

Words can open doors to history and culture

by Sabine Eiche

Richmond News, May 25, 2012, p.14

Whenever I work in my garden, I become aware of an unusual but pleasant sensation. Kneeling down, almost at eye level with the insect population, I feel drawn back into my early childhood, when everything in my life was miniature. Outdoors, in my sandbox, I'd build tiny landscapes. Indoors, I'd play with tiny dolls that sat on tiny furniture. Small scale things have never ceased to enchant me, which is why I'm so fascinated with etymology, the study of the origin of words. It's history in miniature.

Take, for example, that very word, miniature. It comes from the Latin "minium," meaning vermilion, the colour red. And what, you ask, does red have to do with small? Read on. Before the fifteenth century there were no printed books, only handwritten ones, called manuscripts. Medieval manuscripts often included images and ornamentation, which are called miniatures because they were originally drawn with "minium." Properly speaking, they were miniated. And they filled only a small part of the page. Hence the word miniature denotes both the image and the size.

If luminous colours, such as gold and silver, were included, the miniature can also be called an illumination, from the Latin "illuminare," to enlighten. The word illustration is part of the same family, deriving from the Latin "illustrare," to make light.

Occasionally the borders – margins – of the manuscript page have notes or decorations, which are called marginalia, from the Latin verb "marginare," to make a border. Marginalia tended to be of secondary importance to the main

text, a significance we've retained in our word marginal, describing something at the edge or of slight relevance.

The craftsman who wrote and miniated manuscripts is called a scribe. The Latin root for that word, "scribere" (to write), has also given us script and scribble (originally meaning little writing). In ancient Egypt, scribes using a split reed wrote important texts on long rolls of papyrus. Lower-grade papyrus came in separate sheets, which were sewn together along one edge to form a codex. The word codex derives from "caudex," the Latin for tree trunk, referring to wood split into tablets and covered with wax to provide a writing surface.

By the fourth century scribes were using parchment (goat skin) instead of papyrus, with a quill pen for writing. The root of the word pen is the Latin "penna" (feather) because it was made from the flight feather of a bird such as the goose.

Paper, from the word papyrus, wasn't widely available in the west until the fourteenth century. It was first manufactured by the Chinese, from whom the Arabs learned the technique in the eighth century. In the late eleventh century Spain began papermaking. Notaries and merchants in Mediterranean lands were the main users of paper in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, by which time a paper mill had opened in Italy. More were established in the fourteenth century in Switzerland, Germany and France.

There you have it – my love of things small led me to enquire about the origin of miniature, which opened the doors to manuscripts and scribes and paper. What better or more entertaining guide into the past than words?