A Modern Critique for an Ancient Manuscript
Analyzing The Book of Kells with modern design principles

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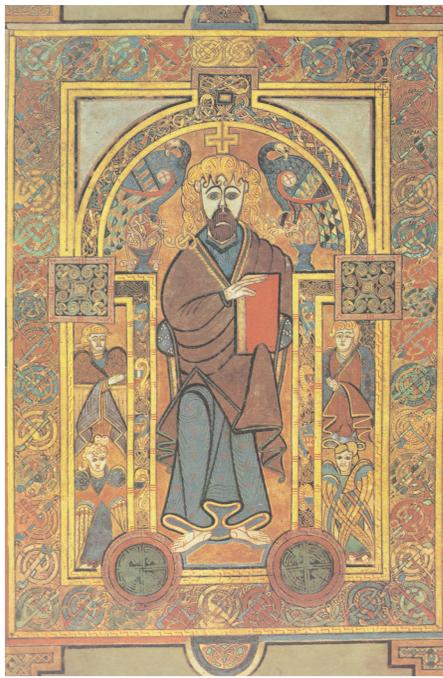
Illustration

The Book of Kells has striking illustrations shown all throughout the work. All varying from an entire page dedicated to a single illustration, to an ornamental cat at the end of a line of text. Although these illustrations are stylistically Celtic there are a few minor things they could have done differently that would have really made the pieces shine. The first of these being human proportions. The other thing the Celtic people could have done differently is adding depth and shading to the illustrations. The use of only lines to show the difference between shapes causes the shapes to meld together creating a wall of color, especially when shapes are next to another shape of the same color.

Color

The Book of Kells uses a large amount of color. However, introducing color into a piece also introduces more responsibility to the creator. Some of these pages have an amazingcolor scheme, where all the colors work together and harmonize well. However, other pages miss harmony completely or have a single element that causes disruption for the entire page.
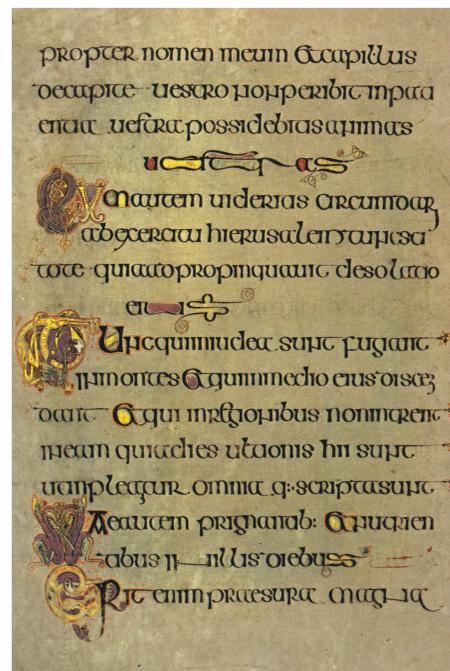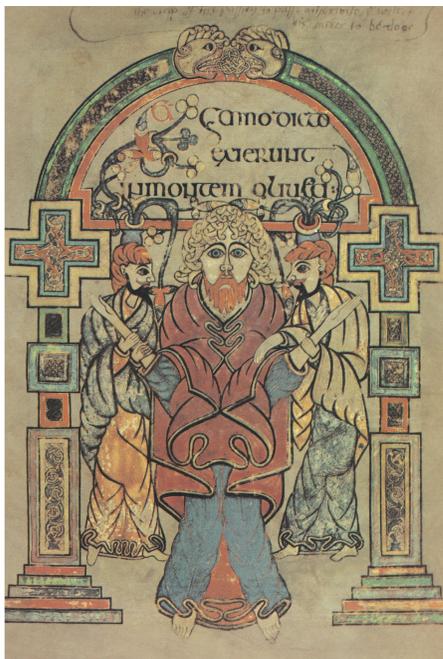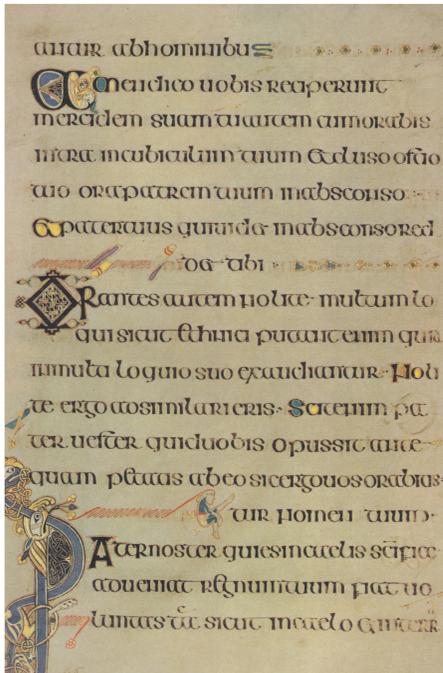
Abstract

The book most widely considered the epitome of Celtic illuminated manuscripts, The Book of Kells, is under review. This review will be conducted by critiquing the entire manuscript and putting it up to the design standards of today. The review consists of looking critically at the use of color, the readability of the writing, the use of decorative elements, and the effectiveness of the stylewhich everything is illustrated in. During the course of the review it has been concluded that the Celtic people had a fine grasp on getting color onto the paper, however, lacked the knowledge to be able to use the colors effectively. The readability of the writing is less than easy. This being because of the use of thick black writing along with the need to connect almost every letter. The decorations and illustrations flung throughout the manuscript are pleasant distractions from the barely readable text. The readability of the illustrations was lacking also. When looking at the more involved illustrations they become a wall of color because of the lack of depth in each picture. The Book of Kells is a marvelous piece of history, and through its shortcomings the design community has been able to learn about the importance of choosing legible typefaces and that colorscheme is an extremely important part of the design process.

Decorations

The only things the Celtic people were consistent about during the creation of this manuscript was the use of weaving elements together, the use of three as symbolism, and depictions of spirals. The weaving element is predominantly used in the boarders, with decorative lettering, or as space filling decorative elements. The use of three as symbolism can be found on the most simply decorated page in the entirety of The Book of Kells. Spiral depictions can be found hidden throughout the entire book.

Typeface

The half-uncial writing that is predominantly used in the manuscript is iconic to the Celtic style that is known of today. This writing style isn't easily legible though because of the over use of ligatures, the lack of clear differences between letters and consistent use of one form of a letter. For example, the similarities between "t", "a" and "u" when lined up next to each other is enough to force the viewer to stop and decipher the text.

Conclusion

Overall The Book of Kells is a marvelous example of illuminated manuscripts. The illustrations fit in stylistically with the time and place it was created. The amount of color that they were able to use in the entirety of the book is unbelievable considering the hoops that had to be jumped through to get good ink back then. It's a testament on its own that the manuscript is in decent shape. However, if this book were to be submitted as a design students project there would be a lengthy critique to follow. The immediate notes being the inability to read the text with ease and comfort, the lack of depth in everything, and poor craft. Many things can be learned through these mistakes though. For example; depth and shading in a work creates more visual interest for the viewer, and thick typefaces should be used carefully when a piece of text needs to be legible. With all that being said the Book of Kells is no less a historical monument because of what it lacks in the present. If anything what it lacks has gone to pave the way for what we believe is good design today. So even though The Book of Kells is not a modern marvel, it is certainly a historical wonder.

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