In 1854, John Ruskin gave three lectures, or what he called "friendly talks," to audiences of students and professional craftsmen at the Architectural Museum of London. These informal talks on 'Decorative Colour as applicable to Architectural and other Purposes' were delivered on three Saturday afternoons, November 11th, 25th, and December 9th. Though Ruskin never published these lectures, nor even wrote them down in full, reports of them occurred in various newspapers, including the Builder (November 25th, December 2nd, and 16th). For these lectures, he drew upon examples of illuminated manuscripts, particularly those from the mid- to the late-thirteenth century, to illustrate his principles of design.

In the first lecture, Ruskin discussed 'The Distinction Between Illumination and Painting,' a distinction he made between the decorative borders and letters and the miniature in an illuminated manuscript. Ruskin treated the decorative borders and letters as the true function of the illuminator; the art of illumination, in fact, depending upon the art of writing. For Ruskin, the illuminated ornament of manuscripts belonged to the decorative, or lesser, arts; pictorial art belonged to the higher art of painting. The separation of the "illumination" from the lettering of later manuscripts indicated the decline in the art form. When the illuminations became "pictures," they no longer functioned as ornament to the lettered page. In his opinion, these manuscript pictures were successful neither as painting nor as ornament. They failed as painting because the illuminator lacked the very rare qualities of the good painter, who should be able to "lay on light and shade properly." They failed as true ornament because the illuminator tried to go beyond the basic principles of illumination, which Ruskin stated as "clearness of outline and simplicity of colour, without the introduction of light and shade." To further clarify this distinction between the painter and the illuminator, Ruskin set forth what he determined to be the principles governing the best examples of illumination. He stressed that, even when introducing elements of nature into manuscript art, the illuminator must never directly "imitate" nature through the application of shadows and highlights, as would the painter. Rather, he must be the "master of outline." Outline is "opposed to light and shadow" in that "light and shadow altered, but outline, the statement of material form, did not alter." And as Ruskin pointed out in his second talk, 'The General Principles of Outline,' "There was no such thing as outline in nature." From this it followed that direct imitation of nature could not be the proper function of the illuminator. Yet, Ruskin believed that the introduction of nature in the thirteenth-century
manuscript contributed to the excellence of the art. Nature, in the Gothic manuscript, symbolized growth, life, and God. Ruskin told his audience that by developing the habit of drawing everything that came before their eyes, they would receive “a power of communing with nature and . . . a reverence for Him who made both nature and their hearts.”6

In studying nature, the student would also become aware of other basic principles, such as:

If there were no change there could be no life. A person could not live without change; not a tree or a leaf could live without growth. That might be taken as the great rule of all living art.7

Further:

Nothing in nature was perfectly symmetrical . . . in art as in nature, without dissimilarity there could be no grace. That, too, was one of the laws of capital illumination.8

For Ruskin, the laws of nature were the laws of art: creation implied growth and change in each. He had stated similar thoughts in his earlier work, The Stones of Venice, particularly in the chapter entitled, ‘The Nature of Gothic.’ These laws of change and symmetry (or absence of symmetry) describe the sense of life (growth and decay) in nature where nothing is perfect and nothing remains the same.9 Therein lies the beauty.

In his third lecture, ‘The General Principles of Colour,’ Ruskin discussed the appropriate use and treatment of color in illumination:

No colour was really valuable until it was gradated . . . This same law was pre-eminently to be found among the illuminated works of the thirteenth century, where white lines or dots were most judiciously and effectively introduced for the purpose of gradating colours.10

One example Ruskin presented to his audience was a Bible of 1230, where “the prevailing colours were the same, blue, purple, and scarlet, with white introduced at intervals, telling like beautiful pearls.”11 For the choice of color, he once again referred his audience to nature. “Watch for everything, look carefully for everything in nature which was beautiful.”12 While blue, purple, and scarlet, with gold, formed the basis of illumination, Ruskin also pointed out the value of green (a bluish green), white and black. But he “urged upon the student of illumination the propriety of not using the sacred colour, crimson, the symbol of life, without extreme caution.”13

Ruskin had several reasons for directing the attention of his audiences to the art of illumination. First, and most importantly to Ruskin, he wanted to inspire a return to the medieval attitude towards the book: “that a book was a noble and sacred thing, to be respected and revered.”14 This reverence was justified not only because of the evident work involved in the creation of a beautifully decorated book, but because the book “was the means of making human thought – the most
transient and evanescent of all things – the most permanent of all things.”\(^5\) For Ruskin, the illuminated manuscript was an expression of man’s thoughts and creative responses to the world around him. Further, a revival of illumination, a care in the decoration of books, would perhaps give new impetus to modern writers; more care would go into the writing of books if the author thought that his work would be carefully and beautifully ornamented. But the decoration must never detract from the text: “His object in introducing illuminations into books was not to lead the mind away from the text, but to enforce it.”\(^6\) To bring back this respectful attitude to books, Ruskin sought a revival of the art of illumination, guided by the principles he had outlined. “The great point was to make this art of illumination fashionable.”\(^7\)

But there were other applications beyond book decoration to justify a revival of the art of illumination. Ruskin told his audiences of students and professionals that they should recommend this kind of decoration to their employers whenever possible. Church interiors, for instance, were appropriate places for illuminated ornament: “the lettering of the Commandments, and the writing over the Communion-table, the windows, or other ornamental work, where illuminated letters might be introduced with great effect.”\(^8\) And Ruskin felt that illuminated letters could be appropriately used for the lettering of shop-front signs and public buildings.\(^9\) The lettering should always be legible and placed where it could be easily read; again, the decoration should never obscure the meaning.

Ruskin’s enthusiasm for the art of illumination is evident in William Morris’ involvement with this art form. In the early 1850s, while students at Oxford, Morris and Edward Burne-Jones made many trips to the Bodleian Library to study the fine collection of manuscripts housed there, and they continued this habit when they moved to London in 1856. There, the two young friends visited the Manuscript Room at the British Museum, carrying away sketches and notes of the manuscripts they had seen.\(^10\) It appears likely that this interest was encouraged by Ruskin’s 1854 lectures. Morris was already acquainted with Ruskin’s writings through reading The Stones of Venice and the Edinburgh Lectures during 1853-54. And Mackail, in his early biography of Morris, states that Morris was avidly reading the Builder at the time of Ruskin’s lectures.\(^21\) Although Mackail does not specifically mention the Builder’s reports on these lectures, it is reasonable to assume that Morris, who was already a devoted disciple of Ruskin, would have followed them there. Significantly, Mackail does link Morris’ reading of the Builder with his intense study of illuminated manuscripts at the Bodleian Library during 1853-54.\(^22\) By 1858, Ruskin was praising Morris’ illuminations, comparing them with those of the thirteenth century, the period he claimed to be the most beautiful in his 1854 talks.\(^23\) In view of such praise, it is not surprising that the three known illuminated pages by Morris from this time are generally considered imitative of the Gothic style.\(^24\) The earliest example is his illumination for two stanzas of the song from Robert Browning’s ‘Paracelsus,’ which he presented to Elizabeth and Robert Browning during their visit to England in the summer of 1856.\(^25\) The next is for his own poem, ‘Guendolen,’ created for Georgiana Macdonald (later Mrs. Edward Burne-Jones) in August, 1856.\(^26\) The third illumination, ‘The Iron Man’ (a translation of Grimm’s ‘Der Eisenhans’), was given to Louisa Macdonald, Georgiana’s sister, around 1857.\(^27\) In these early
examples, Morris applied the same principles outlined by Ruskin in his talks. He firmly outlined each of his decorative forms, eliminating the illusion of a three-dimensional space. For colors, he chose primarily reds and blues with accents of gold and green, and he modulated his colors with wavy lines of paler tints. Further, Morris freely made use of the grotesque, a medieval feature which for Ruskin “was a means of conveying truths to the mind” and also a feature belonging “peculiarly to the northern nations.” These early illuminated pages and their Gothic style imply not only an awareness of Ruskin’s lectures but a sympathy with the ideas expressed there.

That Morris continued to study illuminated manuscripts during the 1860s was recorded by his daughter, May:

I have before me a little octavo leather note-book which is a storehouse of suggestions and notes, giving tantalizing fleeting glimpses of my father’s work and play in the year 1862... On one page is a careful sketch of a helmet of an early type, on another notes of certain illuminated manuscripts in the British museum, with delicate drawings of the detail in them.

Then, from 1869/70 to 1875, Morris’ most prolific period in illuminating pages of manuscript, he produced a group of eighteen illuminated books, over 1500 pages of script and ornament in various stages of completion. The style is no longer Gothic, and begins to take on more Morris-like characteristics such as one encounters in his textiles of this period. For A Book of Verse, a manuscript of his own poetry which he presented to Georgiana Burne-Jones in 1870, Morris designed and painted the bulk of the ornament, consisting mainly of foliage and fruit motifs, while Burne-Jones and Charles Fairfax Murray created the miniatures and George Wardle painted initials and contributed the ornament for the first ten pages. The ornament, when “Morris took over the decoration, ... changes to denser, more organic, almost self-generating floral arrangements.”

Morris’ continuing study and love of illuminated manuscripts was also evident in his own private collection. At the time of his death, his library contained over 100 manuscripts, ranging in date from the eleventh through the seventeenth century (most of which were from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century), including English, French, Flemish, Italian, and Persian examples. May wrote: “It was a great passion, not exactly the collector’s passion ... He loved his books as a craftsman, as a poet, as a romancist: with a threefold affection and a threefold pleasure.”

Morris’ few written comments on the manuscripts in his collection further recall Ruskin’s principles for illumination. The Giffard Psalter, circa 1270, contains the following note by Morris:

Though this book is without figure-work, the extraordinary beauty and invention of the ornament make it most interesting; and the said ornament is thoroughly characteristic of English work: the bold folded-over leaf in the great B on the first page of the text is an undeniable token of an English hand. The great thickness of the black boundary lines is worth noting, and no doubt is the main element in producing the effect of the colour, which is unusual. The
beauty of the simple blue and gold calendar will scarcely be missed by any one taking up the book.\textsuperscript{34}

For another Psalter, late thirteenth century, he notes that:

This book has a complete and satisfactory scheme of ornament, which is nowhere departed from and the colour of which is thoroughly harmonious. Many of the dragon-scrolls end in daintily painted little heads, drawn with much expression and sense of fun; and the hair of them beautifully designed, and drawn very firmly.\textsuperscript{35}

In 1894, Morris published an essay entitled ‘Some Notes on the Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages.’ In speaking of the examples from the mid-twelfth century, he noted that:

The drawing is firm and precise . . . an unerring system of beautiful colour now makes its appearance. This colour . . . is founded on the juxtaposition of pure red and blue modified by delicate but clear bright lines and “pearlings” of white.\textsuperscript{36}

These comments on color recall those by Ruskin concerning a thirteenth-century Bible cited earlier, which noted “the prevailing colours . . . blue, purple, and scarlet, with white introduced at intervals, telling like beautiful pearls.”\textsuperscript{37} They also reflect Ruskin’s statement on the value of gradated color: “Colour might be gradated by passing into other colours, or by becoming paler or darker . . . white lines or dots were most judiciously and effectively introduced . . .”\textsuperscript{38}

During this fifty-year period, from 1854 to 1894, Morris studied, created, wrote about, and collected illuminated manuscripts. And while his own style evolved from his early Gothic attempts in the 1850s to a more personal, more identifiably Morris style in the 1870s, the importance of the art of illumination had not diminished. Part of Ruskin’s legacy to Morris was that the illuminated manuscript remained a source of inspiration and design, and perhaps most important of all a link with the medieval craftsman. For as Morris put it, “the mediaeval craftsman had two sides to his artistic mind, the love of ornament and the love of story,”\textsuperscript{39} an apt description of Morris himself.

\textbf{NOTES}


\textsuperscript{2} Ibid, p. 481.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid, p. 489.
Ibid, p. 487.
Ibid, p. 479.
Ibid.
Ibid. See also Ruskin, Ibid, vol. 10, pp. 203-204.
Ibid, pp. 479-480.
Ibid, p. 505.
Ibid, p. 476.
Ibid.
Ibid, p.491.
Ibid, p. 484.
Ibid, p. 484.


Ibid.
Banham and Harris, Ibid, p. 212.
Needham, Dunlap, and Dreyfus, Ibid, p. 49. Morris and Burne-Jones were introduced to the Brownings by the Pre-Raphaelite painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Ruskin, an early supporter of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, had encouraged these artists, including Rossetti, in their study and use of illuminated manuscripts as a source of design. See Banham and Harris, Ibid, pp. 56-57. Julian Treuherz, ‘The Pre-Raphaelites and Mediaeval Illuminated Manuscripts,’ Pre-Raphaelite Papers, edited by Leslie Parris (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), pp. 153-169.

Ibid, p.50
Ibid, p. 507.
Needham, Dunlap, and Dreyfus, Ibid, cat. no. 50, p. 111.
Ibid, p. 41.
Ibid, no. 23.


38 Ibid, p. 503.