

## Visual literacy in RE teaching and learning

Rachel Woods

### Case study 5

#### Chi Ro carpet page from the Book of Kells c.800

#### Theme: Sacred texts

##### Medium: Hand-painted decorated texts

An image for projection is available at

[www.rethinking.co.uk](http://www.rethinking.co.uk)

##### Links to the non-statutory national framework for RE for England

KS1 – 1a, 1d, 1e, 2a, 3a, 3f, 3o

KS2 – 1e, 1h, 2e, 3f, 3i, 3r

KS3 – 1b, 1g, 2e, 3q, 3r

##### Introduction to the theme and media:

Sacred texts since the earliest times have been a focus for decoration by artists. A very important part of early Christian communities in Britain was the scriptoria in monasteries where sacred books were made, hand-written and decorated by very skilled craftsmen and artists. The purpose of the decoration was to express something of the holiness of the book. The craftsmen and artists involved with making and decorating these books would have considered their job as an act of devotion and worship. Carpet pages are ones covered with illumination, with very little or no text.

A study of an historic artwork such as this sacred manuscript requires an investigation of the context in which the artwork was made and used for pupils to understand its significance and purpose in relation to the RE theme, so the context part of the RESEARCH section is important when using historical sacred texts.



##### **RESPOND**

Show an image of the page to the pupils and invite their initial responses to what they see. This is the pupils' starting point with the

work and with the theme so encourage them to be honest in their feelings and to respect the views of others.

**Key questions:** What's the first thing you notice? What else can you see? What emotions does the image communicate and how do you feel? What do you think? Look really carefully, this is full of detail. What animals can you find? How many people?

**Sample responses:** The composition of the carpet page is very complicated with extremely intricate patterns of different shapes and sizes filling every corner of the design. Yet the image works as a whole even though there are many parts. The surface of the image appears to move and vibrate and draws the eyes into a never-ending journey.

There are strange animals and beasts hidden within some of the patterns. They seem to be designed to surprise the viewer, but would have had symbolic significance to the artist. The patterns are intricate, rich and abstract, and involve a skilful creative process. What might the purpose of the illustration be?

Though the artwork, with its incredibly intricate decoration appears to have been

designed to communicate something beyond human limitations, something spiritual. There is mystery here, not everything about God can be explained. Old manuscripts were made of vellum, that is, treated animal skin smoothed carefully using a lengthy process to produce a fine, velvety surface.

**Activities:**

- **Sacred patterns:** give pupils a few sentences that introduce a Bible story (i.e., Noah, Jesus' baptism, entering the Promised Land, the beginning of John's gospel) and ask them to design an composition from abstract patterns inspired by the content of the sentences or knowledge of the story and the carpet page.
- **Words and pictures:** pupils could listen to a recording of a bible story and at the same time be asked to draw a design inspired by what they are hearing. The outcomes of this exercise would make an interesting starting point for discussion about ways of expressing beliefs.



**RESEARCH: Physical object**

**Visual elements:**  
Additional key questions are available on page 9 of the book.

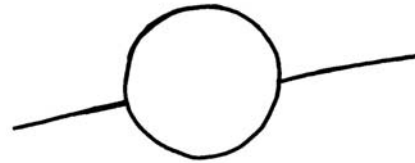


**Line and marks**

**Key questions:** How has the artist used lines and marks for example as outlines, or to show movement? How has the artist used lines and marks to create patterns, decoration, and symmetry? How has the

artist used line or marks to create texture: rough, smooth, or feathery?

**Sample responses:** The artist has used line to meticulously draw out complex areas of decorative pattern that decorate or 'illuminate' the first words from Mark's Gospel.



**Shape**

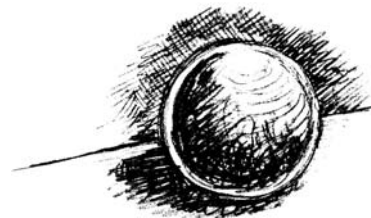
**Key questions:** What shapes has the artist used in the artwork? How are these arranged and what feelings and thoughts do they express? How has the artist used shapes symbolically or in an abstract way? Is the artwork a particular shape? What significance does the shape have?

**Sample responses:** The shapes the artist used to create the intricate patterns are a mixture of geometric and organic. The geometric shapes form the main framework for the rich pattern infill.

**Colour**

**Key questions:** What colours has the artist used? How has the artist used colour symbolically? Which colour has the artist used most? Why do you think this is?

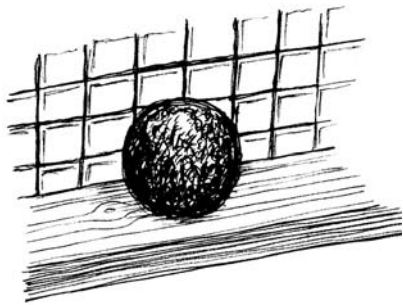
**Sample responses:** The palette of colours that the artist uses is varied. Purple, lilac, red, pink, green, yellow are some of the main colours used to fill in areas of the pattern.



**Tone**

**Key questions:** How has the artist used tone from black through grey to white? How has the artist used tone to depict light and shade? How does the direction and focus of the light add to our understanding?

**Sample responses:** The colours are flat with no tonal variation because they are used in a decorative way.



### Pattern and texture

**Key questions:** What textures has the artist used and how have they created them? For example rough, smooth, jagged, spiky and soft. What emotions or thoughts are expressed?

**Sample responses:** The artist relies on his skills in using traditional Gospel Book decoration to illuminate the sacred text. Particularly look for the traditional knot patterns, circles, crosses and repeating patterns, as well as illustrations of animals and people.

### Mood

**Key questions:** How does this artwork make you feel? (Happy or sad, warm or cold, calm peaceful, uneasy, frightened, angry) What sort of mood has the artist created? What elements in the work of art tell us this? How did the artist want us to feel? How do you know?

**Sample responses:** The overall atmosphere expressed by the mesmerising patterns is one of mystery.

### Composition

**Key questions:** What is the central focus of the work of art? Where is the focal point and why is it there? What is happening in the background, in the corners, at the edges? Do some parts of the artwork look more finished than others? Describe why you think this is. Is there an illusion of space in the artwork? How are we positioned as viewers by the work? Are we forced to look at it from a particular angle? Are we made to become conscious of our own position in space? Is it clear where the artwork begins and ends? Can you see any underlying geometrical

structure to the work and how does this affect the composition?

**Sample responses:** The central focus of the composition is the chi and ro letters representing Christ. The decoration is equally important with its purpose of illuminating the text, making the viewer spend time reflecting on the words and getting lost in the threads of interlace. The interlace motifs create an illusion of infinite space, suggesting a spiritual dimension. It is difficult to see where the threads of some of the knotted motifs begin and end. These motifs symbolised the eternal and the mystical side of faith and relationship with God.

### Materials and processes

**Key questions:** What materials is the artwork made of? Are they traditional art materials or found objects? Is the material of the artwork important? How would your reaction to the artwork change if the artist used a different material? What associations do the materials carry? How did the artist make the artwork? Has the artist made it by hand or had someone else made it? What kinds of skills were involved? What changes might have occurred to the piece while it was being made? How visible or invisible is the process of making?

**Sample responses:** The Gospel book is made up of around 340 vellum leaves (330mm by 250mm) which are folded into folios (groups of pages) and bound together. Each page is filled with hand written text from the Gospels in black, yellow, red and purple ink. The ink was very precious and made from pigments that were imported from different parts of Europe.



### RESEARCH: subject Content

**Key questions:** What is the work about? What is happening? How does the work engage you? Does the artwork ask you to

question your assumptions about art or the world?

**Sample responses:** The artwork is about the visual communication of a sacred text,

in this case the introduction to Matthew's Gospel. The artwork is designed to engage the viewer and hold their attention, for example, the way the artist has constructed and decorated the page to make the viewer want to spend time looking carefully and thinking about the words. Monks would have used it to help them in prayer and worship both in the creation of the work, and in using it later. The decoration could inspire awe and wonder and direct attention to the creator God. The page is known as the Chi Ro page. Chi and ro are the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek, and look like our X and P – with the X on the left of the illustration and the P in the bottom right. There are circles within circles, within circles, possibly symbolising the trinity.

#### Activities:

- **Sacred writing:** pupils could be asked to copy a piece of writing from the related Bible passage in Matthew 1:18 – 2:12 and then decorate it with colours and patterns inspired by the Celtic knotwork patterns created by the Book of Kells' artists.
- **Illuminated sacred words:** pupils design a monogram based on words used in Christian scripture to describe God for example: Holy, Glory, Majestic and create pattern motifs to decorate and illuminate the words in a way which expresses the meaning of the word.

#### Message

**Key questions:** What does the inclusion of such detailed decoration say about the artist's perception of the text? What questions is the sacred text asking? Is it asking us to respond in a certain way? Is it a story, a command, a challenge? What might the painting stand for? Does the position of the artwork help to explain the meaning? Has the artist used any symbols that you recognise? What are they and how have they been used to communicate ideas relating to the RE theme? What

does it tell us about the artist's view of God?

**Sample responses:** The book is an invitation to the viewer to meditate on the sacred text and through this to consider the holiness of God. For a medieval monk living in the monastery this book would have been greatly revered because it contained the revealed word of God. A sacrificial amount of time, labour and money was spent on making such an object that would then be used in the community as an aid to worship. This expresses something of the depth and creative richness of the monks' spiritual understanding and faith in God, particularly in a context where there was political unrest and therefore much uncertainty for monastic communities.

#### Activity:

- **Valuing beliefs:** in groups pupils collect ideas about different expressions of spirituality, related to their own experiences, thoughts and ideas. What images, patterns and colours are particularly important to them? They then design a book cover and decorated carpet page for a personal notebook that they could use for recording personal thoughts, ideas and feelings.

#### Title and theme

**Key questions:** What title has the artist given the work of art? Does this change the way we see the work of art? Some artists deliberately leave their work untitled. Other artists provide deliberately misleading titles, which, when explored can add meaning to the artwork. Does the artwork have a broader subject area theme that links it with other artwork?

**Sample responses:** The title of this artwork is 'Carpet page from the Book of Kells'.

Illuminated carpet pages suggest themes such as God's holiness, life, creation, joy, worship, creative expression – all important parts of the Christian faith. A writer in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Gerald of Wales, in his *Topographica Hibernica*

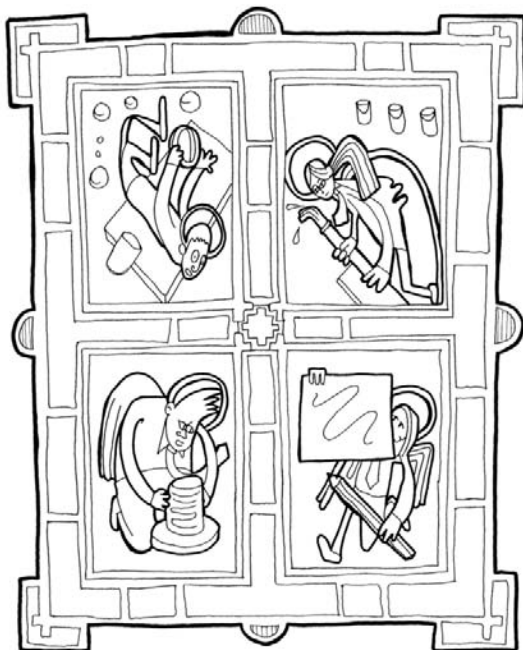
describes a gospel book he had seen which was possibly the Book of Kells. His words capture beautifully the awesome qualities of the craftsmanship and sacred purpose of the artwork.

*“Fine craftsmanship is all about you, but you might not notice it. Look more keenly at it and you would penetrate to the very shrine of art. You will make out intricacies, so delicate and so subtle, so full of knots and links, with colours so fresh and vivid, that you might say that all of this is the work of an angel, and not of a man”*



### **RESEARCH:** context

**Key questions:** When and where was the artwork made? Can we make any connections between the work and the place and period in which it was made? Who made it and who was it made for? What country is the artist from? How did the artist imagine his role? How do people view the work today and how is this different from how it might have been seen and interpreted when it was first made? How has opinion changed and why? Compare works of art from different cultures, by different artists, etc.



**Sample responses:** The Book of Kells was probably made over a considerable period of time around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Monks would have made the Book of Kells in a monastery, but it is not clear exactly where this was. It could have been Ireland, Scotland or Northumberland. Kells is a place in Ireland where there is known to have been an Abbey in the sixth century which was founded by monks from the monastery on the Scottish island of Iona. Viking invasions around the coast of Britain forced the Iona community to retreat to Kells. Historical evidence suggests that it is most likely that the Gospel Book was made in either Kells or Iona or worked on in both locations. The book remains unfinished which points to the fact that life at the time was very uncertain.

The Book of Kells was handmade by a team of monks in a monastic scriptoria, an example of creativity in community. St Columba, a well-known figure in early Christian history is thought to have associations with it, although the style of the patterns suggests it was made after he died.

It is one in a series of illuminated Gospel Books surviving from medieval times. The making of this incredible artwork would have been an important focus of the creativity and worship of members of the monastic communities of the time. The Book of Kells was also known as the great Gospel Book of Columkille (Columba) and it is recorded in the Annals of Ulster in 1006 as having been stolen from the stone church at Kells one night. The book was found a few months later under a square of turf, minus its jewelled cover.

### **Activity:**

- **Making sacred manuscripts:** pupils research how the Book of Kells was made. Give pupils a Bible story (or ask them to choose a passage they have studied) which they can write out and then decorate using ideas taken from the Book of Kells carpet page. The completed pages could be

combined into a class book. The cover of the book could be decorated in the style of the Book of Kells.



### **REFLECT**

#### **Key questions:**

What else can you see? What emotions do you feel? What do you think?

**Sample responses:** The carpet pages are almost unbelievable in terms of the intricacy and mesmerising beauty of the decoration. It is incredible to think of the skill and time involved in making a work of art like this. It was a definite act of devotion and clearly a response of worship to God. The addition of strange creatures and figures were perhaps intended as a playful distraction and light relief from the almost dizzy-making pattern.

There is a sense of intense joy and playfulness in the way the decoration saturates the page, almost hiding the letters of the text. Maybe this was intentional to encourage the viewer to look harder and stay longer in spiritual reflection and worship, to encourage wonder at the mystery of some things that defy words or explanation visually.

The extraordinary qualities of this work produced by faithful monks in a context and at a time in history when war-fare was common, and so security wasn't guaranteed makes it seem all the more unbelievable. Was it in fact something inspired by God and not just something amazing made by diligent and skilled human hands?

#### **Activity:**

- **Sacred book review:** pupils write a book review about the Book of Kells which describes their understanding of its purpose as a sacred Christian text and about the qualities of the decoration.

Extension work for Case Study 5: Chi Ro carpet page from the Book of Kells  
Sample responses from applying the remaining stages of the 3 R's toolkit to this case study are provided on the website [www.rethinking.co.uk](http://www.rethinking.co.uk) as a reference and to demonstrate the value of developing the investigation with pupils. Teachers can select distinct sections, related key questions and activities to suit their teaching and learning objectives. Key questions relating to looking at sculpture and sample responses to this section can be viewed on the website.