letter, making it thicker. You want to create space inside your letter to add decorations. Once you have your thick outline, you can choose to erase the original letter line you drew.

3. Start to add extra lines or flourishes that will help make your letter unique, and refine the outer shape of your letter. Erase lines you don’t need. Add light drawings of decorations in and around your letter.

   You can choose to keep your letter by itself, or make it part of a word by drawing the additional letters next to it.

4. Add your color media to illustrate your letter. If using paint, be sure to paint your letter in layers. Save the details for the last layers of your painting.

   Tempera is a traditional type of paint for illuminated letters. Our example here was painted with tempera.

   **TIPS:**
   - Let the paint layers DRY before adding the next one.
   - Try adding illuminated letters to your journals!