Illuminated Letters

- In Medieval times, all books were hand written and decorated by hand, usually by priests and monks. They were seen as very precious works of art, and you had to be very skilled to produce them.
- These manuscripts were called 'illuminated' because the letters and pictures were often decorated with gold and silver leaf.
- The word 'illuminated' comes from the Latin word *illuminare*, meaning "light up."

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Here are some examples of medieval illuminated letters.
Can you see what the letter is? Can you guess what the text was about from clues in the illuminated letter?

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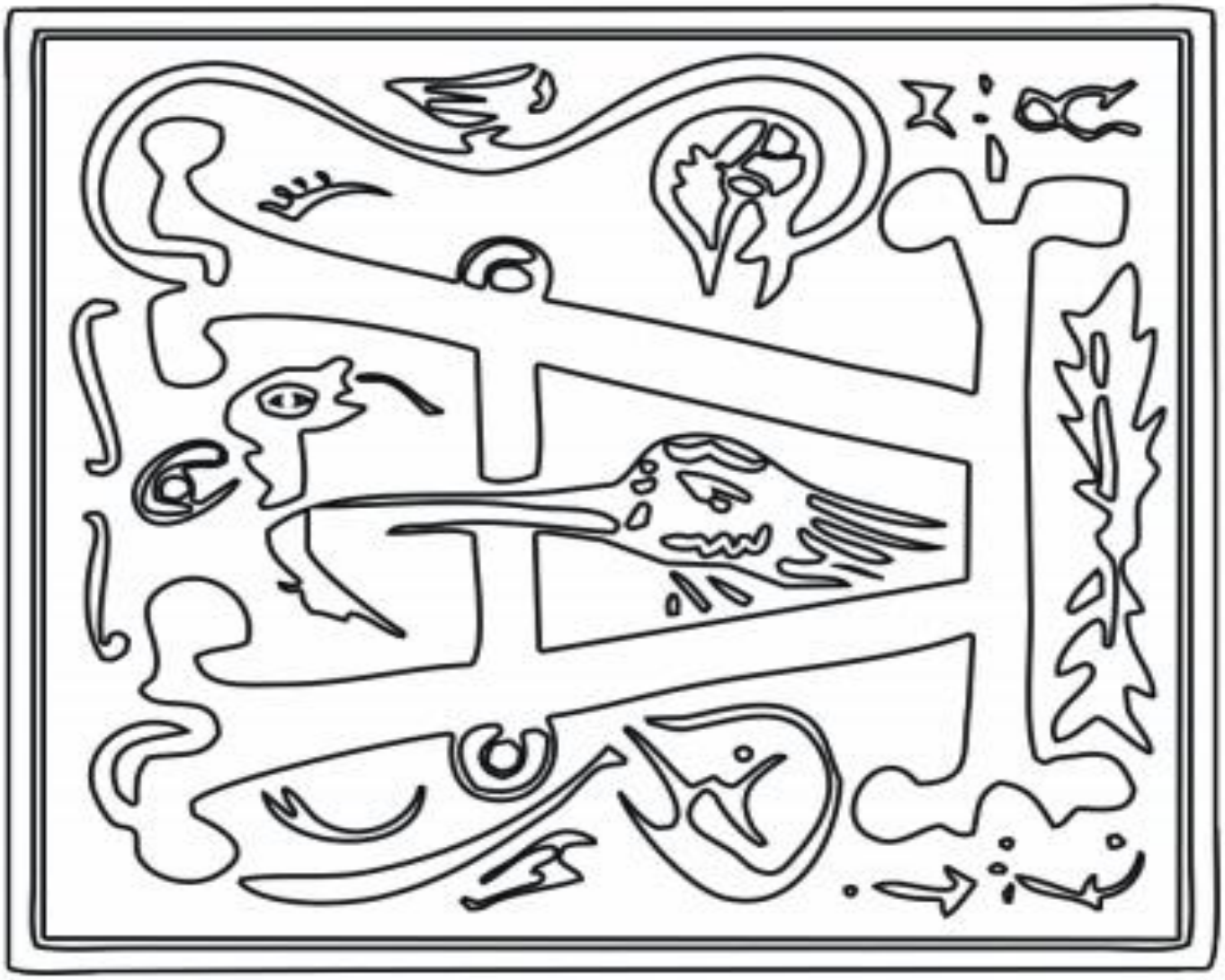
- An illuminated letter was usually the first letter of a page or paragraph. It was enlarged and in colour, with gold or silver added in areas, while the rest of the text was in black. Images of people, animals, plants or mythological creatures were sometimes added to enhance the letter.
- The Anglo-Saxons borrowed from the art styles of several different countries (Irish, Italian and Germanic) to create their own distinctive style of illuminated letters.
- Because not many people could read at this time, illuminated letters were a way of communicating a story or message without using words.

The Medieval alphabet didn't have all of the letters that we use today.

As you look through, see if you can spot which ones are missing!



Design your own illuminated letter – perhaps for your name!