

Borthwick Institute



For Archives



UNIVERSITY
of York

SCHOOL RESOURCE PACK



MEDIEVAL INITIALS AND DOODLES

INTRODUCTION

AT A GLANCE

Suitable for: KS3 Art

Curriculum Link:

- Evaluate and analyze creative works
- Understand the historical and cultural development of art
- The history of art...including periods, styles and major movements from ancient times up to the present day

Learning Objectives:

- To understand the development and types of medieval art found within documents
- To be able to create their own initial based on those found with medieval documents

Further Resources

- [Archbishops' Registers Online Database](#)

BACKGROUND

During the medieval period documents were written almost exclusively by monks and scribes. After cutting their quills, these scribes would have to test the nib to check it was the right width. While the most common solution was to write a few words or phrases, some scribes chose to create little images or doodles. As these were rarely intended to be seen except by other scribes, the doodles and images gave them a chance to express their personalities and occasionally opinions. Some appear to be things the scribe was looking at or had seen recently, while others are clearly figments of the scribe's imagination.

Prior to the invention of the printing press (c. 1439) books were costly and therefore a status symbol. Many books were made on commission, and they were often lavishly decorated. Decorated initials used at the beginning of a paragraph or chapter evolved in Britain in the 8th century, and remained a uniquely British phenomenon. Historiated initials portrayed a specific person or scene (usually but not necessarily something described in the text), while inhabited initials contained plants, animals, or seemingly random images. The larger and more ornately decorated the initial, the more important that part of the text was. By the 15th century this practice was so common that early printed documents often left space for a decorated initial to be added later.

Within this resource pack, you will find both doodles and decorated initials to compare. The earliest dates from around 1150, while the latest is from the early 16th century.

NOTES ON SOURCES

Sources 1 – 6

These images come from the Archbishops' Registers, a record of the day-to-day administration of the Diocese of York. A new register was generally started each time a new archbishop was elected, with the exception of register 5A, which was written in whenever there was no current archbishop. The registers were written by scribes, and would only be read by other scribes in order to provide reference and context. As such, these documents were not illustrated and all of the drawings found within them are doodles.

Source 1: Reg 5A, f. 446v. A doodle of a fish within the letter 'O'. 1426

Source 2: Reg 5A, f. 672r. Random doodles found within the letter 'R'. 1544

Source 3: Reg 5A, f. 623Ar. Doodle of two men and a dog around the letter 'R'. 1531

Source 4: Reg 17, f. 1r. Doodle of two dragons. 1407

Source 5: Reg 26, f. 1r. A caricature of Henry VII within the letter 'R'. 1508. Many in York had sided with Richard III against Henry during the Wars of Roses. Henry VII also had a reputation for being greedy and rapacious, so was not well liked by some of his subjects, including this particular scribe.

Source 6: Reg 27, title page. Celtic knots surrounding the letter 'R'. 1514

Sources 7 - 10

These images come from a collection known as the Takamiya Fragments. These are mostly single pages from medieval documents collected by Toshiyuki Takamiya, a professor at the University of Tokyo. As most were purchased at auction, not much is known about their origins. All are from expensive and lavishly illustrated books, meaning the decorated initials are done in paint and gold leaf rather than quill and ink.

Source 7: TAK 1/25. Coloured and decorated opening word. Late 12th century.

Source 8: TAK 1/28. Inhabited initial letter 'D'. Late 12th century.

Source 9: TAK 3/5. Historiated initial letter 'D' containing a nativity scene. This page comes from a Book of Hours, a small devotional book of prayers. 15th century.

Source 10: TAK 3/6. A page of music containing both a decorated initial letter 'S' and doodles of faces within other initial letters. 15th century

Source 11

As parchment was expensive, old bits of parchment were often reused within the bindings of new books. This page was found within the bindings of one of the Archbishops' Register. As such, its origins are unknown but it appears to have come from an illustrated religious text.

Source 11: BF 6. Coloured initials.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- 1) What differences do you notice between the doodles and the illustrations? Which do you prefer?
- 2) Many of these images appear on the letters 'R' or 'D'. Which letters do you think would be best for decorating? Are there any letters you think it would be difficult to decorate?
- 3) Do you notice any themes within these images?
- 4) Which of these images might be based on things the scribe had seen? Which do you think are imagined?
- 5) What can these doodles tell us about those who were drawing them?
- 6) What sort of things do you doodle? How are they different from the doodles that appear in these pictures?
- 7) Source 5 is a caricature of Henry VII. He is deliberately shown with a long nose as this was an insult at the time. If this image was being created today, who do you think would be caricatured? What features would they be given?
- 8) Source 10 includes both illustrations and doodles. Do you think the doodles make it less or more valuable? Why?
- 9) Many of the illustrations are done on a very small-scale. Do you think this makes them more or less impressive than large works of art?
- 10) Create your own decorated initial based on the ideas found in these images.