Review Article

Technologies for Creating Initials

Stanislav Bolanča [1,*]

[1] Croatian Academy of Engineering, Kačićeva ulica 28, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia

* Correspondence: sbolanca@htz.hr

Abstract: The tradition of manuscript illumination, characterized by historiated initials, vignettes, and intricate decorative elements, dates back to the period between the 2nd and 5th centuries. During this era, texts were meticulously transcribed by hand; following the transition to the codex format, professional illuminators and painters manually adorned each page, transforming functional documents into artistic artifacts.

With the advent of the Gutenberg revolution and the invention of movable type, textual reproduction became mechanized. However, in the early stages of printing, decorative flourishes were still applied manually by artists to maintain the aesthetic prestige of the works. The subsequent evolution of printing technologies, particularly the advancement of offset lithography, enabled high-fidelity, full-colour reproduction of entire pages, bridging the gap between artistic intent and industrial efficiency.

The emergence of digital printing further revolutionized the field by streamlining prepress workflows and significantly reducing production costs for short-run editions. Today, by synthesizing traditional aesthetic principles with contemporary technological innovations—such as nanography and high-definition inkjet processes—the decoration of books has reached a level of sophistication that closely approximates the quality of handcrafted illumination. Consequently, high-end artistic detailing has become increasingly accessible, ensuring that the legacy of book ornamentation persists within the modern economic landscape.

Keywords: initial; vignettes; illuminations.

1. Introduction

Initials in paleography and the history of printing represent prominent initial letters in manuscripts, books, or emphasized chapters. With their size, specific colour, or ornamental ornamentation, they visually emphasize certain places in the text, serving as key landmarks for the reader. Their role goes beyond mere decoration; they highlight the structure of the written work and the hierarchy of information, thereby directly increasing the attractiveness and overall value of the text.

The history of initials dates back to the period of late antiquity, and their presence has endured to the present day. Over the centuries, they have undergone constant changes in aesthetic expression, but also in the technology of creation itself – from unique hand-illuminations on parchment to precisely printed forms in modern printing. During the manuscript period, initials were the result of meticulous work by painters. The development of the printing press, however, brought a new dynamic, in which mechanical reproduction of the text merged with artistic tradition.

In line with the historical and technological developments described, this paper is structured through several key chapters:

- Initials, Vignettes, and Illuminations: The first part of the paper analyses the formal evolution of decorative elements from late antiquity to the 8th-century *Evangeliarium Spalatense* and the 13th-century *Trogir Evangelistary*. It examines the transition from geometric structures to zoomorphic (ornithomorphic and ichthyomorphic) designs and the cultural significance of hagiographic works like the *Legenda Aurea*.

- The Pre-Gutenberg Printing Era: This chapter explores the early methods of mechanical reproduction, focusing on the development of stone rubbings and wood-block printing in China and the subsequent refinement of movable type during the Song Dynasty and in Korea.

- The Gutenberg Revolution and Letter-press: The central part of the paper investigates the 15th-century technological shift initiated by Johannes Gutenberg. It details the hybrid process where printed text met manual illumination and the eventual transition from woodcuts to durable metal clichés.

- Planographic Printing and the Offset Era: This section traces the evolution from Senefelder's lithography to Rubel's offset press. It highlights how high-resolution halftone screening and modern colour management systems replaced the need for manual coloration in mass production.

- The Digital Age and Nanography: The final part focuses on Non-Impact Printing (NIP) technologies, specifically electrophotography, high-resolution inkjet, and Benny Landa's nanography. It concludes with an analysis of contemporary trends, such as robotic transcription and the use of photography and artificial intelligence in modern book decoration.

2. Initials, vignettes, and illuminations

Initial letters are used to designate the beginning of a text or a chapter [1, 2]. This method of emphasizing and decorating parts of a text originated in late antiquity, specifically appearing in the 4th and 5th centuries. During this period, highly simplified capital letters began to evolve into decorative forms [3-5]. The development of these elements was largely continuous; initially, highly painted initials appeared, most commonly in religious and historical texts. The combination of the initial with vignettes and miniatures expanded into high-quality, richly adorned book illuminations, a practice already well established by the 8th century [5-9].

Colored initials initially followed geometric structures. Subsequently, zoomorphic designs emerged, specifically those based on birds (ornithomorphic) and fish (ichthyomorphic).

These forms were often combined with interlace patterns, known in Croatian as pleter. In later periods, there was a resurgence of complex floral and abstract ornaments [2, 4, 10, 11]. Throughout the Middle Ages, books were transcribed by hand, as were the initials, vignettes, and illuminations (Figure 1 a)) and b)). These tasks were performed by gifted and highly specialized individuals, such as scribes and rubricators [12, 13].


(a)

(b)

Figure 1. a) Glagolitic scribes, Croatia [14]. b) Tools for sketching and drawing, Miss Mustard Seed [15].

The territory of present-day Croatia also played a significant role in the development of manuscript decoration. The oldest such book is the *Evangeliarium Spalatense* (Split Gospel), written in Latin on parchment in the 8th century, reflecting the cultural and spiritual landscape during the Christianization of the population [16, 17] (Figure 2 a)).
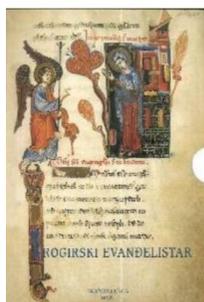
The Trogir Evangelistary, considered by many to be one of the most beautiful books of its time, was written and edited from the end of the 11th to the beginning of the 13th century (Figure 2 c)). It contains 122 initials and 5 miniatures [20, 21]. This manuscript represents a pinnacle of Romanesque art in the region.
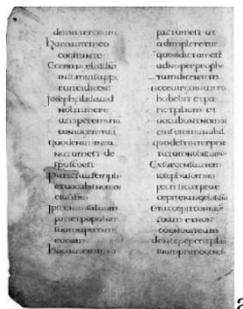
(a)

(b)

(c)

Figure 2. Medieval manuscripts: (a) the Split Gospel, 8th century; (b) a modern edition of a 12th-century copy; (c) the Trogir Evangelistary, a work of exceptional aesthetic beauty [18, 19].

The most widely read book of the Middle Ages is considered to be the "Golden Legend" (*Legenda Aurea*) by Jacobus de Voragine [22, 23]. This book is a collection of hagiographies—works concerning the lives of saints. It consists of 153 chapters and was expanded over time. It originated between 1259 and 1266. Following Johannes Gutenberg's invention, it was published in numerous languages, often reaching two editions per year, which, according to some authors, surpassed the distribution of the Bible during that period [23, 24].

Figure 3 illustrates a contemporary presentation of the Golden Legend by Jacobus de Voragine, highlighting its status as the most widely circulated hagiographic work of the Middle

Ages, which set the stage for the increasing demand for standardized book reproduction [25]. To facilitate the reproduction of books, printing was introduced as a method of duplicating originals. Initially, the primary goal was the efficient transfer of texts. In China, stone was used as a transfer medium as early as 200 BCE, though some authors suggest the first impressions date back to 400 BCE [26]. Wooden blocks as printing forms appeared in the 7th and 8th centuries [27, 28]. A major technological milestone was the invention of movable type, discovered during the Song Dynasty between 1041 and 1049 [29, 30].

Figure 3. Presentation of the most read book of the Middle Ages, "The Golden Legend" by Jacobus de Voragine / Laudato [25].

Printing from wooden blocks had significant disadvantages; for instance, a single block could only sustain about 12 impressions of satisfactory quality before degrading [19, 27]. This limitation drove the search for more durable materials (Figure 4).

In the search for more durable materials, ceramic printing forms were used as early as the 11th century. By the 13th century in Korea, metal characters were being adhered to wooden bases, and by the 14th century, fully cast metal type was in production [33]. These innovations laid the foundational technical principles that would eventually lead to the Western printing revolution.

3. Johannes Gutenberg

In the year 1450, a revolutionary shift occurred with the introduction of printing forms, based on Johannes Gutenberg's invention [29]. This technological breakthrough marked the beginning of the decline of manual manuscript transcription. Printing forms made of wood gradually faded into history, eventually being reserved almost exclusively for artistic and specialized works [34]. As early as the 13th
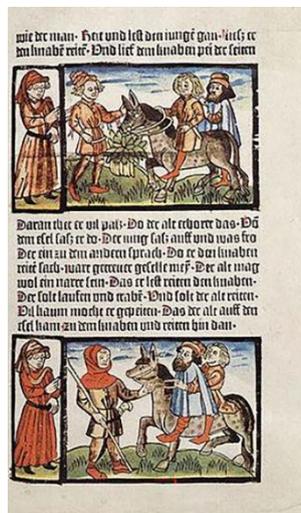
century, an international trade of expensive, hand-copied books existed between countries. However, with the invention of Gutenberg's movable metal type, books became significantly more affordable, and a new logistics of knowledge emerged through the transport of the movable type itself [30, 35] (Figure 5).
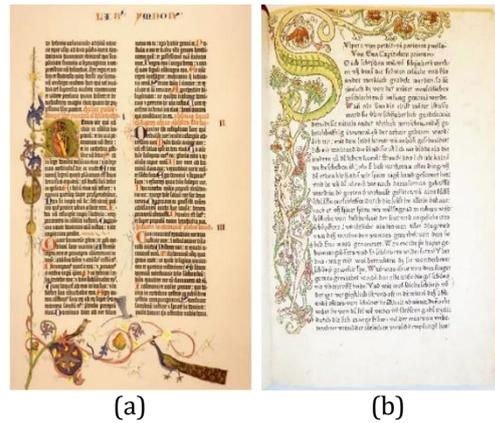

(a)
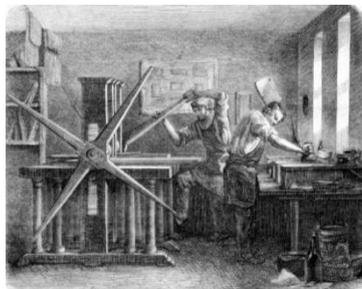
(b)

(c)

Figure 4. Photography of: a) Wooden movable type from the 11th century [30]. b) Printing press with a wooden form from the 15th century [31]. c) Impression from a wooden printing form from the 15th/16th century [32].

(a)   (b)

Figure 5. a) Printed Gutenberg Bible from 1455 with hand-painted illustrations [36]. b) Johannes Zainer, circa 1474; a woodcut manually coloured with yellow, green, and red pigments [37].

Gutenberg's early printed works were adorned with initials and numerous miniatures in various colours. It is essential to note that, although the main text of the Bible, for instance, was mechanically printed, the layout was intentionally designed with intentional blank spaces. These "lacunae" were left specifically for master illustrators to manually complete the initials, vignettes, and other illuminations for each individual copy [38, 39]. This hybrid process maintained a link between the new mechanical efficiency and the traditional artistry of the scriptorium.

Soon, wooden clichés (blocks) began to be utilized for the systematic insertion of initials and illustrations [40, 41]. A prominent example is Hartmann Schedel's *Liber Chronicarum* (Nuremberg Chronicle) of 1493, which utilized 645 woodcuts to adorn its pages [42]. The subsequent evolutionary step involved replacing these wooden blocks, which had limited durability, with more resilient metal clichés (Figure 6). This transition ensured greater consistency across large print runs.
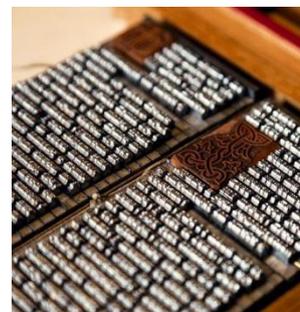

Figure 6. Letterpress printing form featuring metal type and wooden clichés [43].

The replacement of manual transcription with movable metal type, the establishment of printing houses, and the mechanization of the printing process led to a rapid increase in the production of books. This democratization of information resulted in a significant rise in literacy rates and accelerated the progress of modern civilization [44, 45, 46] (Figure 7).

The technique of letterpress printing continued to evolve. New machinery emerged, progressing from sheet-fed presses to high-speed rotary presses. Alongside manual typesetting, advanced mechanical techniques such as linotype, monotype, stereotype, and electrotype were introduced [43]. These innovations addressed the growing demand for complex layouts and higher production speeds.

The need for multi-colour printing also became evident. By 1892, the first four-color rotary letterpress machine was constructed [47, 48]. The success of industrial colour printing further reduced the necessity for hand-painted illuminations and initials. Additionally, the sophisticated technique of steel die engraving (die stamping) was employed for both coloured and blind embossing on book covers and title pages, enhancing the tactile value and aesthetic prestige of important documents and high-end publications [49, 50].
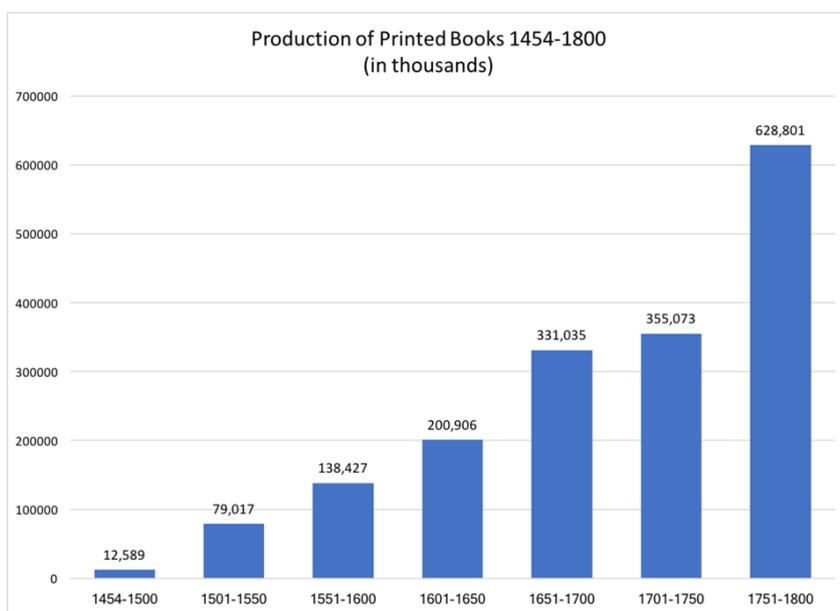

Figure 7. Growth in the volume of printed books issued from 1454 to 1800 [30].

4. Planographic printing

Until the emergence of lithography, invented by Alois Senefelder in 1796, letterpress remained the predominant technique for book production. This shifted when Ira Washington Rubel, between 1903 and 1904, enhanced the lithographic process by introducing the offset cylinder. This innovation marked the birth of rotary offset printing, a technique capable of printing on both sheets and webs, providing formidable competition to traditional letterpress [48, 51].

From its inception, offset printing enabled the simultaneous reproduction of text alongside monochromatic illustrations and initials. With the subsequent development of multi-colour planographic and letterpress processes, it became possible to print initials, vignettes, and illuminations in full colour. In 1936, the first four-color offset presses with in-line printing units were constructed. After 1950, the mass production of these machines began, delivering high-quality prints that gradually displaced letterpress as the leading printing technology [48]. Specifically, the halftone screen frequency (ruling) in offset printing became sufficiently fine to replace manual artistry in most commercial and artistic applications [43, 44].

Offset technology continued to evolve through the integration of computer systems, the inclusion of control strips (slugs) on the margins of prints, and the measurement of print quality using certified international standards (Figure 8). The implementation of

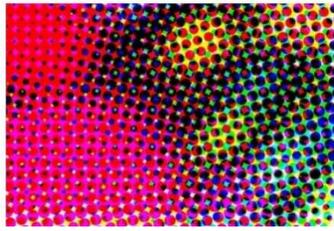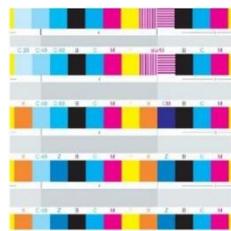systematic colour management began in the late 1980s, further refining the process [46, 47, 48] (Figure 9).

Figure 8. Full-colour printing in a four-color offset process [45].

(a)

(b)

Figure 9. a) Colour management [49], b) Prepress control bars [50].

The integration of these advanced systems ensures a high and consistent quality for reproducing initials, vignettes, and colour illuminations, even when produced in large or very large print runs [58, 51]. This industrial precision ensures that the aesthetic integrity of decorative elements is maintained across millions of copies.

5. Digital printing

The first known impression using powdered toner dates to 1938, credited to Chester Carlson and Otto Kornei. The first formal patent was published in 1973, followed by the demonstration of a computer-aided photocopier with a laser printer in 1977. According to various scholars, the industrial application of digital printing technology was solidified around 1995, which is widely regarded as the true inception of digital printing technology in a commercial context [52, 53].

Digital printing devices based on Non-Impact Printing (NIP) technologies range from high-end professional presses to consumer-grade desktop units. Their primary commonality is a relatively streamlined prepress workflow. While professional digital presses offer robust equipment for high-quality and rapid output, amateur devices are affordable but slower, generally lacking high-fidelity reproduction. However, both categories are capable of reproducing initials, vignettes, and illuminations in full colour. Today, a vast array of NIP devices exists, almost all of which can effectively output decorative elements.

A broad classification of digital printing identifies three dominant sectors: electrophotography, inkjet, and the more recent nanography. The output quality of these technologies is frequently benchmarked against the standards of traditional offset printing [54] (Figure 10).
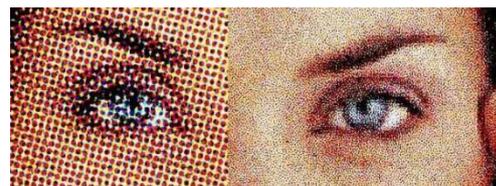

Figure 10. Comparison of colour print quality using high and low halftone screen frequencies [55].

Electrophotography primarily utilizes powdered pigments (toners). Unlike finer toner particles, larger granulations can interfere with high halftone screen rulings and compromise the sharpness of printed edges. Furthermore, electrophotography typically requires a greater ink layer thickness to ensure full dot coverage, which can be a disadvantage when reproducing the delicate gradients and fine lines found in traditional initials and vignettes [55] (Figure 11).
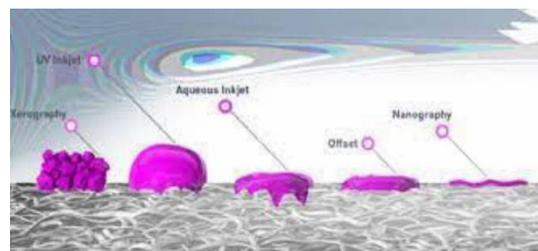

Figure 11. Ink layer thickness comparison across various printing technologies [56].

Inkjet printing represents a purely non-contact digital process. Although the fundamental technique dates to 1867, significant refinements occurred in the 1970s, leading to the production of the first desktop units in 1984. From the outset, the goal was to achieve photographic-quality output [55]. Modern inkjet systems have surpassed resolutions of 1000 dpi, making the reproduction of high-quality colour initials and illuminations effortless [10]. Economically, digital printing is currently more cost-effective for runs under 500 impressions, whereas larger volumes remain more viable via offset printing.

A breakthrough occurred in 2012 when Benny Landa introduced Nanographic Printing® [56]. This technology was publicly demonstrated at the Drupa trade fair in 2016 [59]. Nanography is essentially an indirect (offset) digital inkjet process. Its name is derived from nanotechnology, as it utilizes water-based inks containing ultra-small pigment particles measured in nanometers. While standard UV inks have particles exceeding 1000 nm, nanopigments do not exceed 100 nm. These microscopic pigments allow for a new class of digital output [56, 58] (Figure 12).
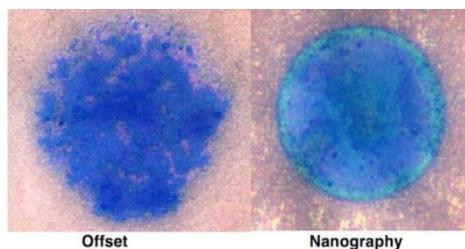

Figure 12. Comparison of a halftone dot printed via conventional offset versus nanography [59].

The colour gamut achieved through nanotechnology is approximately 30% wider than that of conventional offset, covering about 50% more of the colour spectrum than standard CMYK offset. In this process, liquid ink is jetted onto a heated conveyor blanket where the water evaporates, leaving a dry polymeric film that is then transferred to the substrate. This allows for multi-colour printing in a single pass with thermal fixing. The resulting print exhibits extremely sharp edges with an ultra-thin ink layer of only about 500 nm. Nanography rivals offset printing in terms of speed and format size (B1), allowing it to reproduce initials and illuminations with unparalleled quality [60, 61].
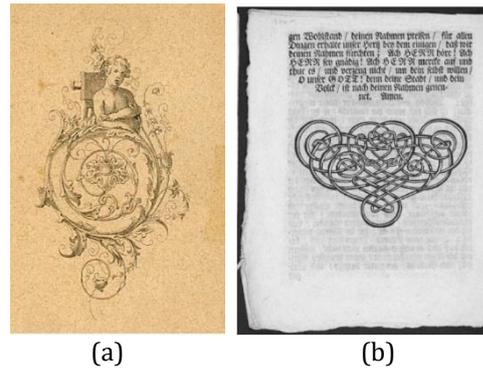

Figure 13. The application of photography in book decoration technologies: a) application of photography, b) application of photography and text [62].

With the evolution of Cy, it has also secured a place in the decoration of books and formal correspondence [62] (Figure 13). Digital photographic reproduction typically utilizes resolutions ranging from 300 to 3200 dpi. In the CMYK colour model, it is applied across offset, gravure, flexography, screen printing, and Print-on-Demand (POD) systems [63].
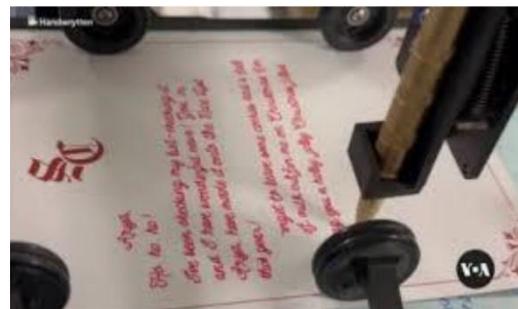
Figure 14. Photography of a) Robot transcribing text; b) Plotter executing both text and illustration; VOA: "Robots Writing Letters for Humans" [66].

Despite these technological strides, there remains a profound desire to replicate the aesthetic of handwritten text and hand-painted initials [64, 65]. To address this, computer-

controlled robots and plotters are sometimes employed to transcribe text and illustrations onto paper with literal precision [66].

The speed of robotic transcription far exceeds that of manual work, allowing for the creation of numerous identical copies (Figure 14). However, it is essential to conclude that for the most prestigious and culturally significant works, manual painting remains the gold standard. Although it is the slowest and most expensive method, it remains the highest quality technique for creating authentic initials.

6. Conclusion

The social and cultural prestige associated with literacy and the art of writing has been recognized since the inception of the first writing systems, dating back to over 3000 BCE. The emergence of the Sumerian pictographic script around 3100 BCE marked a foundational shift in human communication. As novel substrates for writing were developed—transitioning from clay tablets to papyrus, parchment, and eventually paper—the techniques for transcribing and reproducing manuscripts evolved in tandem [68].

While East Asia, particularly China, demonstrated early sophistication in the mechanical reproduction of originals through woodblock printing, the immense complexity of their logographic character systems initially hindered rapid technological expansion. Consequently, significant advancements in movable type occurred in Korea, where a more streamlined and phonetic writing system facilitated technical innovation.

In the European context, the transcription of books remained the exclusive domain of highly gifted and educated individuals throughout the Middle Ages. Due to the high production costs and the intrinsic value of these works, manuscripts were adorned with initials, vignettes, and intricate illuminations as early as the Classical period to signify their importance.

The Gutenberg revolution, characterized by the invention of movable metal type, catalysed the democratization of knowledge by making books significantly more affordable. However, for prestigious editions, the tradition of artistic ornamentation persisted, bridging the gap between industrial efficiency and aesthetic luxury. With the later advent of photography, new

dimensions were added to the reproduction of these decorative elements [35].

Despite the proliferation of contemporary high-speed digital technologies, the interest in book ornamentation remains undiminished. These decorative elements are frequently regarded as independent works of fine art, intrinsically linked to the narrative and intellectual content of the text [69]. Looking toward the future, this trend is expected to persist with sustained intensity. The integration of advanced digital workflows, nanotechnology, and potentially artificial intelligence will continue to redefine the boundaries of book design, ensuring that the ancient tradition of the illuminated word remains a vital component of modern bibliographic culture.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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