

## The Wolsey Lectionaries: palette and pigments

Richard Gameson and Andrew Beeby

Outstanding among the books associated with Thomas Wolsey are two lectionaries that were conceived and made as companion volumes for use during mass: one (now Oxford, Magdalen College, lat. 223) contains readings from the gospels, the other (Oxford, Christ Church, 101) has readings from Acts and Epistles. They are grand, luxurious manuscripts, spaciously set out with very wide margins, calligraphically written, and lavishly decorated with an illustration plus elaborately ornamented borders for the principal divisions within the text. There are nineteen such pages in each volume – so thirty-eight in the pair as a whole.

A great deal known about the two volumes. Their connection to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey is assured by the appearance of his initials, armorials, and/or motto on the many pages with full decorative borders. The choice of readings, focusing on feasts for saints with which Wolsey had a personal association – Thomas his name saint, Andrew for the see of Bath and Wells, where he was bishop from 1518-23, Cuthbert for Durham, whose bishopric he held from 1523-29, and so on – indicates that they were designed for Wolsey personally, doubtless for one of his private chapels. They were written by a well-documented scribe – Pieter Meghen, from whose pen some thirty-five works are known, eleven of them signed. Born in s'-Hertogenbosch in the northern Netherlands, Meghen was active in England, on and off, from 1502, employed by high-ranking churchman such as John Colet and John Fisher, eventually (1529) gaining the role and title of 'writer of the king's books', a position that he held until his death in 1540. He is also famous for being (as he himself put it) *monoculus*.

The decoration of the volumes, the artistic style suggests, was also by an individual from the Low Countries but this time from the southern Netherlands. In the absence of any evidence for his identity, the illuminator has been styled 'The Master of Cardinal Wolsey' after these

manuscripts. As his hand has only otherwise been recognised in a couple of charters (for Cardinal College, so also connected with Wolsey), his career is an enigma. What is no longer unknown, however, is the nature of his palette and pigments.

The pair of lectionaries can be dated with some precision. The absence of readings for Swithun, patron saint of Winchester, implies that the set was planned before Wolsey acquired that see in February 1529 – indeed, incorporated into the artwork of the epistle lectionary is the date ‘1528’. Conversely, the inclusion on some pages of the gospel lectionary of the arms of the see of Winchester, along with the initials ‘TW’ for ‘Thomas Wintoniensis’ (‘TC’, for ‘Thomas Cardinalis’, was the form used throughout the earlier volume), implies that at least some of the illumination of this volume was done after February 1529. Wolsey’s disgrace on 9 October of that same year provides a probable terminal date for the project.

To the considerable amount that is already known about Wolsey’s lectionaries, we can now add a range of new facts, namely the nature of their inks and pigments. These were investigated by the present writers using the non-invasive techniques of Raman, reflectance and X-ray fluorescence spectroscopies, multispectral imaging, and photomicroscopy.

The painting of the pictorial vignettes and the decorative borders throughout both volumes is marvellously subtle, incorporating multiple shades of countless colours – or so it seems to the eye. For in fact the palette from which these effects were realised was not enormous. While some colours had several sources – there were vermilion and organic reds, for example, azurite and indigo blues – others, such as orange and brown, had but a single colorant (minium and ochre respectively), while yet others shared one pigment (carbon was not only the standard black, it was also the basis of a maroon and of one type of grey). The total number of different colour-stuffs (listed in full at the end of this article) was fourteen. The dazzling multiplicity of hues was achieved by applying these fourteen pigments in differing intensities and

in various degrees of dilution, by mixing them, and by overpainting or glazing a given colorant with one or more of the others.

All these pigments can be found in other books from north-west Europe (England, Flanders and France), dating from the end of fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth, as one would expect. At the same time, the particular selection of them deployed in the Wolsey lectionaries is distinctive in certain respects. To explore this phenomenon, we shall compare the colorants of the lectionaries with those of a small but representative sample of broadly coeval, high-grade volumes. From England our comparanda are a psalter (Lambeth Palace Library, 186), a statute book (Bodleian Library, Hatton 10), a copy of London Ordinances (Christ Church, 179) another volume written by Pieter Meghen (Bodleian Library, Douce 110), and a pictorial compendium of plants, trees and creatures (Bodleian Library, Ashmole 1504). From Flanders our points of comparison are a books of hours (Fitzwilliam Museum 1058-1975) and a prayer book (Cleveland Museum of Art, with individual leaves elsewhere), the latter decorated by the most famous illuminator of the age – Simon Bening of Bruges (d. 1561). From France our comparanda are two further books of hours (Christ Church 93 and Manchester, John Rylands Library, lat. 38, the Hours of Jacques – known as Galiot Ricard – de Genouillac), along with a breviary (Bodleian Library, Laud misc. 419).

Let us start with the case of red. Here the Wolsey artist limited himself to two colorants – vermilion and an organic red. So, too, did the English decorator of our other book written by Pieter Meghen and the French artists of the breviary and of the Genouillac Hours. All the other illuminators represented in our sample of manuscripts, by contrast, employed in addition minimum (red lead), while the Flemings utilised ochre reds too. In sum, from a limited range of options, our illuminator made a distinctive choice.

The yellow colour-stuffs employed by the Wolsey artist were more numerous. He availed himself of at least four distinct colorants – one or more ochre(s), one or more organic yellow(s),

lead-tin yellow (a substance manufactured by heating powders of lead and tin oxide to 900° C), along with gold – employing, in addition, variant forms of a couple of them, namely a lead-tin yellow enhanced with massicot (another manufactured lead oxide), and a mélange of ochre and gold. Possible reasons for this plethora of yellows will be considered below.

The closest match for this generous selection is provided by the Flemish illuminator Simon Bening, who utilised all of these substances bar the formulation of lead-tin yellow with massicot. The nearest English parallel is provided by the Statute book, which features three of them (including lead-tin yellow with massicot). In the other Pieter Meghen book ochre alone was used for yellow, in the English compendium only lead-tin yellow (with and without admixtures of organic yellows), and in the French breviary solely an organic material. The illuminator of the Genouillac Hours employed – sparingly – both an organic substance and lead-tin yellow. The yellow repertoires of the English psalter and the Flemish prayer book, by contrast, were more extensive; nevertheless, they only share a couple of colorants with the Wolsey Master, while between them they feature three others that do not appear in his work, namely the mineral orpiment, litharge (another lead oxide product, related to massicot), and mosaic gold (a sparkling yellow-bronze substance manufactured from mercury, tin, sulfur and sal ammoniac). In brief: from a much wider range of options, the Wolsey illuminator once again made a distinctive choice.

The Wolsey Master employed one main type of green, which was copper based – a verdigris. Copper greens feature in all the comparator manuscripts; however, as their formulations differ according to the details of how they were manufactured and tempered, this is a case where our illuminator was drawing upon the same general type of pigment, rather than exactly the same substance(s), as his peers. Conversely, he did not employ another common type of green that was utilised by many of the other illuminators, English, Flemish and French alike, nor a less common one that was used by a few of them. The common green absent from the

Wolsey lectionaries is vergaut – wherein the colour was created by mixing blues and yellows (what exactly was utilised for the blue and the yellow differed from case to case). Among our comparator manuscripts, vergauts were likewise avoided in the English compendium, in the French Breviary and Genouillac Hours, and in the work of the Fleming Simon Bening (though this last illuminator, just like the Wolsey artist, was ready to add yellows to copper greens to vary their tone). The less common green absent from the lectionaries was the mineral malachite; this features in the Genouillac Hours and the two Flemish volumes.

Finally, we reach blue, for which the Wolsey artist employed the late medieval and renaissance staples – the mineral azurite and the organic dye indigo, the latter derived from woad (only from the middle of the sixteenth century does true indigo, *indigofera tinctoria*, appear to have reached Europe, transported by the Portuguese). He did not utilise either of the other two blues that feature in a couple of books of our sample, namely smalt (used in the Fitzwilliam book of hours from Flanders) and lapis lazuli (found both in that same volume and in the Parisian book of hours, Christ Church 93). These two materials were rare in English illumination at this time: smalt (created from ground cobalt-blue glass) because it had barely been adopted; lapis lazuli because it had all but vanished from the English palette in the mid-fifteenth century. On the rare occasions when lapis did appear in English manuscripts of the later fifteenth century, it was normally in extremely small quantities, reserved for the most important elements of a composition, added to blues that were overwhelmingly composed of azurite. After c. 1500 even this parsimonious and highly selective usage dwindled, and lapis does not feature in any of the English books in the present sample (even the blue used for robes of the Virgin Mary in the Wolsey lectionaries – the place where it was most likely to be deployed – is azurite alone).

That good quality lapis lazuli was still available in some regions of northern Europe at the beginning of the sixteenth century is clear from certain high-status French books: as noted above, the semi-precious mineral appears alongside azurite and indigo in the Parisian book of

Hours, Christ Church 93. Yet whether this was still the case by the 1520s is an open question: certainly, there is no lapis lazuli either in our French Breviary or in the Genouillac Hours, both of that date. Nor by the 1530s does it feature in the work of Simon Bening, the much sought-after Flemish illuminator working for patrons of the highest rank. Writing c. 1600 Nicholas Hilliard, lymnour (portrait miniaturist) to the English court, lamented the extortionate price of good quality *ultermaryne of Venice* (i.e. lapis lazuli); moreover, as even low quality lapis was very expensive, he recommended smalt and blue bice (azurite or its synthetic equivalent) in its place.

To sum up: the artist of the Wolsey lectionaries made a personal selection from the colorants that were available to him. Given that expenditure on the project as a whole was evidently lavish – as manifested in the size of the books, the prodigal use of parchment, and the quantity of gold that was incorporated (and our analyses revealed the metal to be of a high degree of purity) – his choices are highly unlikely to have been determined by considerations of cost. Indeed, vermilion and azurite, although less expensive than lapis lazuli, were still costly commodities. Rather, with the exception of lapis which may not have been readily available, the palette surely reflects personal preferences along with the requirements of the commission and its aesthetic.

In relation to the aesthetic of the book, the point to consider is that the wide borders with (generally) a rich golden ground meant that the illuminator had to be circumspect in his deployment of yellow, a colour that could clash with, or be overwhelmed by, the sheen of the metal. One contemporary response to this conundrum, exemplified by the illuminator of the Genouillac Hours, was to minimise the role of this particular colour. An alternative approach, followed by the Wolsey illuminator, was to resort to the yellows that could complement, and tell against gold: hence he employed, on the one hand, those that tended to be browner or paler than the metal (the ochres and organics) and on the other those that were brighter and either more lemon-toned (lead-tin yellow) or redder (the version with massicot).

Concerning the general requirements of the commission, the key point is that the twin lectionaries were of grand dimensions and, with thirty-eight heavily decorated pages, there was – to put it crudely – a lot of parchment to cover with paint. In such circumstances, if the illuminator wanted to be sure of maintaining consistency of palette throughout, it was logical to rely on materials that were easily obtainable.

The excellence of the resulting illumination demonstrates that a restricted palette did not mean reduced splendour or finesse. Indeed, a distinguishing characteristic of the Wolsey illuminator's artistry is the masterly use that he made of a limited number of colorants, underlining that what really mattered was not the number of pigments but rather how skilfully they were deployed.

Concerning the question of whether the Wolsey lectionaries were illuminated in England or in Flanders – an issue on which expert opinion has differed – knowledge of the pigments cannot provide a definitive answer for, as we have seen, almost all the colorants that were used in them were readily available in both territories. Yet given that such *was* the case, that the volumes were written in England, and that they were produced within a relatively short period of time, it is surely most likely that they were decorated here too. The absence from Wolsey illuminator's palette of malachite – a material present in some of our French and Flemish books but not in any of our English ones (and rare in English manuscripts more generally) – accords with this interpretation.

These elegant volumes provide an evocative memorial to Wolsey's cosmopolitan taste and discerning patronage at a time when his life was starting to unravel as he failed to resolve the King's Great Matter (the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon) in the face of papal intransigence: in October 1529 he was charged with *praemunire* (recognising papal authority over the king) and stripped of his governmental roles; he was arraigned for treason on 7 November 1530, and died en route to London at the end of that month. Pointedly, Wolsey's

personal service books are rather finer than the psalter that was made for Henry VIII himself a decade later by another expatriate, the Frenchman Jean Mallard (London, British Library, Royal 2 A.xvi); but then Henry was better at appropriating fine books (and much else, including Oxford colleges!) than commissioning them.

## The Palette of the Wolsey Lectionaries

**Red** – vermilion; organic; vermilion + organic

**Pink** – vermilion + white lead; organic

**Orange** - red lead

**Yellow** - ochre; organic; ochre + organic; ochre + gold scatter; lead-tin yellow (Type I); lead-tin yellow + massicot

**Green** – copper (verdigris); copper + white lead

**Blue** – azurite; indigo; azurite + indigo; azurite + white lead

**Maroon** – carbon

**Brown** – ochre

**Black** – carbon (artwork); gallo-tannic (text)

**Grey** – indigo; carbon+ white lead

**White** – white lead

**Metals** – gold (ink / ‘shell’)

### **The Pigments of the Wolsey Lectionaries**

**Red** – vermilion; organic

**Orange** - red lead

**Yellow** - ochre; organic; lead-tin yellow (Type I)

**Green** – copper (verdigris)

**Blue** – azurite; indigo

**Brown** – ochre

**Black** – carbon (artwork); gallo-tannic (text)

**White** – white lead

**Metals** – gold (ink / ‘shell’)