Pearl at Home

This art project is designed for suggested ages of 12 and up to be completed at home with easily-accessible art materials. This lesson can also be used as a teaching resource for art educators.

VARIATIONS ON THE ILLUMINATED LETTER

Share your artwork with us on social media! Tag @pearlfinchermfa, and use #pearlathome

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MATERIALS

• Derwent Inktense pencils
• Prismacolor colored pencils
• Grafix Double Tack mounting film
• Mona Lisa Simple Leaf - Gold
• Powdered tempera
• Egg yolk
• Pencil • Scissors

Visit the Youtube video or pearlmfa.org/pearlathome for links to where you can find these materials.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

Introduction:
Illuminated letters from ancient times are still vibrant with luminous colors, brilliant gold accents, and historic grandeur. This series of lessons delves into techniques used by the masters from centuries ago. To share these ideas with your students brings them an enriching understanding of art history.

Background Information:
When did illuminated letters begin? In the Middle Ages, before the invention of the printing press, all books were written entirely by hand. In fact, the word “manuscript” means “written by hand.” In order to highlight certain areas of the illuminated manuscripts, the craftsmen would decorate the manuscripts with gold to “illuminate” them. The word “illuminare” is Latin for “enlighten.”
1 The first example in this series on the illuminated letter is a very detailed and elaborate letter “P.” The inspiration for this example came from the study of Celtic manuscripts found online and in art history books. Because of its precise detail, I began by tracing, but soon began to freehand my design. The color was added with Derwent Inktense pencils, but any quality colored pencil would work well.

2 The next project experiments with the illumination aspect – or gold leaf decoration. Gold leaf is applied on top of an adhesive called “Double Tack.” This process is covered in detail in a previous video lesson on Decorated Monograms (available on the museum website). In this example, the initial letter B is surrounded by things that begin with the letter B: bluebells, berries, a bluebird, butterfly, and a bumble bee. Art educators could direct their students to select an initial of their own to “illuminate,” and then “historiate” it with things that also begin with that letter. Supplies used were Prismacolor pencils on black paper and gold leaf applied with Double Tack.

3 The third example project in our series is an illuminated letter and a self portrait combined. In the art classroom, teachers could have their students illuminate one of their initials in the style of their choice. Then, the students could surround the letter with at least three things that tell us about them personally. In the example, I depict the initial of my first name surrounded by a tree that stands for family, a dove that symbolizes my faith, and an artist’s palette that represents my deep love of art.

4 The last project was inspired from an old Celtic design that I came across in my research. I revised the original design and emphasized the dragon for a little visual drama. My goal was to recapture the rich tones of the ancient manuscripts and a bit of the historic grandeur. In addition to gold leaf, I used the ancient technique of egg tempera that was used centuries ago. What better way to bring history alive than to allow students to experience using the same methods as the Old Masters! The supplies used were: egg yolk, dry tempera powder, gold leaf, and Double Tack.