THE condition of the miniatures in the Psalter of Henry of Blois, British Library MS. Cotton Nero C. IV, has long been a subject of interest to students of Romanesque illumination. Those who have commented upon this problem agreed that originally the miniatures were fully painted. At some point, the paint flaked away, leaving traces of colour on some of the figures. It was also suggested that the lapus lazuli of the backgrounds was deliberately scraped off to be reused. Because of the loss of most of their original paint, the miniatures were considered to be in an extremely fragmentary condition.¹

It is possible to demonstrate that the miniatures are in a much better state of preservation than previously believed. A close inspection of the paint surfaces indicates that most of the miniatures were never fully painted. As they exist at the present time, the vast majority of the figures, as for example those on folio 16, have thin even layers of coloured wash to indicate the texture of hair, beards, chain mail, and fur. Apart from this, the only colour is found around the contour lines of each of the segmented areas which form the stylized bodies. There is no trace of colour in the centre of these segmented areas. It does not seem reasonable to assume that the paint would have flaked away in exactly the same places on each figure in a 39-page cycle. Even if this were the case, faint traces of paint could be expected to remain and close inspection reveals none. While the concentration of paint around contour lines makes it difficult to understand the illustrations as fragmentary paintings, it does point to an alternative explanation. The consistent application of colour around the contour lines of the miniatures places them stylistically within a well-established and widespread Insular tradition. The tinted drawing style was one of the principal stylistic mediums of the Anglo-Saxon period and continued in use after the Conquest.² The most important characteristic of this style in the Psalter and earlier examples is the way the tint is applied to the drawing. Colour follows the outlines of the drawing, giving the effect of a shadow, softening the otherwise harsh impression created by the pen line. Large areas of blank space are left undelineated by line or colour. The choice of colour also adds to the delicacy of these drawings. Pale, soft shades are employed, instead of the
dark, brilliant colours found in most Romanesque manuscripts. This tinted effect is exactly the impression created by the illustrations in the Psalter.

Not all the miniatures originally envisaged as tinted drawings were completed. Many areas were drawn in pen outline and never accented with colour. The most striking example is the frequently reproduced scene of the Angel locking the damned in Hell, fol. 39 (fig. 1). The upper half of the hell mouth was drawn in pen and covered with an even green wash. The lower half received the identical treatment in pen outline but only a few strokes of colour were applied to the nose. Since by far the largest concentration of untinted drawings appear near the end of the cycle, it is reasonable to assume that the initial plan was interrupted before it was carried to completion.

The confusion that has arisen over the original condition of the manuscript appears to be the result of the misinterpretation of the application of opaque paint, black ink, and gilding to the partially unfinished drawings. These features can be explained as a series of alterations and additions which can be approximately dated and are particularly valuable for explaining the present condition of the drawings. In addition to over 250 figures executed in the tinted drawing style, approximately thirty figures and some architectural details are or were fully painted. Although a small number of these figures appear throughout the manuscript, the largest concentration appears in the drawings left incomplete near the end of the cycle. Even here they are scattered randomly throughout the unfinished scenes. The scant proportion of these figures and their curious, sporadic appearance differs from the consistent character of the tinted-drawing cycle. This suggests that they represent a deviation from the original plan. Other features also point in this direction. On fol. 25, for example, only the face of Christ was painted while the body was tinted. Although there are rare instances where tinted and painted figures appear in the same work in the twelfth century, it is unique to find them combined in the same figure. It is difficult to believe that this unorthodox juxtaposition of painted and tinted areas was planned from the beginning. However, in the cases where the paint surfaces are intact, it is evident that these figures were executed in a style contemporary with that of the tinted drawings. The mid-century date and placement of these painted features suggest that some of the miniatures were altered shortly after the pen sketches were completed.

Additional observations lead to similar conclusions. A series of twelfth-century Norman French inscriptions accompany many of the miniatures. They are not in the same hand as the Latin inscriptions on the banderoles carried by some figures nor are they uniform in their placement or in the size of the script. Some appear on the gold framing bands, as on fol. 7 (fig. 2), but where these borders are too narrow, they appear above the border (fol. 10, fig. 3), on arches (fol. 14, fig. 4), squeezed between and over architecture and figures (fols. 27 and 28, fig. 5), or in the middle of a miniature (fol. 20, fig. 6). The assessment of the inscriptions as alterations may be extended to a series of heavy, crude outlines which are drawn in the same black ink. They were used to strengthen the fine pen outlines of figures and edge the gilded borders. The less accomplished character of these black lines also applies to the gilding of the hems.
Fig. 1. Angel locking the damned in Hell. MS. Cotton Nero C.IV, fol. 39
Fig. 4. MS. Cotton Nero C.IV, fol. 14
Fig. 5. MS. Cotton Nero C.IV, fol. 28
of garments, crowns, and many borders. Here the gold obliterates details such as the delicate beading on the border of the Virgin’s robe (fol. 16). Moreover, where black ink articulates the gilding, as on fol. 10 (fig. 3), it is simpler and cruder than the fine detailing visible beneath the gilding. The application of opaque blue paint to the backgrounds is of a similar nature. It obliterates numerous details which are now visible due to the flaking of the blue paint. Over-painted areas appear throughout the cycle, as the shovel handed to Adam on fol. 2, reins on fol. 15, and swords on fol. 6. While the manuscript does not offer internal evidence for a dating of the gilding and blue grounds, their frequent appearance in mid-twelfth-century manuscripts suggests that they, like the painted figures and inscriptions, date from the middle of the century. However, the lack of feeling for detail and crude execution indicates that they were added by someone other than the artist responsible for the drawings.

It appears then, that the illustrations in the Psalter were planned and partially executed as a series of tinted drawings. Shortly thereafter, they were subjected to a series of additions and alterations by a less accomplished artisan. These additions, particularly the backgrounds, are in a poor state of preservation. The fragmentary appearance of the manuscript is due then, not to the loss of most of the original paint but to the incomplete state of the original series of tinted drawings and the effect of the partially extant over-painting. The majority of tinted drawings are much closer to their original appearance than previously believed. As such, they represent some of the finest English tinted drawings from the middle of the twelfth century.


2 On the tinted-drawing style in the Anglo-Saxon period, see Francis Wormald, English Drawings of the tenth and eleventh Centuries (London, 1952). After the Conquest, the technique was used for a number of Canterbury and Rochester manuscripts, among others. See C. R. Dodwell, The Canterbury School of Illumination 1066-1200 (Cambridge, 1954).

3 Fols. 26–39.

4 Incomplete manuscripts from the twelfth century are not uncommon. A parallel situation is offered by the Winchester Bible. The mid-twelfth-century artist completed the pen outlines for a number of drawings but only a small number were painted at the beginning of the manuscript. For bibliography, see Michael Kauffmann, Romanesque Manuscripts, 1066-1190 (London, 1975), p. 110.

5 These figures are found on fols. 5, 23, 28, 30, 34, 35, 36, and 37.

6 As, for example, in the Lambeth Bible, Lambeth Palace Library, MS. 3. Many miniatures are fully painted including the one on fol. 198. Others as on fol. 306 were tinted. See M. Kauffmann, op. cit., p. 99.

7 As, for example, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Auct. D. 2. 15, ibid., p. 107.