Puzzling it Out: One Woman's Quest to Master Puzzle Initials

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I use the term "puzzle initial" to refer to any illuminated capital which is formed by two or more separate pieces (often, but not always, of two different colors) which interlock with each other, with a small white space between the pieces. These initials are often, but, again, not always, decorated with penwork flourishes. Puzzle initials can be found across a wide range of times and places, from 12th C England (Figure 3) to 16th C Italy (Figure 2), and many places and times in between.

Trinite Ducalon introduced me to puzzle initials, and I found them fascinating in both their simplicity and complexity. For 2–3 years now I've worked on polishing my skills at copying them, and I recently indexed the puzzle initials that are available in the British Library online: `http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/candi/puzzleinitials.html`. These notes are some of the things that I've learned.

A disclaimer before we go further: I am a copyist, not an artist, in that whenever I try to make something up out of the blue, it neither looks right, compositionally, nor turns out how I wanted, executionally. So the following is geared towards techniques for copying extant puzzle initials, *not* for creating new ones in a vacuum.

1 Getting started

Once you've chosen your initial, block out a rectangle that is the size of the letter, including the penwork flourishes, and then pencil in side and top borders to give space for further flourishes.

1.1 Pallette

Most puzzle initials are done in a two-toned pallette of red and blue. I usually use vermillion and ultramarine, straight from the tube, but sometimes substituting carmine reasonable, and (as can be seen in the bottom initial of Figure 4) sometimes lightening the ultramarine with some white is also.

Green and purple are also used, but much less frequently, and more often as a third color complementing red and blue than substituting for one of them (though you can find red and green combinations, without any blue). Occasionally, you'll even see ones where one of the substantive pieces has been done in gold (for example, BL MS Royal 17 F III f. 266v)—very pretty!

Because the red/blue pallette is so predominant, I recommend being hesitant against deviating from it too much (unless your exemplar does).

1.2 Tools

The flourishes on puzzle initials are often done with penwork, and the initials themselves can be likewise. The type of nib that I use for puzzle initials with a pen is pictured in Figure 1. But despite the name "penwork", I often find that I have better results if I use a paintbrush instead of a pen. My favorite is my 310-000 Vincent Zuiver Roodmarter.

1.3 Media

Following the two choices of tools, there are of course two choices of media, paint and ink. For the most part, if you're using a pen it makes sense to use ink, and if you're using a paintbrush, it makes sense to use paint, but in fact, you can mix and match. Paint can be thinned down sufficiently to be used with

Figure 1: An example pen for penwork

a pen, and you can dip a paintbrush into ink, though of all the combinations of media and tools, this is the one I find works the worst. However, you should experiment with all combinations until you find the one that's right for you. My recommendation, though, is to do each letter uniformly; if you paint one of the colors, paint them all (though there's nothing wrong with then using the pen for the flourishes). Combining paint and pen in the same initial can result in a non-uniform look.

2 It's all about shape. It's all about whitespace.

The two most important things for getting a puzzle initial to look "right" is correct shape, and proper balance between color and whitespace. Medieval capitals have a very distinctive shape of their own, and mimicing this shape is important to making sure that the overall affect looks medieval. In Figures 4 and 12, you can see two examples where I *didn't* get the shape of the letter right, and the results are both strange looking. In the top B, the bulges of the B are distorted and not properly round. In the A, the aspect ratio between height and width is wrong.

Getting the shape of the letter wrong will upset the balance between color and whitespace, which generally manifests in three ways: (i) the pieces which form the letter are of roughly equal weight, (ii) none of them have too much area that is unbroken solid color, and (iii) the fill pattern is evenly divided between white and color. Again, Figure 4 shows an example of how not balancing the colored parts of the letter properly makes things look funny. In the top B, the red portion is too large. In the bottom B, which was done 2–3 years later, the blue is larger than it could be, but the overall proportions are better.

If the shape of the letter isn't right, the rest of the letter is going to be thrown off; the closer you can stay to the shape of the letter you're copying, the closer you can keep the space that needs to be filled with a fill pattern, which means more copying and less extrapolating (see caveat above!). What I have found is that it is the *inside* dimension that is important, especially with round letters such as B, C, D, T, U. The inside shape of the bottom B of Figure 4 matches the inside shape of the B in the center image much better than the one on top does. So how do you compensate for this? Two tricks I've found useful: Trace the inner dimension of the initial! This will help you get both the right shape and the right size, and once you have the inside boundary, you can build the pieces up from there to the outside. I find this much easier than drawing the outside of the initial and then trying to build the pieces inwards. Also, keep reminding yourself that the width of a single brushstroke is bigger than you think, even if you're using a very thing brush. When building the puzzle pieces, start with a single stroke around the outline, and then build the pieces from there. For example, in Figure 6, while blue in my C (right) is pretty close to correct, the red ended up too wide.

The use of whitespace is most important when it comes to the fill patterns. It is very easy to overuse the color and the resulting imbalance between color and white space is extremely jarring. I discovered this with the first initial I tried, and you can compare the two U's in Figure 5; there is far, far too much red in my version. I have found that compensating for this is easier with some fill patterns than for others. For example, the fill pattern in Figure 7 is mostly spirals, and the balance here I think is good (in fact, this is one of my favorites that I've done). But the foliate fill patterns like in Figure 5 I find much more difficult. In order to do passable foliate fill patterns, I need to change the way I look at the exemplar and how I paint it: Even though it is the color that I am painting, it is the white that I need to be looking at. Instead of looking at where the color is in the image and trying to reproduce it, look at where the whitespace is, and try to outline around it. In many cases, you'll find that the outlines of two whitespaces are shared, and this is what helps balance the color and the white so that the fill pattern ends up being roughly shared between the two.

3 Fill patterns

Early puzzle initials tend to be just that: two or more pieces which interlock to form an initial, without any further flourishes, such as can be found in Figure 8. However, in later manuscripts, the spaces enclosed by the initial were often filled with various patterns. These fill patterns range from being quite open and bare in the earlier period (cf. Figure 9) to quite dense in the later period (cf. Figure 10; BL MS Harley 4893, f. 6; BL MS Sloane 3557, f. 5). There are a number of different types of fill patterns, each of which have their own variations. Here are a few of the more common ones, along with helpful hints. Note that these categories are not exclusive, and they are completely of my own making; I have grouped them together in this way due to the differing techniques that I use in making them.

3.1 Spiral

Since the inner section of many letters is circular, spiral fill patterns are common; they are made up mostly of concentrinc or spiralling circles, often decorated with dots or smaller circles in a contrast color (e.g., BL MS Arundel 68 f. 143v). A very nice example of a simple spiral fill can be seen in Figure 11. Other examples can be found in these BL MSs: Egerton 1117, f .1, Royal 19 B XVI f. 98v, Sloane 1977 ff. 9v–10, Sloane 3319 f. 1, and Figure 10.

3.2 Foliate

Foliate fills come in three main types: round leaves on the ends of long stalks (Figure 12, Figure 13), trefoils (Figure 14), and leafy leaves (Figure 6). Other round leaves on stalks can be found in BL MS Burney 212, f. 14; Sloane 1936, f. 1. Other trefoils can be found in BL MS Egerton 871, f. 284v. Other leafy leaves can be found in BL MS Harley 2330, f. 1; Harley 2398, f. 73; Harley 2421, f. 1; Lansdowne 398, f. 3; Lansdowne 416, f. 4; Royal 13 B VI, f. 30v.

3.3 Crosshatching

Crosshatching was often used to fill in the backgrounds in a dense, color-rich pattern. See, e.g., Figures 6 and 14.

3.4 Zoomorphic

Finally, you'll also very occasionally find fill patterns that use zoomorphic creatures, such as in Figure 15, but these are quite rare.

4 Figures

All images here are either taken from the British Library's website or are photographs or scans of my own work.
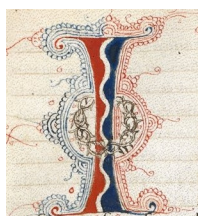

Figure 2: BL MS Harley 3413, fol. 83v

Figure 3: BL MS Harley 863, fol. 8

Figure 4: BL MS Arundel 325, fol. 36 (center)

Figure 5: BL MS Burney 212, fol. 1 (right)

Figure 6: BL MS Harley 666, fol. 30
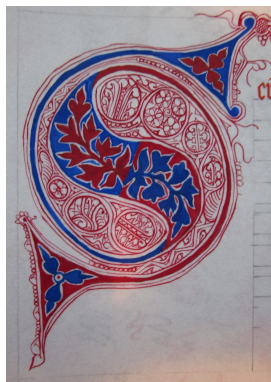

Figure 7:

Figure 8: BL MS Arundel 446, fol. 1

Figure 9: BL MS Arundel 185, fol. 1

Figure 10: BL MS Burney 252, f. 4v

Figure 11: BL MS Arundel 161
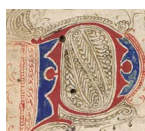

Figure 12: BL MS Burney 199, fol. 1

Figure 13: BL MS Egerton 811, fol. 1

Figure 14: BL MS Arundel 288, fol. 84

Figure 15: BL MS Egerton 751, fol. 13v