

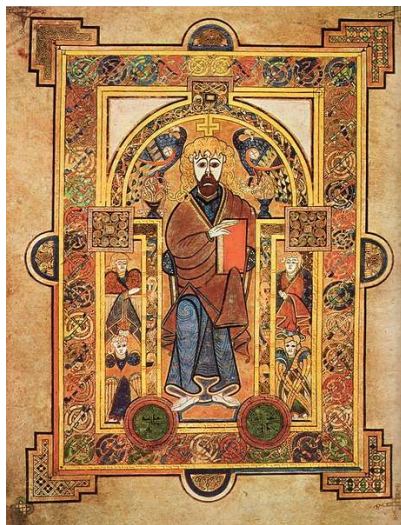
# Imaging the Word: Art & Theology

## Illuminated Manuscripts

Among the artistic and spiritual treasures the Celtic Church has left to us, illuminated manuscripts—hand-written books highly decorated with flourishes such as borders and miniature illustrations—stand out as the richest and most interesting. Produced by monks working alone in the monastic scriptoria, these illuminated manuscripts, most of which are either Psalters or Gospel books, display interlacing knotwork and spiral patterns similar to those found on the high standing crosses. They also often depict numerous animals and birds. The art of copying and illustrating the Psalms and the Gospels was seen as a way of meditating and contemplating on the Scriptures, to which the monks were called. In the *Cathach of St Columba*, a Psalter which dates from c.600 and contains Psalms 32 to 105, the decoration is limited to the first letter of each psalm. The Gospel books which appear somewhat later are much more lavishly illustrated. The three most important of these are the *Book of Durrow*, possibly dating from the late seventh century and produced on Iona, the late eighth or early ninth century *Book of Kells*, which is also thought to be a product of the Iona monastic scriptorium, and the Lindisfarne Gospels which were probably produced between 715 and 720 on the holy island, although there have been suggestions that they may have had an Irish provenance.

### *The Book of Kells*

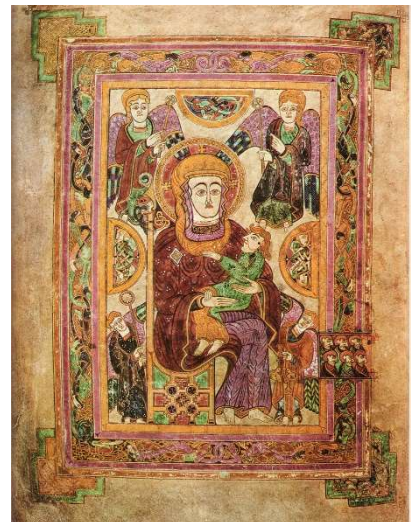
The Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript of the four gospels of the Christian New Testament, currently housed at Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland, is perhaps the most developed of these three. Indeed, the work is the most famous of all medieval illuminated manuscripts on account of the intricacy, detail, and majesty of the illustrations. It is thought the book was created as a showpiece for the altar, not for daily use, because more attention was obviously given to the artwork than the text.



Book of Kells, Folio 32v, Christ Enthroned.



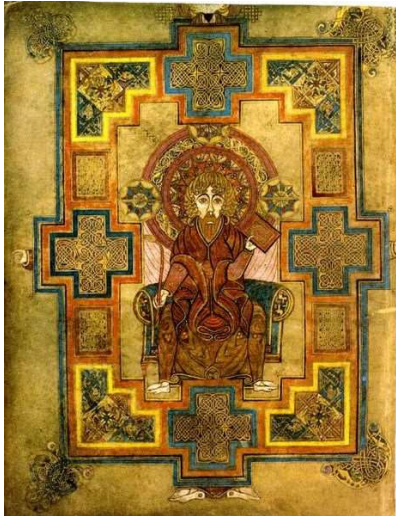
The Book of Kells, (folio 292r), circa 800, showing the lavishly decorated text that opens the Gospel of John



Book of Kells. Folio 7v: Virgin and Child



Folio 27v contains the symbols of the Four Evangelists (clockwise from top left): a man (Matthew), a lion (Mark), an eagle (John) and an ox (Luke)



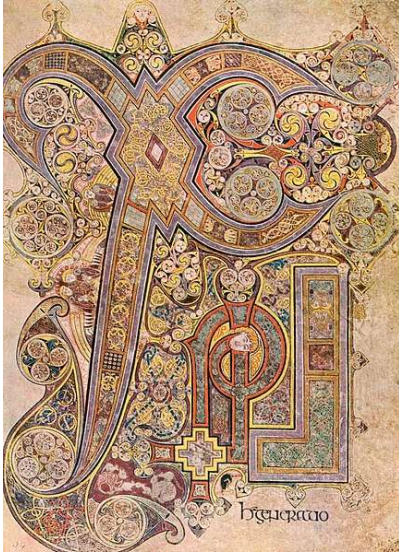
Folio 291v contains a portrait of John the Evangelist.



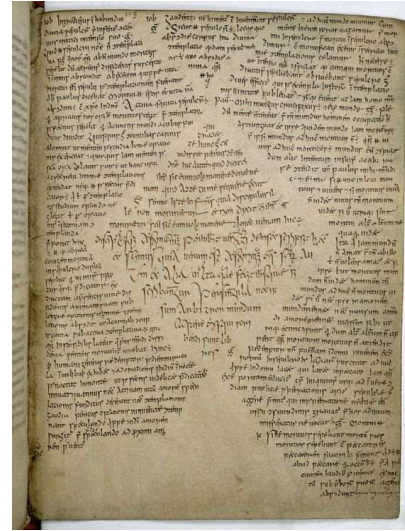
Folio 34r contains the Chi Rho monogram. *Chi* and *rho* are the first two letters of the word *Christ* in Greek

The beauty of the lettering, portraits of the evangelists, and other images, often framed by intricate Celtic knotwork motifs, has been praised by writers through the centuries. Scholar Thomas Cahill notes that, “as late as the twelfth century, Geraldus Cambrensis was forced to conclude that the Book of Kells was ‘the work of an angel, not of a man’ owing to its majestic illustrations” and that, in the present day, the letters illustrating the Chi-Rho (the monogram of Christ) are regarded as “more [living] presences than letters” on the page for their beauty. Unlike other illuminated manuscripts, where text was written first and illustration and illumination added afterwards, the creators of the Book of Kells focused on the impression the work would have visually and so the artwork was the focus of the piece.

The Book of Kells also depicts one the significant innovations in the art of the Irish monasteries not found with the same emphasis or concentration in wider Celtic European culture--the diamond shaped lozenge design. It is on Mary’s right shoulder in the depiction of the Virgin and child, at the intersection of the Chi Rho (*XP*) letters on the page illustrating the birth of Christ in Matthew’s Gospel, at the center of the page of symbols in St John’s Gospel and on the cover of the book held by John in the portrait of the evangelist. Similarly, in the *Book of Armagh* the concluding words of St John’s Gospel are enclosed in a lozenge which occupies the central space on the last page. The lozenge shape also appears prominently on a number of high standing crosses, notably at Moone and at Kilbroney, County Down, where it is positioned at the center of the cross-head. It is also found on the Tara and Cavan brooches and carved on the side of a doorway of an early monastic church at Fore, County Westmeath.



The Chi Rho Page, The Book of Kells, folio 34r. Opening of St Matthew's Nativity Account



The Book of Armagh, St John's Gospel

Hilary Richardson and other art historians and archaeologists have persuasively argued that this lozenge symbol represents Christ as the Logos, or Word, as designated in the prologue to John's Gospel. It can, perhaps, be taken as evidence to back up the assertion made by Philip Newell and others that the fourth Gospel had a special place in the hearts and devotions of Celtic Christians. It is noticeable that in the *Book of Kells* the diamond-shaped lozenge is always edged with purple and gold, the colors used to suggest imperial majesty. If it is pointing to the majesty and kingship of Christ, this particular piece of patterning again suggests icon-like symbolism, mystery and metaphor.

*The Book of Durrow*

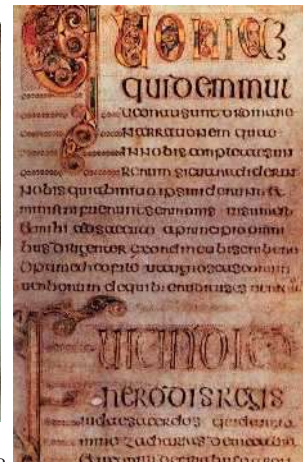
The Book of Durrow It is the oldest extant complete illuminated Insular gospel book, for example predating the Book of Kells by over a century. The text includes the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, plus several pieces of prefatory matter and canon tables.



Beginning of the Gospel of Mark



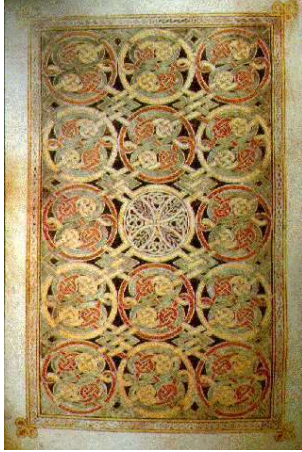
Page with Chi-Rho, Matthew 1:18



Folio



Carpet page with interlaced animals



Carpet page, Folio 85v



Carpet page, Folio 125v



Carpet page, Folio 1v



Carpet page, Folio 192v

For more on illuminated manuscripts, watch [this video](#).