

Illuminated manuscript paintings in Poland

Beauty Illuminated

BARBARA MİDOŃSKA

Czartoryski Museum and Library

National Museum in Kraków

biuro@fundacja-czartoryskich.krakow.pl

ANNA PALIŃSKA

Institute of Art, Warsaw

Polish Academy of Sciences

The flakes of gold used in illustrating the initial letters in old manuscripts gave them a shining effect that gave rise to the name for such miniature paintings: “illuminations.” Despite their small size, these miniatures are rich in theological, liturgical and literary motifs

In December 1423, Zbigniew Oleśnicki of the Dębno coat-of-arms became bishop of Kraków, thereby embarking on a quarter-century-long ecclesiastical and political career of great consequence for the history of the Kingdom of Poland. It also had a great impact on the history of Polish culture: Oleśnicki acted the patron of early historian Jan Długosz, whom he encouraged to produce his great *Annals of the Kingdom of Poland*.

The Oleśnicki Antiphonal

Another of the relics of Oleśnicki's cultural patronage is preserved at the Archives of the Kraków Cathedral Chapter in Wawel Castle: the *Antiphonal for Feast Days*. This is a Latin liturgical book containing the words and melodies of antiphons and responsories – songs sung during Divine Office in response to the psalms.

The pages of this large-format parchment volume, hand-inscribed with calligraphy and musical notation, were decorated – in accordance with the custom of the time – by manuscript painters then known as “illuminators.” The paintings they produced, i.e. illuminations, not only decorate the volume and lend it greater splendor, they also constitute an important visual complement to the content of the text itself, visualizing it and enriching it with a kind of commentary that draws upon many sources, of an artistic as well as a theological, liturgical, and literary nature.

Here we have chosen two miniatures from this volume for closer scrutiny. Each is a historiated initial, i.e. ornamental first letter of the text that encloses a figurative composition within its internal space. Such letters are incorporated into the column of the line of text, whereby the text and

image are made one. As in the Oleśnicki Antiphonal, a decorated initial may be accompanied by decorative motifs running outward to the borders around the column of text. In the 15th century these were plant motifs, stylized branches that were ultimately derived, via centuries of transformation, from the ancient Roman motif of acanthus leaves. After first drawing the design on the parchment with a metal stylus, the painter-illuminator applied tempera paints with a small brush in several layers, then adding metallic gold and finishing off the details with a quill.

The Annunciation

The themes of the particular miniatures we are considering here were drawn from the New Testament, from the Gospels, and are associated with the outset of the church year – the period of Advent and Christmas. They



This scene of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary is a historiated initial – a capital letter A which begins the first words of the text: „A diebus...”

Dariusz Kosiński/Archives of the Kraków Cathedral Chapter in Wawel Castle

tell the story of the Incarnation, of the Annunciation – the Archangel Gabriel’s announcement to the Virgin Mary of the Incarnation – and of Christ’s Birth, which marks the beginning of mankind’s salvation. These events at the same time represent a fulfillment of the prophecy of the Old Testament and signal the links between the Old and New Covenants.

The scene of the Annunciation painted within the initial A (diebus) at the start of the tome’s opening antiphon, intended for the vespers on the first Sunday of Advent, is contained within a frame 182x141mm in size. It presents Mary as a frail light-haired girl wrapped in the folds of a blue mantle, who is standing and gently bowing before the angel. Gabriel, clad in the alb of a deacon, kneels before her in a gesture of salutation. His wings are already folded from flight, and the first words of his message – *Ave Maria*, or “Hail Mary” – are inscribed on a wide, white ribbon unfurled between the two figures. The letter A is in fact hard to discern, as it has been transformed into an imaginative sort of architecture – a light portico covered by a gothic ribbed vault and colorfully tiled roofs. This construction is supported on one side by a watchtower with three window openings.



Danusz Kosiński/Archives of the Kraków Cathedral Chapter in Wawel Castle

This portrayal of the Adoration of the Child is 3-dimensional, with the Mother and the Child in the front and a landscape stretching off into the distance

Mary stands against the backdrop of a red curtain suspended from a frame. This unreal architecture contains allusions to Jerusalem and its temple, whose curtain was said by early Christian apocrypha to have been woven by Mary, while waiting as a servant of the temple for her destiny to be fulfilled. This destiny was augured by the prophets of the Old Testament, whose torsos are leaning in from outside the frame of the image. One of them is Isaiah, recognizable by the Latin citation of his prophecy about the virgin who will bear a son by the name of Emmanuel – meaning “God is with us.”

This miniature is composed of symbols representing the virgin motherhood of Mary, who herself becomes the temple of God. The curtain symbolizes Her body, while the watchtower and the green branches growing from it symbolize virginity. White flowers blossom from the gray rock on which Mary and the archangel are standing, as a sign of the dawning of a new era of mankind, for whom the coming of the Messiah heralds salvation.

The form of the miniature belongs to the Kraków style of book paintings from the first quarter of the 15th century. It is characterized by flatness and graphicness, contours running along straight lines and gentle curves, frail and disembodied figures, heart-shaped oval faces and almond-shaped, dark-circled eyes. This miniature is of great artistic value, chiefly in view of the portrayal of the figures of Mary and the angel, full of expression and harmony, dematerialized yet imbued with intense life.

The Adoration of the Child

The second miniature shown here, the initial h(odie) on page 43^{verso} of the Oleśnicki Antiphonal, opens the text of a responsorium for the vespers said on Christmas. Its scenes, portraying Mary’s Adoration of the Child and the Revelation to the Shepherds of the Good News of the birth of the Savior, correspond exactly to the content of the Latin verses.

The “iconographic formula” of the Adoration employed by the painter underscores the miracle of the painless birth, in keeping with how this event was understood in those days. The Mother is paying her Son the homage that is due to God.

This miniature was produced by a different painter than the Annunciation. Its style – deriving from Central Europe’s leading Czech school of painting, or more concretely from the workshop of the Master of the Gerona Martyrology – was innovative in Kraków at that time. It was characterized by a shift from idealism to naturalism, evident in the portrayal of the vividness of the forms and the three-dimensional space, as well as in the “painterly” style of employing the brush and tempera paints.

The composition of this initial is distinctly three-dimensional. It consists of separate elements: the letter itself, its frame, and the figurative scene, which plays out within a landscape. Mary – a lovely, light-haired girl clad

Illuminated manuscript paintings in Poland

in a blue dress – is folding her hands and kneeling over the Child, who lies bathed in golden rays on an inclined rock slab. The landscape stretches off into the distance through a gently rising green meadow, containing a shepherd's wooden hayshed and a straw stable – from which the heads of an ox and donkey emerge, bowing low over the Child. In the distance, a dome-shaped hill with a tree stands in front of the brightening horizon, above which flies an angel bearing the Good News to the shepherds. The figures of the shepherds and their flock are still concealed in partial shadow.

These early painterly plays with light and shadow seen in the landscape scene contrast with the real light reflecting off the plane of the gold foil in the initial letter itself, and glittering off the rosettes pressed into this foil with a stamp. It was this shining and glittering effect that was dubbed “*illuminare*” in Medieval Latin, the source of our term “illumination” for miniature book paintings of this sort.

Miniatures in Polish collections

Book miniatures occupy an important portion of the three-volume publication on gothic painting in Poland (*Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce*) published in 2005 through the efforts of the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Volume I of the publication contains a synthetic outline of the history of the field (from the mid-13th to the early 16th centuries) in the Polish regions of Silesia, Małopolska, Wielkopolska, Mazovia, Kujawy, and Pomerania, authored by Barbara Miodońska, Alicja Karłowska-Kamzowa and Marcin Majewski. Volume II, a catalog of works, lists 156 entries of illuminated manuscripts, while Volume III – the album of illustrations – contains more than 500 black-and-white photos and color plates.

Documentary work for the catalog of illuminated manuscripts was launched by the Institute of Art in the 1970s, and continued through 2004. The project involved scouring the extant book collections and photographing and documenting the illuminations found there. Researchers drew up descriptions of each manuscript's decorations (paintings or calligraphy), identified the techniques employed and the system used in decorating the pages, described the color scheme, and reconstructed the iconographic program – i.e. examined

and listed the themes of the images included in the illuminated initials, independent miniatures, or images situated in the borders. They studied the types of writing as well as the musical notation, colophons, ownership marks and entries, which yielded precious information about when a given work was produced, about its intended destination, and about the scribe of the text (unfortunately, information was almost never gleaned about the illuminators themselves).

This project therefore required knowledge from various fields: codicology, paleography, musicology, and also familiarity with fundamental texts, especially liturgical volumes: missals, graduals and antiphonals, which alongside the Bible make up a considerable percentage of all the preserved gothic luxury codices.

Many important discoveries were made during the cataloging work for the publication *Malarstwo gotyckie w Polsce*. A review of manuscripts at the Chapter Library in Sandomierz turned up very interesting illuminations in codices that can be linked to donations made to the Sandomierz collegiate church by Polish King Kazimierz the Great. Another particular surprise came when a richly illuminated volume of the *Sachsenspiegel* (the “Saxon Mirror,” a compilation of Saxon customary law) dating from 1387, thought by miniature painting researchers to have been lost in WWII, was rediscovered at Jagiellonian University Library. The recovery in 2002 of another legal manuscript – the precious *Głubczyce Volume* dating from

1421, illuminated by Jan of Żytawa, which was donated to Polish collections by Barbara Piasecka-Johnson – fuels hopes that other codices whose fate has remained unknown since WWII might likewise be recovered. (The catalog lists some of them, described on the basis of the surviving photographs and literature). In view of the vast losses suffered by Polish book collections during the war, each such instance is of particularly great significance. ■



Each painted page of the Oleśnicki Antiphonal is a masterpiece of medieval art with decorated initials and plant motifs

Dariusz Kolakowski/Archives of the Kraków Cathedral Chapter in Wawel Castle

Further reading:

- Miodońska B. (2004). *Book Painting – Introduction; Silesian Painting; Little Poland Painting* [in Polish]. In: *Gothic Painting in Poland*, [in Polish]. Labuda A.S., Secomska K. (eds.). Vol. 1. PAN Institute of Art. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo DiG.
- Miodońska B. (1993). *Book Painting in Małopolska, 1320-1540* [in Polish]. Warsaw: PWN. [Summary in German and English].