

The Macclesfield Psalter and East Anglian Medieval Manuscripts

Background notes

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Images from the Macclesfield Psalter © The Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 1-2005



The Macclesfield Master, St Andrew (fol. 1v) and Psalm 38: King dispatching knight; horseman, woman and wild man (fol. 58r)

‘A world heritage item’

The discovery of the Macclesfield Psalter in the library of the Earl of Macclesfield at Shirburn Castle in 2003 and its sale at Sotheby’s, London in 2004 caused a furore. The J. Paul Getty Museum in LA bought it at the sale, with Cambridge University’s Fitzwilliam Museum as the underbidder. The Culture Minister stopped the export. Following an ambitious public campaign led by the Art Fund and extensive media coverage, the Fitzwilliam Museum raised the necessary funds to purchase the manuscript from the Getty Museum and keep it in East Anglia where the Psalter was produced seven centuries ago.

The Macclesfield Psalter has been pronounced ‘a world heritage item’, ‘a treasure-trove of European culture’, ‘a window into the world of medieval England’, ‘the most important discovery of an English work of art in a century’ and ‘the missing link in the development of East Anglian illumination’. These are big claims. Does the manuscript live up to expectations?

The Macclesfield Psalter is tiny - 17 x 10 cm: a private prayerbook to be taken to bed, to church or on distant journeys. Yet, it is dense in content, both textual and visual. Its 252 leaves (504 pages) contain a Calendar with the annual feasts of the Catholic church; the 150 Psalms of the Old Testament; the standard biblical Canticles; a Litany of saints; the Office of the Dead and prayers.

Painted in gold and precious pigments, the Macclesfield Psalter is one of the most imaginative manuscripts to survive from a particularly dynamic period in the history of medieval painting. Blending tradition and innovation as well as local, metropolitan and continental trends, the Psalter represents the most experimental stage in fourteenth-century English illumination. The style exemplifies the refined, ‘courtly’ art that flourished in aristocratic circles on both sides of the Channel, including dainty, swaying figures, sweet faces, fashionable coiffure and elegantly draped garments. There is a growing interest in spatial depth, volume, texture, human emotions and the anatomically accurate rendering of the human body. The text-image dynamics of the page, with wide-ranging subject-matter and aesthetic paradigms, invite an integrated way of reading and looking, breaking the boundaries between courtly and provincial, secular and profane, didactic and entertaining. The historiated initials opening the Psalms of the ten-fold division (Psalms 1, 26, 38, 51, 52, 68, 80, 97, 101, 109) illustrate the biblical text or its historical context, while the borders are peppered with marginal vignettes, many displaying the earthy humour traditionally considered a hallmark of East Anglian illumination.



The Macclesfield Master, details of marginalia

The Macclesfield Psalter's patronage: the internal evidence

The manuscript's intended recipient is depicted at the opening of the Confession prayer (fol. 250r): a young layman being trained for a career in the Church, as the prayer reveals. The Dominican friar shown beneath Psalm 107 (fol. 158r) is most likely the owner's confessor. He may have been involved in the design of the Macclesfield Psalter, if not in its production. Both remain anonymous, but were probably associated with John, the last Earl of Warenne (1286-1347), and his nephew and heir, Richard Fitzalan (c.1313-1376), 3rd Earl of Arundel – both distinguished art patrons in East Anglia and key players in Edward III's court politics.



The Macclesfield Master, details of a young man (fol. 250r) and a Dominican friar (fol. 158r)

Materials and production: the scientific evidence

The scientific analysis of the materials used in the Psalter's production was undertaken by MINIARE, a cross-disciplinary project based at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Only non-invasive methods were employed to identify underdrawings, painting materials and binders: multi-spectral (IR and UV) imaging, optical microscopy, X-ray fluorescence, fibre optic reflectance spectroscopy, Raman spectroscopy. No samples were taken and the pages were not even touched by the analytical instruments.

The scientific analyses confirmed that the manuscript was conceived and executed as an object of luxury. The creamy and supple parchment is calfskin, carefully treated and pared down to an even thinness; it is almost transparent and yet sturdy enough to support the gold and pigments. The bold and crisp script of the main text is penned with iron-gall ink, cherished by medieval scribes for its striking and lasting effect. The red text - or rubrics from *ruber*, the Latin for 'red' - are written with vermillion, a mercury sulphide.

The preparatory drawings were made with an organic black pigment, a fine charcoal made from a beech or willow tree. The gold was applied next. Most of it is gold leaf laid onto a thin cushion of gypsum, burnished to a high polish and tooled with tiny dots. Occasionally, small details are drawn in shell gold (gold leaf ground and mixed with glue to form ink or paint). Another gold-like material found in the manuscript is the synthetic tin sulphide known as mosaic gold. Its matt surface sprinkled with sparkling particles creates a dense effect of an almost tangible texture (seen in John the Baptist's camel shirt below, right) and contrasts with the abstract qualities of the highly reflective, shimmering gold leaf.



The Macclesfield Master, burnished gold leaf (left) and mosaic gold (right)

The sumptuous palette consist of pigments that preserve their original colours, as – unlike panel paintings – they have never been varnished or restored. The following pigments were identified in the Macclesfield Psalter:

Black – iron-gall ink, carbon black

White – lead white (synthetic lead carbonate) and gypsum (preparatory layers)

Blue – azurite (blue copper carbonate mined in Central Europe), woad (grown in East Anglia)

Green – verdigris (synthetic rust of copper), sap green (plant-derived, likely extracted from local buckthorn berries)

Red – minium (synthetic red lead), organic red/pink lake (insect-derived, likely Mediterranean kermes), vermillion (synthetic mercury sulphide, in rubrics only)

Yellow – organic yellow die (plant-derived, perhaps from crocuses grown in East Anglia)

Brown – brown earth

Purple – organic lake (plant-derived, likely from folium)

Most of the pigments were tempered with gums (the resins of acacia, plum or cherry trees) or glair (beaten and strained egg white). The received wisdom is that egg yolk, the medium of tempera painting on panel, was too greasy for parchment. Yet, selective use of egg yolk was detected in the Macclesfield Psalter, enriching the lush, warm glow of red areas.

The materials identified in the Macclesfield Psalter are representative of manuscript illumination and panel painting in fourteenth-century East Anglia.

East Anglian manuscripts: the artistic and historic context of the Macclesfield Psalter

Despite the inconclusive evidence about the Psalter's ownership, an East Anglian origin in the 1330s is suggested by the prominence of St Edmund of Bury in the opening miniature (fol. 1r), by visual allusions to historic events, and by stylistic and iconographic parallels with contemporary manuscripts and panel painting.

The manuscripts most closely related to the Macclesfield Psalter include: the Gorleston Psalter commissioned by John de Warenne c.1316 (London, British Library, Add. MS 49622); the Stowe Breviary made in Norwich c.1322-1325 (London, British Library, MS Stowe 12); the Ormesby Psalter's Norwich campaigns of the 1320s and 1330s (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 366); the St Omer Psalter of the 1330s (London, British Library, Yates Thompson MS 14); and three manuscripts containing work by the Macclesfield Master: a copy of John of Freiburg's *Summa Confessorum* (London, British Library, Royal MS 8.G.XI), the Douai Psalter (Douai, Bibl. municipale, MS 171) and a copy of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.7.3).



Marginal motifs in the Gorleston Psalter (left), Stowe Breviary (centre) and Macclesfield Psalter (right)

Within the large family of East Anglian manuscripts from the first third of the 14th century, the Macclesfield Psalter forms a tightly knit sub-group with the Stowe Breviary and the Trinity College Bede. The sub-group's palette is characterised by the absence of ultramarine and silver (found in other East Anglian manuscripts), and by the presence of indigo, mosaic gold and a plant-based purple dye (absent from other manuscripts in the larger East Anglian family).

Two artists were responsible for the Macclesfield Psalter. The Macclesfield Master provided most of the illumination. His colleague, whose hand has not been identified in other manuscripts as yet, painted several marginal figures and the *Anointing of David*. The Macclesfield Master and the Anointing Master collaborated closely, using the same painting materials and techniques as well as the same workshop patterns.



The Anointing Master, The Anointing of David (fol. 39r) and marginal details

The Macclesfield Psalter is an important witness to the connection between painting and illumination in fourteenth-century East Anglia. It is intimately related in style, iconography, painting materials and techniques to the best preserved English panel painting to survive from the Middle Ages: the Thornham Parva Retable made in the 1330s for the Dominican Priory at Thetford or Norwich.

The relationships between the Thornham Parva Retable, the Macclesfield Psalter and the other closely related manuscripts demonstrate that the same network of artists, most probably trained in Norwich, was active across East Anglia during the first third of the 14th century. They produced manuscripts and panels, sharing style and iconography as well as painting materials and techniques, and revealing the close, underexplored collaboration between illuminators and painters in medieval England.



St Edmund of Bury in the Macclesfield Psalter (fol. 1r) and Thornham Parva Retable

Suggested reading

Stella Panayotova and Paola Ricciardi, 'The Macclesfield Psalter, in *The Art & Science of Illuminated Manuscripts: A Handbook*, London and Turnhout: Harvey Miller Brepols, 2020, 321-25

Stella Panayotova, Lucia Pereira-Pardo and Paola Ricciardi, 'Illuminators' Materials and Techniques in Fourteenth-century English Manuscripts', in *Manuscripts in the Making: Art and Science*, ed. S. Panayotova and P. Ricciardi, 2 vols., London and Turnhout: Harvey Miller Brepols, 2017-2018, vol. I, 46-63

Stella Panayotova, *The Macclesfield Psalter*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2008

Online resources

ILLUMINATED: manuscripts in the making (2016) -

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/illuminated/manuscript/discover/the-macclesfield-psalter>

COLOUR virtual exhibition (2016) -

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/colour/explore/introduction>

The Cambridge Illuminations virtual exhibition (2005) -

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeilluminations>

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