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## The Illuminated Alphabet

There is much we do not know about “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.” Facts are a little vague when it comes to this epic poem written in fourteenth century England, not only because it was written by an anonymous author, but also because it may have been written and illustrated unconventionally. It was originally recorded as an illuminated manuscript and was most likely made by monks in a monastery. The book was part of a collection kept in the Ashburnham House where it was almost lost to a fire that took many other manuscripts like it.

I chose to do “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” as an illuminated alphabet book because I researched illuminated manuscripts for the presentation, and found it really inspiring. Being a communication design major, typography is a very large part of our curriculum, but the illuminated letters allowed me play with form and design in a way that you cannot do in typography because these letters were made before the printing press was created and all the typographic rules were made.

My goal for this project was to create a book of letters using the style in which monks painted letterforms in illuminated manuscripts, as well as portray the variety of styles for each letterform, going from very ornate to simple and elegant. By doing so, I wanted to get an insight into how monks decided how a letter should look, and give others, unfamiliar with illuminated manuscripts, an insight into how each letter may have looked. It is important not only to understand the plot of a story, but also how it began and its history, and so I also hope to provide a little more understanding as to how the story may have been in its original form.

To do this, I first created a list of themes I found important to the story and to the plot like the Green Man, nature, seasons, games, the green girdle, etc. Then, I looked at a lot of images of illuminated manuscripts and letters both online, and from the book Medieval Craftsmen: Scribes and Illuminators by Christopher de Hamel. Drawing inspiration from both real illuminated letters and the themes found in the story, I designed each letter based on what I had seen. One of the major themes I went with was nature. The Green Knight was based on the Green Man, a deity in pagan culture that revolved around nature and fertility, so I used a lot of leaves, vines, and flowers in letters like A, D, I, and K, and even painted the Green Man in the counter of the O. After I finished sketching them, I painted them with gouache, and “illuminated” each letter with a silver or gold gel pen. Lastly, I stitched the book together with a coptic stitch, adding a piece of museum board on each side as a cover.

For a lot of the letters, choosing what to do was fairly easy at first because I had a few ideas of what I wanted the letters to look like, but after about half way, I ran out of ideas and so I turned to the

internet for inspiration on form, but sticking to the themes from “Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” for ornamentation, as well as looking at the shape of each letterform and their counters. One particularly tricky idea to convey was Morgan le Fay’s magic and the disguise of Sir Bertilak. I portrayed this in the F, using multiple shades of green blended together to convey an idea of uncertainty in which color was where and where one began and one ended, just as Sir Bertilak flowed from the Green Knight into the host of a castle seamlessly.

As for color choices, illuminated manuscripts tended to have very saturated colors and they all used basic colors like red, yellow, green and blue, so I tried to stick to that as much as possible by not mixing paints with black and white. The major plot developments in the story all seemed to take place during the holidays, specifically Christmas and New Years, so I defaulted to red, and even more so, green because of both Christmas and the Green Knight/Green Man.











