

Life of Mary Magdalen

A 12th Century Romanesque style book written, illustrated
and bound by Aelana Cordovera

Documentation for Estrella War Point, Kingdom of An Tir

General Description

I am entering a 12th Century monastic book, Romanesque style. It is a Vita or Saint's Life, a common literary type for both lay and monastic audience of the 12th century Renaissance. The Vitae were written in Latin or in the vernacular in France, Spain and Burgundy and Aquitaine. Therefore I have written mine in the local vernacular.

Choices

I made the book on the basis of the following pieces of art that I fell in love with rather than making rational choices based on one extant book.

Bookbinding

I had some experience making books for the 12th century Romanesque, the epitome of bookbinding excellence, and admired the little chemise cover I saw pictured in a resource book. Dying books with Kermes was a common period practice according to Szirmai.

Illuminations

From the Magdalene Panel, by the Magdalene Master, 1280. I met this panel "in person" in the Gallereria dell' Accademia in Florence and was entranced, could hardly pull myself away, until I found a guidebook with a print to take with me.

As I had painted the panel as an icon, and was accustomed to the Byzantine Italian illustration style, I knew I could redraw other illustrations from other sources in this style to make the illustrations match.

Text

The Legend of Mary Magdalene from "The Golden Legend" by Jacopo de Voragine, 1276. He gathered legends that were around from the 11th century into his own collection. An English translation of a 14th century version of the collection came into my hands and again I was delighted by the adventures of our heroine.

Book Design

As a neophyte scribe I looked for a book design that I could hope to carry out in sufficient scale to make the project reasonable and found the Gospels of Margaret of Scotland (c 1030 - c. 1070) fit the bill. Again I admired the simplicity and readability of the scripts and book design. Someone had cared enough to make it easy for a new reader to make her way in the book!

It would take some creativity to explain why illustrations of a Byzantine Italian provenance were in a book of Flemish design about a century apart, but this is easier to see in hindsight. Perhaps a book of legends came into the hands of an elderly nun trained as a painter in Byzantine Italy. She made a copy for a beloved niece knowing the work of her hands, though old fashioned, would be valued. Since she was trained in the old scripts of her girlhood that is what she used to make it easy to read. Perhaps she didn't get the illustrations finished, and were finished later for a granddaughter of the original recipient. Such examples exist.

Materials

Wood, Leather and Parchment

The text block itself is made of parchment, sewn with linen thread. Rick Cavasin was the parchment supplier. He also supplied the alum tawed goatskin leather for covers and dyed it with kermes as is sometimes found in 12th century book covers and chemises. The boards are of oak, I used 3/8" oak floor boards carved with a draw knife and small wood carving tools.

Paints and Inks

I used Enzo Iron Gall Black ink for calligraphy, sumi gold and red and blue inks for emphasis. I had a sample of iron gall ink I made in a workshop but I was unsure if I had enough to complete the project.

I tried a variety of dip pens, quills, knowing the ink would ruin the fountain pens I was accustomed to practicing with. However the results were so unsatisfactory that I used the fountain pen as a dip pen and washed it well after each use. I was working to a schedule and the problem of calligraphy was taking me way behind schedule. I had to solve the problem pragmatically and get back on schedule or drop out of A&S for the year.

The paints are all natural pigments mixed with egg tempera, yellow and red ochres, burnt sienna, malachite, terre verte, (chromium oxide), a mix of French and true ultramarine blue, bone black, with cadmium red light for vermillion, cadmium yellow for orpiment), titanium white for white lead, all toxic, and alizarion for crimson, for permanence.

I used both shell gold (sumi gold mixed with glue) and real gold leaf. To lay the gold leaf I tried gum ammoniac, but could not make it work, even with telephone coaching from the Gabrielle Guild. So I resorted to gold leaf adhesive size which always works even in damp winter weather with an electric heater on.

Techniques and Tools

I learned bookbinding techniques in a rural workshop without power, so I am used to working in a “period” way, e.g. we split quarter sawn oak logs with a frow and maul, carved them down with a draw knife.

In the city my apprentices at the lumber store help out, especially when I am teaching a workshop. I also use a Dremel for holes in the book boards when I am preparing a workshop. 12th century craftsmen could have used a bow drill or a red hot poker (some holes show signs of charring).

I laid out the book on paper, on double pages, leaving room for illuminations. Then I cut the parchment into double pages too, knowing this left the least room for error. I ruled the pages using a pin and a lead “pencil” (pencil fishing leads which I sharpened and carved with a knife).

I calligraphed the abbreviated “Legend,” filled in the titles, gold sayings of Jesus, red and blue letters. I put the gatherings together to check for accuracy and had made two errors. I had to cut two pages and reverse them, and glue and patch them back together again. Then I taped the pages onto illustration board for gold leafing and painting.

For sewing we made needles over a blowtorch at the workshop, and we used hog bristle “needles” on our book blocks which had been pierced with chisels. We used linen thread we had spun ourselves. However, at home in my workshop, I use bookbinders needles and bookbinders linen thread.

I sewed the pages onto alum tawed goatskin tapes, which were threaded through the slots carved for them on the oak boards. These were pegged in with cedar shims, and glued for modern security. In period they would have been left unglued so the covers could have been taken off for easy transportation.

I sewed the headbands and the “ears” used to pull the books out of boxes and off shelves, put on a page marker, then half covered the boards with wet leather pasted over the boards with wheat paste. This was a practice developed in monasteries that became popular in the universities. I wanted the beautiful oak boards to show. Then I made a chemise according to the pictures. Medieval monks were shoemakers as well as bookbinders and they could have done a much more elaborate job than I have done in my first effort.

I chose a simple brass and nail fastening on a strap to complete the book. I cut the brass with a jeweller’s saw, and riveted it using small brass nails from a picture hanging kit.

Aelana Cordovera

<mailto:sburrows@shaw.ca?subject=Life of Mary Magdalene>