

Master(piece)

by

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Art is labor. While the end product - the art itself - is widely regarded by many as a luxury, producing it is labor. It takes time and effort to hone one's skills, intense discipline to practice regularly enough to improve, a well-informed mind to plan a piece, and immeasurable focus to execute one's vision. An artist is a worker, and, to some extent, they face the same challenges as any other worker might, including navigating the dynamic between worker and boss, servant and master.

As an artist and a graphic designer, one of my greatest fears about entering the workforce is that of not having control over my life's work. If I find myself employed at a design firm, I won't be able to choose which projects I work on, and more often than not, may end up creating art that does not fulfill me, though I would have a stable income. That income is not guaranteed if I decide on self-employment as a freelance designer, but working freelance would allow me to choose which projects I take on, and I would have a greater chance of creating art that I consider meaningful.

These concerns, while relevant to many contemporary creative industries, are not unique to it. For as long as human beings have been creating art in organized structures, in hierarchies, we have faced the issues of creative control, ownership of one's work, and choosing our own labor. My senior thesis explores themes of art, labor, choice, control, and the rejection of authority through a medieval lens.

The project itself, a simple first-person narrative, follows the story of a humble monk, who is assigned to illuminate an entire manuscript by his abbot. Dutifully, he obeys, and works as hard as he can to create a thing of beauty, a masterpiece. By the time he's finished, however, he's grown so attached to his art that he can't bear to relinquish it to the monastery. He runs away with it, abandoning the environment in which he served his masters in favor of a life in which he can serve himself and his art.

My intention was to format this story as though it were a medieval manuscript. I had decided early on that it would be as historically accurate as possible, not just in terms of the aesthetics and style, but also the process of creating it. The reason for this was to forge a strong connection between artists across centuries. I would be experiencing the same process as a monk in the medieval period, familiarizing myself with the labor that I was writing about. It would enrich the narrative to emphasize that this manuscript is the product of a worker's labor; it would be just as much about the making as the end result.

Accuracy, of course, requires research. When I first conceptualized this project, I had been picturing a manuscript typical of the later European medieval period, but after spending some time reading, I chose to pivot to the early medieval period. This decision was made because, as I learned, monasteries were the primary producers of books up to around 700 CE, at which point they first began to see competition from independent illuminators who worked for cash, known

as lay scribes (Alexander 12). This shift heightened around 1100 CE, as Europe saw a decrease in manuscripts produced by monasteries, and an increase in those produced by lay scribes, who were members of guilds or were contracted by a library or university (Alexander 12-22).

My narrative, being in part about power, authority, and the role of “master” versus “servant,” was dependent on the social hierarchy of a monastery. Typically, a monastery would have an abbot at the head. Answering to the abbot would be the armarius, the monk who headed the scriptorium, which was the designated space for writing and illuminating books (Drogin 7). The scribes were lowest in the hierarchy. The abbot and armarius chose which pages the scribes would copy, and the scribes could not object, improvise, trade labor, or even let their minds wander, lest the page become ruined with a misspelling (Drogin 8). It was an environment in which obedience and submission were expected. Thus, an early medieval monastery would better suit the story I wanted to tell.

For a brief moment, this knowledge threw a wrench in my plans, as books created in monasteries were usually crafted by multiple monks, who were likely to have divided the labor between scribe and illuminator (Alexander 5). I felt that for my main character to betray a fellow laborer by stealing a shared work would undermine the whole concept. While an individual making off with art that is purely theirs, from an institution who denies them credit and creative freedom, could be framed as an act of justice, that same individual stealing the labor of others to keep for themselves would be an act of selfishness, an act that harms the other workers. I wanted to avoid a narrative that justified that harm.

However, I soon found that, while extremely frequent, shared labor between scribes was not always the case. For example, the Lindisfarne Gospels, an Anglo-Saxon manuscript written between 715-720 CE, were authored and illustrated entirely by Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne, whose name appears in the colophon (Alexander 6). Furthermore, monasteries - in addition to creating new books - would also reproduce older manuscripts, which, over time, would become worn, faded, or damaged. In the case of copied books, it was common for one scribe to be the sole author and illuminator of the entire manuscript (Alexander 72). This, thankfully, meant that I could continue with my narrative as planned.

Making this shift from later- to early-medieval manuscript meant a shift in certain aspects of this project’s visuals. To name one such change, drawings in the margins were much less common during the early medieval period than during the later medieval period (Alexander 118). I had originally planned to have a secondary storyline parallel to the monk’s, all happening in the margins: an angel who offends God through some action, and is cast out of heaven. I had wanted to draw connections between the master-servant dynamics of an abbot versus a monk, and God versus an angel; this was another good reason to go for an early medieval scribe, who, living in a monastery, would have been religious.

However, because I had dedicated myself to being as historically accurate as possible, that parallel storyline had to be reduced. Throughout my work, the angel would still appear, but only

for a few crucial moments. For example, at the very beginning of the story, he kneels at God's side as a faithful servant, and towards the end, he can be seen flying away from God, narratively mirroring the monk absconding from the monastery. While the audience never sees the angel's story play out page by page, he is still present enough to be thematically relevant, and calls to attention secondary ideas of religious submission and embracing sin, as well as reinforcing one of the primary themes: the risk, and the freedom, of rejecting servitude.

Choosing an earlier time period also meant choosing a new script with which to write. My aspirations to learn the Gothic calligraphy typical of 1100-1400 CE were no longer relevant. Instead, I was left with a few promising options that were popular before 1000 CE, and thus before lay scribes became the dominant illuminators in Europe. One such script was Carolingian Minuscule, widespread across Charlemagne's empire during - and well after - his rule; it was in use from the late eighth century all the way through the twelfth. It was relatively simple to read and write, which some historians theorize to be the guiding principle behind its design (Drogin 49). At the time, education and literacy rates in Charlemagne's territory were relatively low, coinciding with the rise of a great deal of difficult-to-read seventh- and eight-century scripts. In answer to this, the Emperor Charlemagne, along with Alcuin, a Benedictine monk in charge of the emperor's school and scriptorium, popularized the use of Carolingian Minuscule throughout Charlemagne's empire (Drogin 50).

Another option was the use of two scripts, developed alongside each other around the fifth century, a Majuscule form and a Minuscule form. To describe the primary difference between Majuscule and Minuscule, the former resembles what we as modern readers know as capital letters - mostly uniform letter height, with no elements protruding far above or below the mass of a word - and the latter resembles what we know as lowercase, with some letters having perceptible ascending or descending elements, such as the vertical strokes of the letters "h" and "p" respectively. These two scripts had originated in Ireland after St. Patrick, a Christian missionary from Anglo-Saxon territory, brought books written in an older style of script to the monasteries that he established. The converted Irish monks made changes to the letterforms, reflecting their own artistic traditions (Drogin 39).

The resultant scripts quickly spread throughout England, Scotland, and other parts of Western Europe. While there are variations of each script, due to regional modification and scribes' innate handwriting influencing their calligraphy, each version of Minuscule or Majuscule has much in common with its relatives - most notably, both the Majuscule and Minuscule variations have triangular or wedge-shaped serifs (Drogin 40). All regional variations of the period generally fall under the umbrella category of Insular scripts. Insular Majuscule text was used for the main body text in religious manuscripts; Minuscule script was for notes in the margins, as well as secular documents (Drogin 40). Along with the use of Insular scripts, older styles of calligraphy were borrowed by Irish scribes to indicate hierarchically important

information, but most of the text in Irish and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the early medieval period was written in Insular Majuscule and Minuscule.

The duality of Insular scripts inspired me. I decided that Insular Majuscule would come into play as the main body text - the attitudes and ideas that the monk would project to his acquaintances at the monastery, those which he would not be afraid to speak aloud - and Minuscule would be used for his inner monologue, where the audience would get to see his true feelings: his pride, his resentment of his station as a servant, and his sins. When he decides to leave the monastery behind, his rebellious thoughts go from being written in Minuscule to Majuscule, marking the change in his attitude: he goes from a servant who dares not disobey his masters, to an artist free of fear. Since Insular scripts suited the narrative so well, I decided to set my narrative in Ireland, circa 500-600 CE.

The narrative itself was written immediately after this decision was made. I had started research in late August; this was in mid-October, after I had gotten through all of my planned materials. I finalized the text of the narrative, and gained some inspiration for the visuals in the process. Initially, the pages would have a rigid, rectangular layout, symbolizing authority and order, but would shift to more organic, entangled forms after the monk's decision to run away with his masterpiece.

The idea took root immediately, but before I could create thumbnails for the pages, I had to find visual references. My initial research materials primarily informed me about the calligraphic scripts of medieval Europe throughout the centuries, and the circumstances under which manuscripts were produced, as well as some insight on the process. They provided little to no reference for the illumination style of the period, or the way that manuscript pages were usually laid out. However, I knew of the Book of Kells, and, through the Trinity College Dublin's digital collection, was able to access high-quality scans of each page online.

The Book of Kells' precise origins are unknown; historians are unsure exactly whom to ascribe credit to or where they worked, and its exact date of creation cannot yet be placed, though it's likely to have been written around the beginning of the ninth century (Drogin 40). It is over six hundred pages long, most of which are only text: lines of perfectly spaced Majuscule in faded, warm-toned ink. Interspersed are a few full pages of illumination, covered in intricate designs and drawings of holy figures. Looking through it gave me much-needed insight into the illustration style of the period. I decided that, as the Book of Kells had a reputation for being a masterpiece of a manuscript, and since it contained elements of script, illustration, and illumination, I would use it as the main reference for my own work.

One model wasn't thorough enough, however. I tracked down several other manuscripts from early medieval Ireland to use as reference. One such manuscript was the Cathach of Colum Cille, also known as the Psalter of St. Columba. The Cathach, one of Ireland's oldest surviving manuscripts, was written at the end of the sixth century (Ó Néill). Its pages were disintegrated at the edges, but its text was clear, written in a round, even Insular script. It contained a few

I studied these manuscripts to get a feel of how I would be structuring my own pages, and how to break that structure meaningfully. While the Book of Kells was my best resource for illustration and illumination, the majority of its pages contained only text, which was arranged in even rows that stretched perfectly from margin to margin. A contemporary designer might call it “justified text,” but as the Book of Kells was made without a printing press, the term seems inapplicable.

I then began drafting thumbnails for each page. The very first page of the narrative would be directly referenced from the Book of Kells; to be exact, its inspiration was the verso of folio

Sketch 1 (Top Left): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "copy copy not bad", "5", "WHEN I AM FINISHED AND MY MASTERPIECE IS COMPLETE, IT WILL DISAPPEAR INTO THE MONASTERY'S LIBRARY.", "I MAY LOOK AT IT, AND HOLD IT, BUT I AM NOT ALLOWED TO TAKE IT OUTSIDE THE MONASTERY.", "I CANNOT EVEN CALL IT MINE." An illustration of a person in a library is shown.

Sketch 2 (Top Right): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "6", "REMOVE BORDER OR THIN IT", "LARGE FONT IT WITHIN - FANCY PRECISION", "ERRORS IN THE TEXT - NO SCANS ON THE YELLOW -", "I HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL -", "I GOT THIS MESSAGE, THOUGH THE MONASTERY IS DISPLEASANT WITH ME - I HAVE TAKEN INTEREST WITH THE NEW ILLUSTRATIONS, STRAYING FROM THE STYLE OF MY MASTERPIECE -", "THE LOVE CREATES AND TO EMULATE HIM THROUGH SOME CONTRADICTION OF ORIGINALITY IS AIN TO PERSUASION." An illustration of a person is shown.

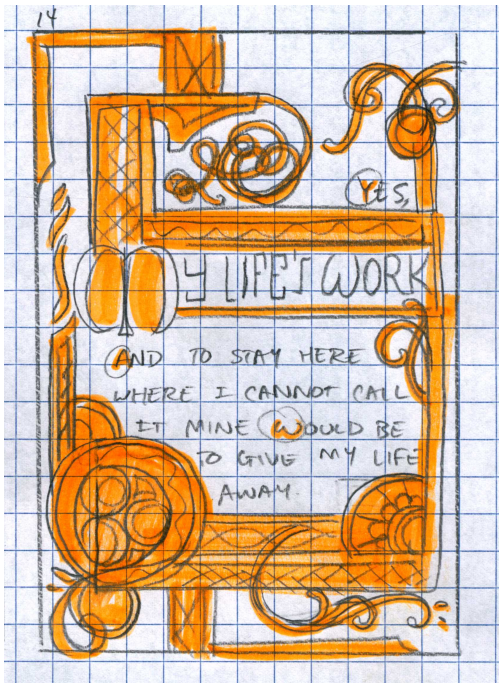
Sketch 3 (Middle Left): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "7", "TAKE PRIDE AND PLEASURE IN MY LIFE - THE RIGHT AND THE KNOWING, TELLING ME NOT TO LET MY HAND OR MY MIND STRAY FROM MY TASK -", "I AM HERE, FINISHED -", "HERE ARE A DOZEN NEW PAGES LEFT - I HAVE THIS GREAT PRIZE TO CREATE THE" An illustration of a person is shown.

Sketch 4 (Middle Right): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "8", "X lots of text - may have to become 2 pages", "HAVE RAVED THE PAGES BUT I CAN DOUBT THE DYNAMICS.", "HAVE JOKED THE LETTERS TO COVER PAGE WILL BEAT" An illustration of a person is shown.

Sketch 5 (Bottom Left): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "9", "I AM HERE, FINISHED -", "HERE ARE A DOZEN NEW PAGES LEFT - I HAVE THIS GREAT PRIZE TO CREATE THE" An illustration of a person is shown.

Sketch 6 (Bottom Right): A text block with a decorative border. Notes include: "10", "LARGE FONT IT WITHIN - FANCY PRECISION", "ERRORS IN THE TEXT - NO SCANS ON THE YELLOW -", "I HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL -", "I GOT THIS MESSAGE, THOUGH THE MONASTERY IS DISPLEASANT WITH ME - I HAVE TAKEN INTEREST WITH THE NEW ILLUSTRATIONS, STRAYING FROM THE STYLE OF MY MASTERPIECE -", "THE LOVE CREATES AND TO EMULATE HIM THROUGH SOME CONTRADICTION OF ORIGINALITY IS AIN TO PERSUASION." An illustration of a person is shown.

As the scribe's disobedient thoughts become more and more apparent, parts of the structure become more organic, more chaotic; columns begin to bleed off the page, and straight lines warp into curves.



Thumbnail for page 14, graphite and ink on paper.
2.5 x 4.25 inches. October 23, 2024.

Finally, as the monk has the revelation that his art is his life, and when he decides to go through with the theft, organic forms take over, curling across the pages and entwining with the rectangular base structures, which are no longer arranged in a perfect grid but overlap, misalign, and extend off the pages. As the monk's willingness to remain obedient shifts, flexes, and finally breaks, the art follows suit.

Medium also had to be decided as I drew up the thumbnails. What I knew for certain was that I would be creating the artifact digitally - following the medieval process as closely as I could, but still digitally. This project was designed to use a historical lens to reflect the concerns of a contemporary artist, and I felt that using contemporary tools - namely, a tracking tablet and Clip Studio Paint Pro - would contribute to its message. It would point out to the audience that, though two artists might use different tools and come

from vastly different backgrounds, their process of creating art is the same. It would demonstrate what they have in common - the issue of labor.

However, the medium of delivery for the final product was something I had neglected to fully consider. I had begun my research with the vague notion of printing out the pages and hanging them up as one would hang a series of paintings, but I quickly came to feel that the idea was weak, and contributed very little to the meaning of the project itself. Some ways through my period of research, my advisor suggested using partial projections on top of those printed pages.

At first, I enjoyed this idea, and had hoped to engage with it. Projections being a light-based medium, they would play off of the word "illuminated"; in addition, light has holy connotations, and this work has religious overtones. With those projections, I would be periodically overlaying illustrations on top of each printed page: as the audience watched, a secret inner thought, a hidden meaning, would appear with the light, and then disappear again.

Unfortunately, I was forced to scrap this concept. It would mean contributing even more time to this project, time that I did not have, since illuminating a manuscript on my own was already complicated enough. A printed medium would have to speak for itself; the question, then, was of display.

In early December, a member of the graphic design faculty suggested printing only one page and displaying it behind glass, as though it were precious, and fully projecting the rest of the pages in sequence behind it. I didn't dislike this idea, but there were issues with the full projections that would have to be resolved. If an audience member walked in during the middle

of the sequence, they would have to wait for it to finish before it began again, spoiling the narrative and missing the context that the beginning would provide. Creating controls that the audience could use to flip through the pages was a possibility, but it would require the use of code, in which I am not fluent. I doubted that, logistically, I would be able to pull it off.

Another faculty member suggested printing and binding the whole project as a book, but I had already considered this. Because of the brevity of the narrative, it would have the feel of a zine as opposed to a book, which I felt would cheapen the intended effect - a book has weight to it, but a zine or a pamphlet is less tangible. I feared that this intangibility might carry over to the audience's perception of the intense labor that went into producing it.

It wasn't until late December that an acquaintance outside the design department gave me the winning suggestion. He proposed hanging the pages up along a wire, as though wet ink was drying, thereby invoking the process of creating art and pointing the audience, once again, toward themes of labor. Beneath the "drying" pages, I could set up a display of tools, further indicating the presence of a maker, an artist.

While the issue of medium was cooking on the back-burner, I started on character designs after completing my thumbnails, in late October. My reference manuscripts, especially the Book of Kells, contained a great deal of religious figures in the illuminations, primarily angels and members of the Holy Trinity. However, there are also figures dressed in plainer clothes and lacking haloes. I based the monk's design off of these figures: a simple robe, a wrap around the shoulders, shoulder-length hair, and a beard. Few of my reference figures had shoes; I left the monk barefoot.

The abbot and the armarius, who feature in the narrative, also received simple robes and wraps, but their designs were meant to signify a higher rank than the monk's. Both had shoes, for one thing, and both wore simple jewelry - the abbot, a gold earring; the armarius, a brooch pinned to his wrap. While the monk was drawn mainly with organic lines, the abbot and armarius were made to look more rectilinear, with barely any curves to their silhouettes. In addition, their hands were always idle, marking them as the masters, not the servants.

Color played a large role in character design as well. Blue, I decided, would represent power, status, and authority, since it was historically an expensive pigment (Alexander 40). The antithesis of that would be red, as its warmth contrasts blue's cold. Therefore, red would represent servitude, but also creativity, as the servants - the scribes in the monastery - did the work of hand-lettering and illuminating books. Oranges and yellows, also being warm, would imply servitude as well; green would ally with blue, and denote power. Thus, the monk's robes were colored in dull yellows and reds; the abbot's, the armarius's, and God's were to be rich, saturated cool colors.

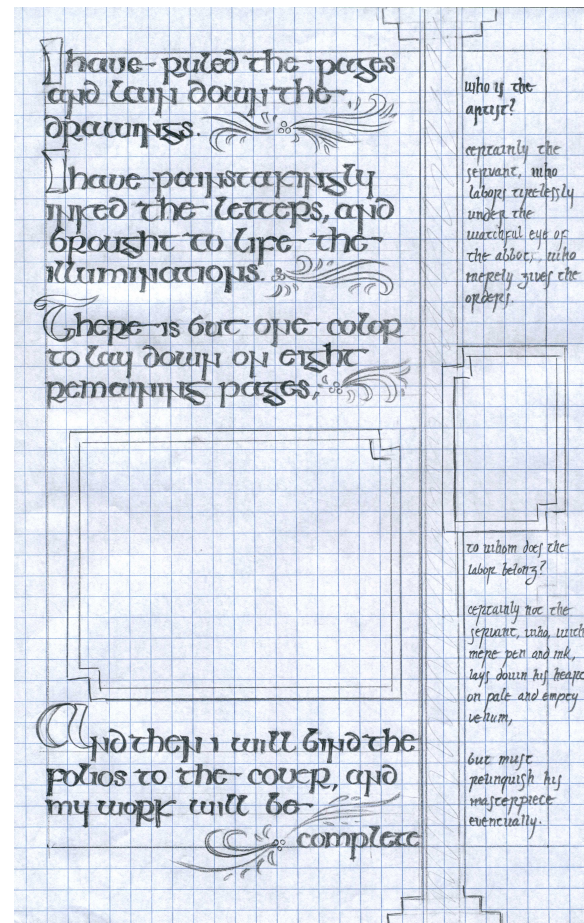
From there, I eased myself into preparations for making the manuscript: illustrations with digital brushes to see which looked best; determining how to texture digital work to give it the appearance of parchment and gold leaf; and practicing my Insular scripts, which I had been

doing on and off all semester, referencing the Book of Kells and one of my research materials, Marc Drogin's *Medieval Calligraphy: Its History and Technique*. It was while testing brushes for the illustrations that I realized that I wouldn't have the time to hand-draw every single element, and that, for the repeating patterns in the borders, I would have to copy and paste individual elements, which would still be hand-drawn to start, to form those patterns.

This realization was a disappointment, as I had been hoping to avoid taking shortcuts in the name of historical accuracy. It would mean distancing myself from the labor of a sixth-century monk, weakening the connection between artists across time. The unfortunate fact of the matter, however, was that my other option was to hand-draw every detail, for which I simply did not have enough time in my budget. I decided I'd have to make the sacrifice, no matter how upsetting.

In mid-November, I took the first steps toward making the actual manuscript: what I had dubbed "scale tests." I had decided on a page size of seven inches wide and eleven inches tall. The Stowe Missal was 5.6 x 4.5 inches per page (Ó Floinn); the Cathach, 7.5 x 10.6 inches (Ó Néill); and the Book of Kells, 13 x 10 inches ("Book of Kells"). Given that my manuscript was supposed to be a masterpiece, I decided to lean towards the larger side.

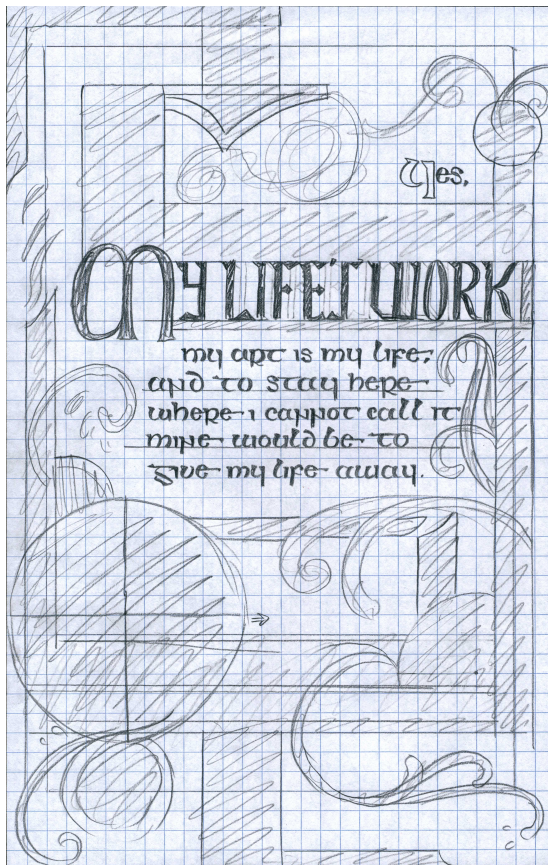
I selected the thumbnail for page eight of my narrative, which was slated to have the most text out of every page, and sketched it to scale on graph paper, writing out the text in the Insular scripts. My first attempt resulted in a hastily improvised trimming of the copy text, which would not have fit otherwise. As it was, the reduced text barely fit at all. This did not bode well for the other pages, so I performed a second test, with a few edits to the layout - I shrunk the Majuscule text slightly, decreased the margin space on the top and sides by a quarter inch, and decreased the space between lines of text. This attempt, still with the edited-down text, had much more space to breathe: enough space for me to either return the copy text to its original, or add two panels of illustration. I opted for the latter.



Second "scale test" for page eight, graphite on paper. 7 x 11 inches. November 13, 2024.

Issues aside, it was excellent practice for writing in both scripts, and it brought to my attention that I might have to edit some of the letterforms so that my writing would be legible to a modern audience. Majuscule “g”s and “y”s in particular are difficult for contemporary readers to recognize. My next step was to begin experimenting with digital calligraphy brushes. This process notified me in advance that digital calligraphy would feel entirely different from what I had been doing as practice, which was to form the contrasting stroke width of Insular letters by outlining the shapes and coloring them in with ballpoint pen or pencil. Writing text with digital calligraphy brushes, which had been designed to emulate chisel-tipped tools and quill pens, would mean that the contrasting stroke width came from pen pressure and the angle at which the tool was held. No matter; I would adapt when the time came.

January of 2025 was when I began making the actual manuscript. The first step was to create scale tests for each page, to ensure that all text would fit and to catch any hiccups in page layout before I got going. Each page took about forty-five minutes or so, amounting to twelve



“Scale test” for page fourteen, graphite on paper. 7 x 11 inches. January 17, 2025.

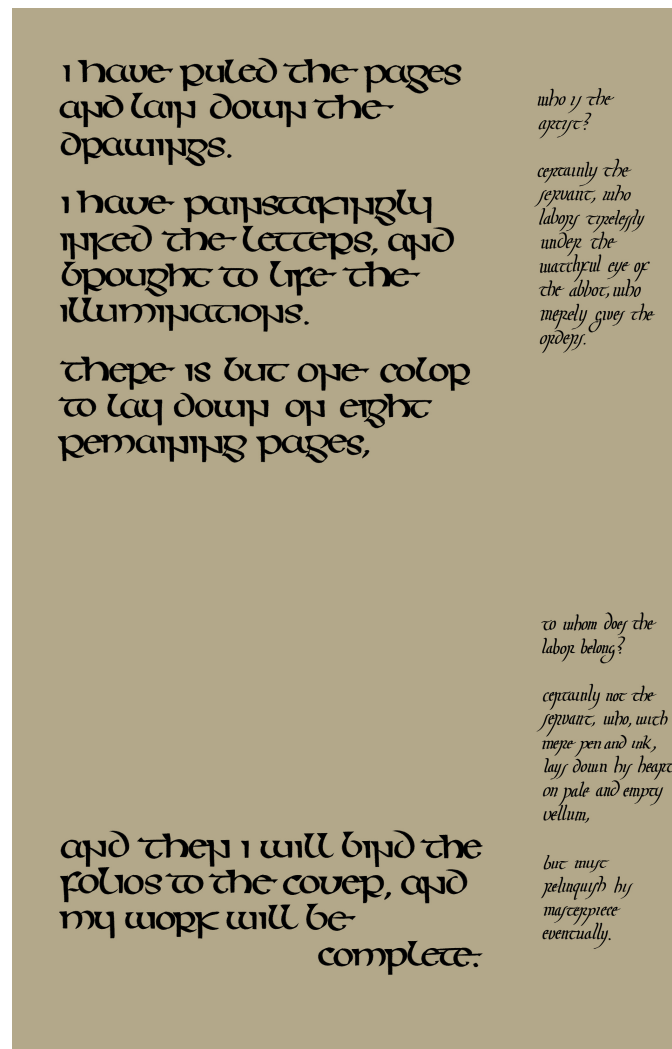
hours total. Everything went smoothly, and it meant that I got even more practice with forming both scripts, though I will admit I took much more care in writing the Majuscule. Historically, the Minuscule text developed in response to the incredible amount of time and care that it took to write the ornate Majuscule; one had to be slow and steady, and the scribes found themselves wanting a script that was faster and more convenient to write (Drogin 40). Thus, Insular Minuscule arose.

In between the scale tests and the digital calligraphy, I had a friend in the Creative Writing department test-read the narrative. While doing the scale tests, I had become increasingly worried about the time it would take to bring this project to life, and tried to ask as subtly as I could if she thought any material could or should be cut. She assured me that the narrative was cohesive and nothing needed to be eliminated, so I forged ahead with all seventeen pages.

Late January through mid-February was devoted to digital calligraphy. My posture worsened from constantly hunching over my tablet, and my hand cramped from putting just the right amount of pressure on the stylus. It took me several tries to find the right brush size and pen angle for both the Minuscule and Majuscule text, and I had to

redo several pages in the beginning. I had also been hasty with my Minusculer in the scale tests, and ironically, the lack of practice meant that the Minusculer took me longer than the Majusculer did: I would often have to spend several minutes redoing one letterform, over and over, until I got it right.

In addition to the above issues, to get my lines even and to keep the size of all scripts consistent, I digitally scanned each scale test, which had all been done on graph paper to help me



Calligraphy for page eight, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels.
February 2, 2025.

measure. Once I had the graph paper digitized, I used it as a reference for the layout, proportions, and text placement of each digital file. I had to re-trace the lines for every page, and it was painstaking.

Another graphic design student, at one point, asked me why I hadn't turned my handwriting into a font and saved myself the trouble. "Because the trouble is the point," I had told him. It was at this stage in the process, because of the pains I had taken to make my calligraphy perfect, and because of how arduous the task was, that I felt closest to the monks of medieval Ireland. The experience was completely new to me, and I was transformed by it.

I was following the medieval process of making a manuscript. To simplify, the scribes would first "rule" the pages, sketching the planned layout in a dry medium that wouldn't show beneath ink; I had translated that aspect of the process into thumbnails and scale tests. Then the text would be inked, and the illuminations and illustrations would follow. Color would be added last. The monks would lay down one color down across all the

pages that made up a folio, before moving on to the next shade (Alexander 40-41).

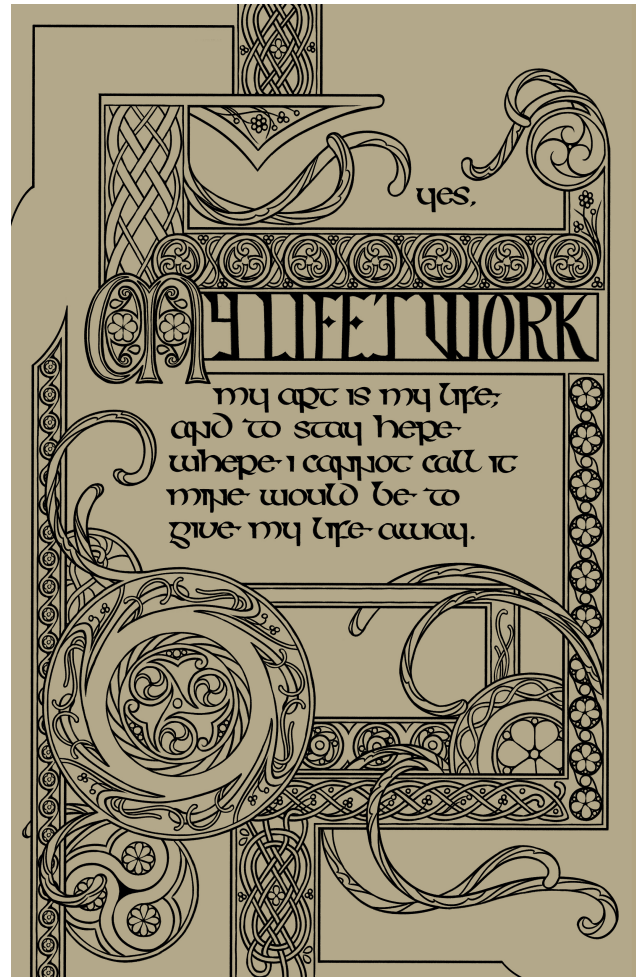
It had taken me twenty hours to hand-letter the calligraphy on all of my pages. Once finished, I estimated that I would need a little more than that for the illuminating process; I was unfortunately surprised by the fact that it took over fifty hours. Irish manuscripts, especially the Book of Kells, are notable for their intricate pattern-work; even though I had conceded the use of

copy-paste shortcuts to create repeating elements, the details in the borders took up the majority of the time I devoted to each page. As the illuminations on later pages trended toward organic, asymmetrical details, the amount of material that I had to hand-draw only increased.

It was hard work, it wore me out completely, and it was immensely satisfying. Despite the shortcuts I had taken, I could still feel the physical and mental effects of my labor, I could see the results in front of me, and I had still followed the historical process, albeit with modern tools. I wondered briefly what the scribes of sixth-century Ireland would think of the copy-paste tool: would they scoff at it, insisting that the labor was what made the art, and that taking shortcuts delegitimized a work? Or would they marvel at how much simpler it made the process, and take advantage of it themselves?

It was an interesting thought, and it caused me to reexamine my own work and consider the relationship between art and labor in a new light. Should artists have to suffer in order to create - should we have to sacrifice all of our free time for our work? Should it make us sweat? Why would that make it any more valuable? On the other hand, isn't the process, however grueling, what makes creation so satisfying? Is that not the reason why we're so proud of our work - not just because of its beauty, but because of the labor and skill we pour into it?

During the process of making, I never came up with the answers to these questions. I finished illustrating in the last week of March. Time was short, and I had yet to begin coloring. Ever since I had finalized the character designs and assigned meaning to color, I had planned to keep the pages toward the beginning leaning cool-toned, and the pages after the monk's revelation leaning warm, again reinforcing the monk shifting from being subservient to authority to being fully in control of himself and his own work. However, I had no specific vision for each page in mind, and could not afford to budget time for preliminary color thumbnails.



Calligraphy and linework for page fourteen, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. March 15, 2025.

As consequence, I abandoned the medieval process of filling in one color at a time across all pages, and instead colored each page fully before moving on to the next one. In order to see which colors worked where for each layout, I would have to see them all next to each other at once. This is perhaps the only real qualm I still have with myself, that I chose to diverge from a process that, up until the coloring phase, I had been sharing to the best of my ability with the artists that came before me. Again, I wondered: how would the scribes do it, if they were in my shoes?

I realized what I was really asking myself. Would the scribes forgive me, if they knew what I was doing and what choices I was making? This was a ridiculous question, and one that I resolved immediately: it did not matter. I was the artist; this was my work. The entire point that I had been arguing with this project was that artists should be able to decide what they create and how they go about it.

Miraculously, I finished the coloring by mid-April; it took just over twenty-six hours. I had done it; the manuscript was complete. An overwhelming sense of pride washed over me. I would like to pull a quote from the narrative itself: “What separates me from my art?” The answer, I felt in that moment, was nothing. This project, this work on which I had spent over one hundred hours creating, was an extension of myself, of my beliefs, my values, but also my time, labor, and the skills in illustration and storytelling that I have spent my life pursuing.

There was a part of me which wanted to call the finished product a masterpiece; another part of me hesitated. “Masterpiece” implied a finality, as though it were the best piece of art I would ever make - my peak. I would hate for that to be the case. This project is far from perfect; already I can think of a dozen ways I could improve it, if only I had the time. Perhaps it is a masterpiece, but if it is, it’s only one of many.

Regardless, there was still the matter of display. I spent the second half of April collecting materials for the exhibition: among them, wire and pins to hang the printed pages from, battery-powered candles for atmosphere, and gold foil. I also obtained a pair of stiff quill feathers about a foot long, and metal nibs for calligraphy pens; by cutting into the shaft of the feathers and cramming the nibs into the empty space, I was able to create my own quill pens.

I also had to deal with the matter of paper. Parchment was the primary writing surface during the early medieval period, as different types of animal skins provided lots of variation in color and texture, and because it was very receptive to ink (Alexander 35). It is quite possible to use real parchment with certain types of modern printers, but such specialized facilities were not available to me for this project. I had known that from the beginning, and had planned on using paper to mimic parchment instead. I had in mind something of a yellowish color, pale enough not to disrupt the colors I would be using, but not pale enough to be jarring to an audience expecting something that looked “old.” Luckily, a nearby art supply store carried a promising option, which bore laser-printed ink well and had an ideal color and weight to it.

The paper was sold in sheets of 19 x 25 inches, and I had to trim it down to 8.5 x 11 so that the printers available to me would be able to handle it. It was not the same as treating animal skin, of course, but the process of preparing the surface upon which art would be displayed was yet another common thread between myself and a medieval scribe. I appreciated being able to share the process through centuries once again; though I had forgiven myself for diverging from it while laying down color, I had still been a touch disappointed. Preparing the paper helped to mitigate that disappointment.

Once printed, the ink shone with a slight glossiness, and the digital gold texturing I had done lacked the metallic shine of real gold leaf. However, every other aspect was perfect, in my eyes. Holding a printed copy of this project - the physical manifestation of several months' worth of toil - filled me with pride. My labor was now tangible. Like my main character, I, too, would have given up everything I know in order to keep my claim over what I had made, to keep that connection between myself and my work.

On the first Friday in May, I carried my materials into the Visual Arts building and procured a small pedestal for the display. In two rows, I hammered four small hooks into the wall, each pair spanning about six feet of horizontal space. From the hooks, I strung my wire; it was not gold, but looked similar enough. It was certainly not period-accurate, but I had selected it because it called to mind something precious, as a masterpiece is precious.

Each length of wire was long enough to clip eight pages onto, totaling at sixteen pages hanging up to "dry." The final page, which depicts the monk happily scribing at his desk, I placed upon the pedestal, and surrounded it with tools: the two quill pens, five small glass jars of ink, a sixth jar containing scraps of gold foil, and three electric candles. As a final touch, I scattered some extra gold foil across the pedestal, and clipped a coil of wire to the empty space after page sixteen. It referenced the post-revelation curlicues that, in my illustrations, represent the monk's ownership of his work and his mission to create art for himself.

I took several dozen photographs. I was overwhelmed with pride and relief; I could barely bring myself to leave the building.

The next day, I visited the display to check on the candle batteries. One had already died, but I left it alone, for one reason: there was currently someone reading my work. I tried not to stare at them as I walked past my installation. I never saw their face, but from what I could tell, they were engrossed in the narrative, standing close to the wall in order to read each page. I left the building having accomplished nothing, but feeling very pleased by the solemn attention that a stranger had given my art.

Since then, I have received several comments from friends and acquaintances who have seen my installation; all of their responses have been overwhelmingly positive. I have only seen one person react to it in person: my test reader. She had, of course, read the narrative back in January, but took the time to do so again, giving each page careful consideration. When she had finished, she turned to me and expressed her admiration for the illustrative details she had

noticed: the gradual shifting of page layouts, the angel reflecting the monk's story at pivotal moments, and the significance of organic versus rectilinear shapes.

I was glad to hear that my conceptual decisions had been noticed, appreciated, and considered narratively enriching. This past semester of creating my own manuscript has been some of the most difficult and demanding work I have ever completed, and throughout the process, I often wondered if the end result would actually be worth all of the effort that I was putting in. Having other people express their appreciation for what I worked so hard to create has been fulfilling, to say the least.

However, external validation is not what truly made me feel that yes, my immense effort was worth it. The story that I told spoke of ownership of one's work and the rejection of blind obedience, as well as themes of the labor and process of making art, which I had experienced for myself as a novice illuminator. This project, because of that labor and that process, was an experience unlike any other. I had gone to a great deal of trouble to pull it off, but again, the trouble was the point. It connected me to the scribes whose process and style I had taken pains to emulate, and it resulted in a visually and narratively engaging artifact.

Beyond that, however, it reinforced in my mind the value of being one's own master. I had been allowed full creative control of this project, and was able to execute my vision in a way that spoke to me. I could take pride in both the labor and the end result, and both informed my identity as an artist and storyteller. Art is labor, and for artists, the satisfaction and the freedom of performing labor for oneself cannot be overstated.



Master(piece), page 1, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. Finished March 24, 2025.





my brotheys and i spend
long houys laboring
in the scriptorium.

the abbot and the
armarius allow us to
copy texts from older
books, whose fragile
pages threaten to
disintegrate under
the slightest touch.

new books are needed
to preserve and spread
the word of the Lord.

*and because the
abbot seeks to
improve his
reputation.*



our monastery is quite fine, and
is known for the beauty of
its books.

*the abbot does none of the work,
yet claims the credit due to others.*

I am to copy
an entire
book on my
own, as I have
a steady hand
and a keen
eye.

*my work is
the envy of
all my brothers
in the scriptorium.*



I have been given a year,
of which one week remains.



when i am finished and my
work is deemed satisfactory,
it will disappear into the
monastery's library.

i may look at it, and hold
it, and read the words so
carefully penned in my own
hand, but i will not be
allowed to take it outside
the monastery.

i myself am not allowed out.

i will not even
be able to
call it mine.



*my labor,
my hand,
my time.*

*my squinting eyes,
my ink-stained fingers.*



what separates me from my art?

all text must be copied
with exacting precision.
no errors in the lettering,
no words forgotten.

i have been successful by
this measure, though the
archbishop is displeased with
my illustrations; i admit,
they stray from the style
of my model.

the Lord our God is the
sole Creator, and to
emulate Him through some
contrivance of originality
is akin to blasphemy.



someone long ago had
to create the first
version of the manuscript
that i now copy.

if such creation is blasphemy,
why do i sit here in a
holy place and use it as a model?

i take pride and
pleasure in my work.

the abbot and the
apothecary instruct
me not to let my
hand or my mind
stray from my task.



my hand, this past year, has
been steady.

*only the lord knows how far
my mind wanders.*

i have taken great pains to
create this

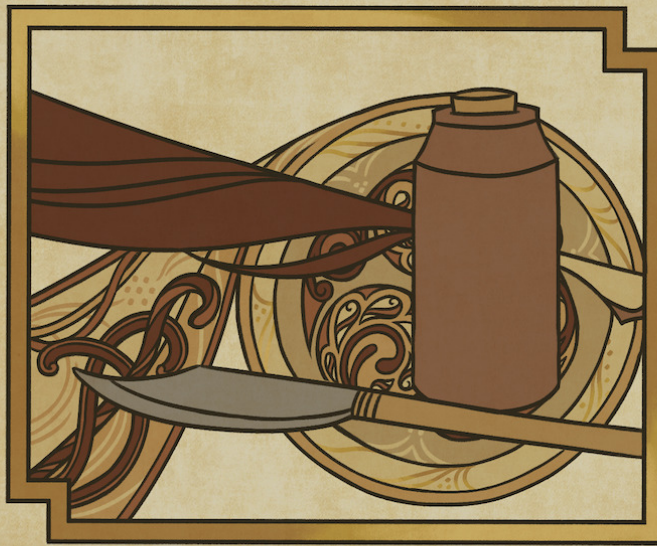
MASTERPIECE

*perhaps i am over-proud,
as a simple monk should not be,
but i consider it a masterpiece.*

i have ruled the pages
and laid down the
drawings.

i have painstakingly
inked the letters, and
brought to life the
illuminations.

there is but one color
to lay down on eight
remaining pages,



and then i will bind
the folios to the cover,
and my work will be
complete.

*who is the
artist?*

*certainly the
servant, who
labors tirelessly
under the
watchful eye of
the abbot, who
merely gives the
orders.*



*to whom does the
labor belong?*

*certainly not the
servant, who, with
mere pen and ink,
lays down his heart
on pale and empty
vellum,*

*but must
relinquish his
masterpiece
eventually.*

i am but a seruant, and
i obey my superiours.

*out of love
for my craft.*

i do my duty.

for my masterpiece.

what is asked of me
shall be fulfilled
without complaint.



*giving up my work will feel like
ripping my heart out of my chest.*



are all artists fated to a life
of servitude?

*will my hard work
always be without reward?*

The satisfaction of a job well
done should be enough to sate
a man.

*it is not. i want to choose
what labor i perform,
and when, and for whom.*



GOD IS THE CREATOR

His wish is my command, and
he wishes to create alone;
unchallenged.



*i care little for god's wishes.
he has an eternity
for his masterpieces.*

i have one week.

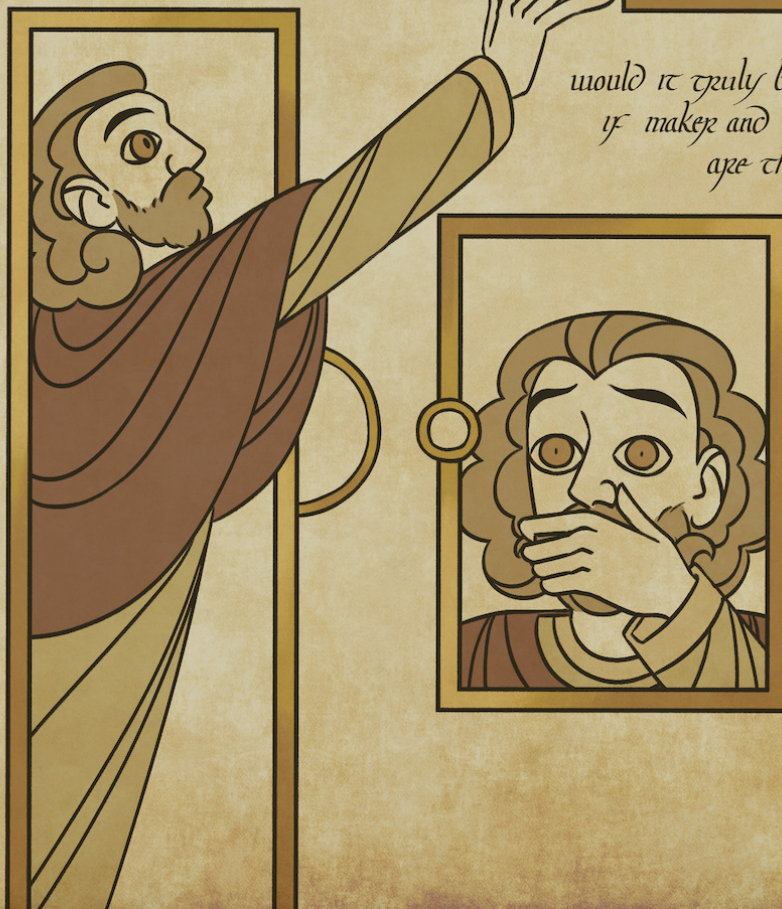


a book is a valuable
thing: time, skill, and
effort made physical.

BEAUTIFUL MANIFEST

theft of a manuscript
is a terrible crime.

would it truly be theft
if maker and burglar
are the same?



a faithful seruant does
not question his orders.
duty must come before
desire.

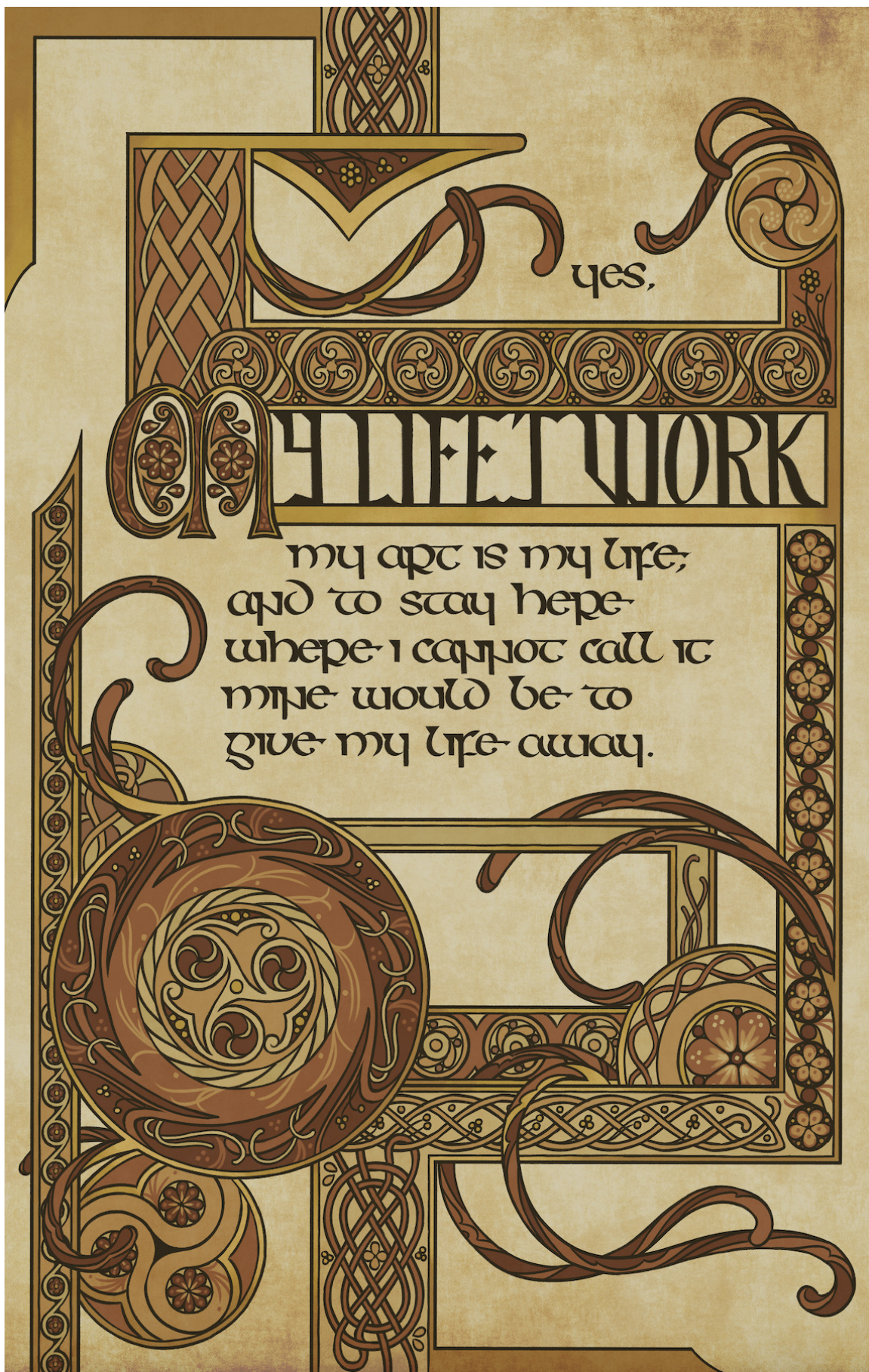
i have tried to be cautious
of sin. to fall outside the
good graces of the abbot,
and of God, would yield
disastrous consequences.



*which do i value more,
my obedience
or my life's work?*



Master(piece), page 13, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. Finished April 4, 2025.





Master(piece), page 15, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. Finished April 6, 2025.



Master(piece), page 16, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. Finished April 12, 2025.



Master(piece), page 17, digital media. 3300 x 5100 pixels. Finished April 13, 2025.

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