

She's Modern Expert in Medieval Art Form

Mrs. Enid Perkins of Washington Makes Career of Hand Lettering Illumination in Ancient Style

By James Deakin

A Washington Correspondent of the Post-Dispatch.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 4. IN A MODERN APARTMENT on fashionable Massachusetts avenue, Mrs. Enid Eder Perkins practices an ancient art—hand lettering and illumination of manuscripts and scrolls in the style of the Middle Ages.

An attractive, dark-haired woman with a delicate talent in her hands, Mrs. Perkins is a Twentieth Century scribe. She uses techniques hundreds of years old, plus some up-to-date improvisations of her own, to design testimonials, prayers and books.

Although her air-conditioned, brightly lighted workroom bears little resemblance to the "scriptoria" in which scribes and calligraphers of another era painstakingly turned out manuscripts by hand, the results are strikingly similar.

Effects she achieves are remarkably artistic and particularly impressive when viewed closely, so that the wealth of small, elaborate design can be appreciated. Even in this day of the mass-produced printed word, there is a refreshingly steady demand for her work.

She has done tributes and memorials to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, President Eisenhower, the late Gen. Brehon B. Somervell, Thomas J. Watson of International Business Machines and other political and business notables.

Recently she completed a fiftieth wedding anniversary testimonial to Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss of Washington, who gave the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection to the trustees of Harvard University in 1940.

The testimonial, presented to Mr. and Mrs. Bliss by friends and associates, consisted of a frontispiece and 12 pages of hand-lettered signatures—about 600 names. It took "many, many weeks" to complete the elaborately-decorated tribute, Mrs. Perkins recalls.

Bliss, a retired diplomat who served as United States minister to Sweden and ambassador to Argentina, was born in St. Louis. The foundations for United Nations were laid at an historic conference in 1944 at his estate, Dumbarton Oaks, one of Washington's show places.

As in the case of the testimonial to the Blisses, the chief demand for Mrs. Perkins' work comes from groups which want an exceptional and unique citation, resolution, award or tribute to mark some outstanding occasion.

She does all the lettering by hand, employing one of the five alphabets at her command. Then she designs a border or pattern to decorate the pages—perhaps fragile twining ivy, small flowers or an intricate geometric arrangement of small dots and delicately-thin lines no thicker than a hair.

Using water colors or egg tempera, she executes the decoration in vivid blue, vermilion, green or gold, the colors she most favors. It's slow, demanding work.

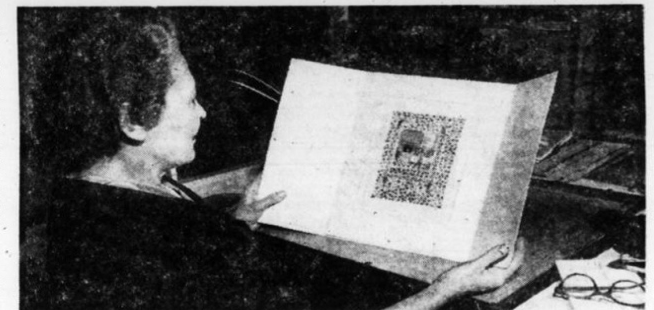
It takes her hours of concentration, often using a magnifying glass, to do just one border. To put gold leaf on one initial letter, in the style of medieval manuscripts, involves a preparatory process that takes six to eight weeks. Three or four short paragraphs of handwriting may take four or five hours.

Since pictures preceded words as a form of communication, it's not surprising that the earliest writings were profusely illustrated and decorated. The first illuminated manuscripts date far back into antiquity—one of the best known being the Egyptian "Book of the Dead," a guidebook of "do's and don'ts" in the next world.

Over the centuries, illumination became an art form as well as a technique. It reached



MRS. ENID EDER PERKINS at her drawing board. She often uses the magnifying glass for close work in illumination and hand lettering.



MRS. PERKINS studies an illumination in Fifteenth Century French style, with raised gold leaf and done in egg tempera.



Another sample of Mrs. Perkins's work is the colophon (last page, with signature) of an illuminated manuscript of a Mayan legend, with decorations derived from Mayan art.

near-perfection in the Byzantine era and then in the Middle Ages. In the medieval monasteries, one monk often did the handwriting, another the decoration, taking infinite care to see that each letter of each word was as beautiful as man's skill could make it.

Most of the major monasteries of Europe had scriptoria. Some of the most famous were at Iona, off the coast of Ireland, founded by St. Columba; at Winchester, England, established by Alfred the Great; at Tours, a center of medieval art and architecture, and at the Abbey of St. Gall in Switzerland.

More than one well-known artist in medieval times did manuscript illumination. Mrs.

Perkins lists Fra Angelico, the Limbourg brothers, Jean Pucelle, Jean Fouquet, the Van Eyck brothers and their sister, Margherita, among those whose work she has come across in her studies.

After the invention of printing, hand illumination fell into disuse. It was revived in Britain in the early years of this century. The Society of Scribes and Illuminators is a thriving, if somewhat esoteric, group in England today. Mrs. Perkins is so far as she knows, the only American member.

She did not start out to be a scribe. Born in New York, she attended Hunter College and then the Art Students League for a time. This was her only formal art training. "They were life classes—no relation to illumination," she recalls.

She came to Washington in 1928 and did occasional lettering and illustrating. A year or so later, a friend asked her to do an illuminated family history. She headed for the rare book room of the Library of Congress and put in several weeks copying and studying old manuscripts. It has become a lifetime study.

When she settles down to work, her surroundings and equipment offer a study in contrasts. On the wall of the comfortable, modern workroom is a framed first page of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," done in the French style of

the early Fifteenth Century. She uses calfskin vellum which she imports from England, or sometimes handmade rag paper or sheepskin. The early manuscript writers worked with quill pens, "but I can't cut a quill pen for the life of me—so I use an English-made straight edge pen."

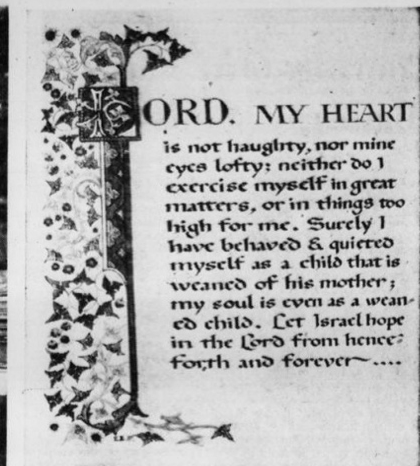
She has mastered a variety of handwriting styles—the humanist hand derived from the handwriting of Charlemagne's time, uncial, Irish half-uncial, Gothic, Italic and chancery (the style in which Papal Bulls were written). Mrs. Perkins writes all her personal letters in Italic, an attractive, flowing script.

For the decorative borders and illustrations which distinguish her work, she uses

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A sample of Mrs. Perkins's work: Psalm 131, done in Fourteenth Century French style.

ordinary tube water colors mixed with white paint to make them opaque. The early scribes used powdered pigments ground up in water, and mixed with "many thins," including the yolks and whites of eggs, Mrs. Perkins explains. When it comes to putting gold leaf on the initial letter of a page, things get complicated. First, Mrs. Perkins makes an undercoating—called gesso—following the instructions given by Cennino Cennini, a medieval teacher. Gesso consists of fine slaked dental plaster, soaked in water for six to eight weeks.

White lead, a little honey or sugar, glue and coloring matter are added. The resulting mixture is laid on the area to be gilded. When the gesso is just the right consistency—"not too dry, not too wet," says Mrs. Perkins—she breathes on it to make it sticky, crosses her fingers and attaches one or two layers of gold leaf.

"Weather influences successful gilding," explains the artist. "Damp weather is best; dry weather is bad." If it is too hot, her breath won't condense on the undercoating and the leaf won't stick. The final step is to burnish the leaf until it shines.

Making the undercoating "is like making a pie," Mrs. Perkins says. The medieval texts on illumination advise "taking a little of this and a little of that." The library that she has accumulated indicates that in other respects the inventive

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Today's Brain Game

HERE is a quiz on pirates and piracy. Six answers correct is excellent.

1. Who wrote about the exploits of "Red Rover"?
2. Can you name the innkeeper's son in "Treasure Island"?
3. What fictional pirate is pursued by a crocodile with a clock in its stomach?
4. What buccaneer captured Panama by using a herd of wild cattle?
5. What British pirate was known as "Blackbeard"?

6. Can you name the pirate who defended New Orleans in the War of 1812?
7. What buccaneer circled the world in a ship named "Desiree"?
8. Who commanded the "Golden Hind"?

Answers.

1. James F. Cooper. 2. Jim Hawkins. 3. Capt. Hook. 4. Henry Morgan. 5. Edward Teach. 6. Jean Lafitte. 7. Thomas Cavendish. 8. Sir Francis Drake.