

St. John page, Book of Kells

The St. John portrait page (fol. 291v) in the Book of Kells has to be one of the finest and most fascinating portrayals of an author and his book that we will ever encounter. It is an icon in the etymological sense—a pictorial representation. But it is more than that. It also attracts a veneration of its artistic achievement. Thankfully, it never was actively venerated for its subject and used as a cure for sick cattle, as was the Book of Durrow in the 18th century, when at least one gathering from its St. John's Gospel seems to have been soaked repeatedly to obtain its curative properties.

The fantastical decoration filling the cells that join to make the frame engages and re-engages one's attention, and so does the decoration inside the halo, and so does the knotwork at the four corners of the frame. At midpoint of bottom, sides and top, the feet, hands, and head outside the frame remain mysterious, though perhaps only because most of the head was lost to a binder's knife. The evangelist is not depicted as writing, as so often is the case. He holds a pen in one hand, but not a knife in the other, and he does not have an open book in front of him. Instead, he is holding a quill in one hand (and there is an inkhorn by his foot) while in the other hand he is holding a closed book. The signification in all likelihood is that his book has now been completed.

In essence, here is a page in a book, depicting a writer (with pen and inkhorn), and his completed book (it even has a fine binding). And the author is nimbed as probably no other writer has EVER been.

The rectangle of the frame for St. John's portrait (without extensions or embellishments) is approximately 266×195 mm.

Here is a brief version of a procedure that will replicate—or create—the frame surrounding the evangelist (Fig. 4.8).

The Frame Begin with concentric and commensurate square and circle, as in Fig. 1f, and from it construct a frame in the ratio $\frac{\sqrt{3}+1}{2}$, as in Fig. 3.16.

(a) Sketch diagonals of this frame, and mark their intersections with the underlying circle to be one set of corners of the inner panel area.

(b) Another set of corners of the inner panel area is located by copying, onto the upper and lower sides, the vertical distance from the the frame to the

Fig. 4.8 Designing frame and halo for St. John page, Book of Kells.

first set of corners, and then sketching the paths of parallel lines joining them in pairs.

(c) A third set of corners of the inner panel area is located by copying to the left and right sides the horizontal measures from the corners, and then sketching the paths of parallel lines joining them in pairs.

(d) Midside ‘notches’ in the inner frame are plotted with separate diagonals, as shown.

The halo (e) The center of the halo is located along the center line a distance from the upper border equal to half the width of the frame (see preceding step). The outer circle of the halo is drawn tangent to 45° diagonals from midpoints of the sides to upper border of the inner panel.

(f) The inner circle is drawn tangent to 45° diagonals from the centerpoint of the frame. There are alternate constructions, some just as easy, all just as accurate.

It is a fair inference that the layout of the St. John page was derived by steps like the ones just illustrated, using compass and straight-edge, and needing nothing more. Proof for any method of construction, of course, is hard to come by in the absence documentation, or in the absence of the tradition that produced it continuing intact. We have proof neither from a tradition still living, nor from documentation such as instructional manuals by the artists, or reports of observers of their craft.

But we do have three kinds of evidence. One is comparative: shapes embodying the same geometrical terms and simplicity, in other media and within the same era of Irish Christian art (the theme of this Guide). Another kind of evidence is deductive: how else to explain designs whose measures match simple geometrical constructions again and again? The third is empirical. It is not ample, and much of it is not easy to find. This is the evidence of construction marks (as they are called)—small punctures, or impressions, left by a sharp point, either a pricking knife used elsewhere to mark where the straight-edge goes to rule the page for text, or marks left by the fixed foot of a compass (or dividers). They also include ruled lines, typically impressed in the surface of the leaf, without ink, or curved lines similarly drawn. In the upper portion of this page construction marks are to be seen everywhere: the centres of the eyes, the innermost circle of the halo where half-circle embellishments inside the circle have their centers marked, as well as their outer limits, a horizontal ruling level with the evangelist’s eyes, on both left and right of his head, and so on. There are also prickings of the parchment leaf in corners of cells of decoration that make up the frame; in profusion they guide the interlace designs.

Still, any construction marks that correspond to the ones predicted by the construction method I proposed for frame and halo are extremely difficult to detect. One reason is that on the portrait side of the leaf, construction marks are covered by paint. Another is that some key parts of the derivation are located along the middle of the leaf. The parchment is extra thick across the middle of the page, because that is the area of the membrane that lay along the back of the animal whose skin was turned into fol. 291. Markings will not easily show through there. And another is that pages having elegant illuminations, in this manuscript and others, seem to have been laid out with light construction markings—part of the elegance of the art. The main layout is lightly marked, and probably copied directly from a model. The decoration, on the other hand, could not be copied with a few reference points, but had to be constructed on the leaf so as to fit the specific area to be filled with embellishing design. Thus the profusion of construction marks for details. Thus the elusiveness of marks for the overall plan.

But there is empirical evidence in the pectoral area of the evangelist. In the facsimile it cannot be made out with certainty. On the manuscript leaf it is not easy to make out—in fact is easy to dismiss when the leaf lies flat. But when the leaf is held to the light, right there in St. John's chest, the exact middle of the frame—the point where diagonals of the frame intersect—: there, exactly there, is a tiny hole letting light through from the other side. Here in the thick area of the parchment, the ridge of the animal's back, is a construction mark that does not guide interlace, or halo, or step-pattern, or boundaries of cells of the frame. It marks the point from which the *mise-en-page* of the illumination began, the central point of the framed image of St. John, the point of origin of the icon. It is the beginning point of the design of the St. John page in the Book of Kells.

It should not come as a surprise to learn that the book in John's hand has the same shape as the rectangle of the whole illumination!