

On DRAWING the HOSPITALITY of ABRAHAM

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The Hospitality of Abraham is the 85th drawing in the *Summula Pictoria*. This essay explains my entire process for composing and making this work.



For any drawing, I start by considering the overall significance of what I intend to depict. Because each drawing in the *Summula Pictoria* is part of a larger, coherent work, I consider also its relation to other drawings in the project.

The Hospitality of Abraham is, to me, most interesting for being a theophany of the Old Testament, a manifestation of God before He assumed human flesh in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. It is related to other such events as Jacob's wrestling, Moses's encounter with the Burning Bush, and the fourth man in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. Here, God appears as three angels, addressed by both Abraham and the author in the singular, as Lord.

Now there are differing interpretations of whom Abraham encountered at this time. Jewish exegetes have seen in these figures not God but the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael: one sent to destroy Sodom, one to deliver the prophecy of Sarah's childbearing, and one to heal the wounds of the circumcision recently performed upon Abraham and the men of his household. Certain Christian exegetes, such as Justin Martyr, saw in these three figures the second Person of the Trinity, and two angels. Others have seen all three Persons of the Trinity represented. Augustine of Hippo favored the former view in *City of God* and the latter in *On the Trinity*. I have chosen to interpret these three angels as representing the three Persons of the Trinity; this is the Old Testament Trinity of Byzantine iconography.

Sacred artists, perhaps limited by their materials, have for centuries largely avoided the challenge of drawing non-incarnate beings in a distinctive way. For the most part, they draw or paint or sculpt the figures representing such beings (a dove, or a hand, or, in this case, three angels) as though they were physically present. Or they have avoided depicting them altogether.

My own idea is to use draw these figures on the opposite side of the translucent calfskin, so that their apparent bodies will have a ghostly appearance, and only

be fully visible when the drawing is held up to light. It is an imperfect solution to an impossible problem, but it is the best idea I have for now. In the *Summula Pictoria*, I depict ordinary angels such as Michael with their apparent faces and exposed skin on the opposite side of the vellum, but hair, clothing, and wings on the front. For representations of God, I draw the entire figure, including hair and clothing, on the reverse. The front has only an outline.

I also wanted to draw connections between the Hospitality of Abraham and the Last Supper, as both involve meals around a table and feet being washed; and between the Annunciation to Sarah and the Annunciations to Elizabeth and to Mary.



Old Testament Trinity by Andrei Rublev

After these general considerations, a close reading of the Biblical story, and some references to the Church Fathers, I study ancient and medieval works of art depicting the same subject, looking for good ideas and especially for common elements that endure over centuries.

For this particular subject, one work of art looms large, the icon by Andrei Rublev. This is one of the best-known works of sacred art ever made, and is held up as an ideal standard by many Eastern Christians to this day. Certainly I respect this painting, and Byzantine iconography in general; it is traditional, theological ordered, and liturgically apt. However, I must confess that I like Byzantine iconography more for what it *is not* than for what it *is*. It is not humanist, not sentimental, not modernist; and when so much religious art has one or more of these flaws, it is tempting to canonize the art of an earlier era, and regard all subsequent development as a falling away. While this approach may remove some of the worst art from consideration, it trades away sacred art's truest and most important purpose (its birthright, so to speak): to elevate souls. The human experience of beauty is rooted in distant memory of the edenic life and the longing for heaven; sacred art therefore can never be considered a completed task, embodied in an artifact of this world. To consider it so is to diminish it immeasurably. Byzantine iconography, for all its merits, is but the inchoate form of something better, and it should be allowed to become that, endlessly. Likewise, I regard Romanesque art as merely unrealized Gothic; Gregorian chant as merely unrealized polyphony; and both Gothic art and polyphony as the inchoate forms of something better yet.

Which is to say that I have no real desire to imitate Rublev here, although I did take one idea directly from this famous icon: that the veal served in the dish be specifically a calf's *head*, rather than some other cut of meat.



Abraham Greets the Angels, Anonymous 15th century panel painting



Abraham Greets the Angels, Painting by Josse Lieferinxe



Hospitality of Abraham, Anonymous Belorussian icon

Two western, late medieval panel paintings, one anonymous and one by Josse Lieferinxe, impressed me. These both depict Abraham first meeting the angels, before he has washed their feet or prepared a table for them. I liked the arrangement of an anonymous icon from white Russia, which shows the three angels at a round table, Abraham kneeling to serve them, Sarah laughing in the background to the left, and the tree in the background center.



To this basic arrangement, I decided to add a basin for washing feet; Abraham's 13-year-old son Ishmael, who perhaps was the young man who boiled the calf;

and Eliezer of Damascus. Thus Abraham's first and second heirs are present when the news of his next and favored son's coming is announced.



Contrary to what is usually considered best practice for artists, I regard composition as a mostly instinctual and very fast process. This is one of my peculiarities; I almost never make detailed drafts or belabor questions of arrangement and content. Figuring out where things go in a picture takes about twenty seconds. If the first pencil sketch does not look right, I make another, which also takes about twenty seconds.

I sometimes see art historians and art theorists breaking down pictures systematically, superimposing colored geometric shape outlines over them to demonstrate how carefully everything was composed. I won't say that this way of thinking is wrong, just that it is foreign to me.

The first figure I drew was Ishmael, standing by ready to hand butter and milk to his father. From the Biblical description of him as a *wild donkey of a man*, I got the idea to portray him as a woodwose, the wild man of medieval folklore.



Woodwose engraving by Martin Schongauer

Woodwoses have fascinated me for years, being so often present in the margins of sacred art, as manuscript drolleries, misericord carvings, or gargoyles; and

also in secular medieval art, on printers' devices, coats of arms, and playing cards.

I have read Richard Bernheimer's study *Wild Men in the Middle Ages*. While this book had some fascinating insights, it seemed to me to try too hard to connect woodwoses with fairy folk, minor pagan deities, demons, and ghosts; and to miss more obvious connections between medieval depictions and descriptions of madmen and hermits. King Nebuchadnezzar and the feral knight Orson were considered woodwoses in their madness, which was temporary and remediable. Thus makes me think that woodwoses may have some basis in fact, in mentally ill persons left to fend for themselves in the wilderness, and perhaps forming societies amongst themselves.

Mary Magdalene, in the later years of her life as a desert hermitess, was depicted with hair covering her entire body. Likewise John Chrysostom was depicted as a woodwose, so intense was his asceticism during his years alone in the wilderness.

I think it plausible also, in light of Biblical descriptions of Ishmael and Esau, that a trait of extreme hairiness may have been more common in ancient times. So here, I have added long flowing hair to Ishmael's arms and legs, but left him beardless so as to appear yet an adolescent.

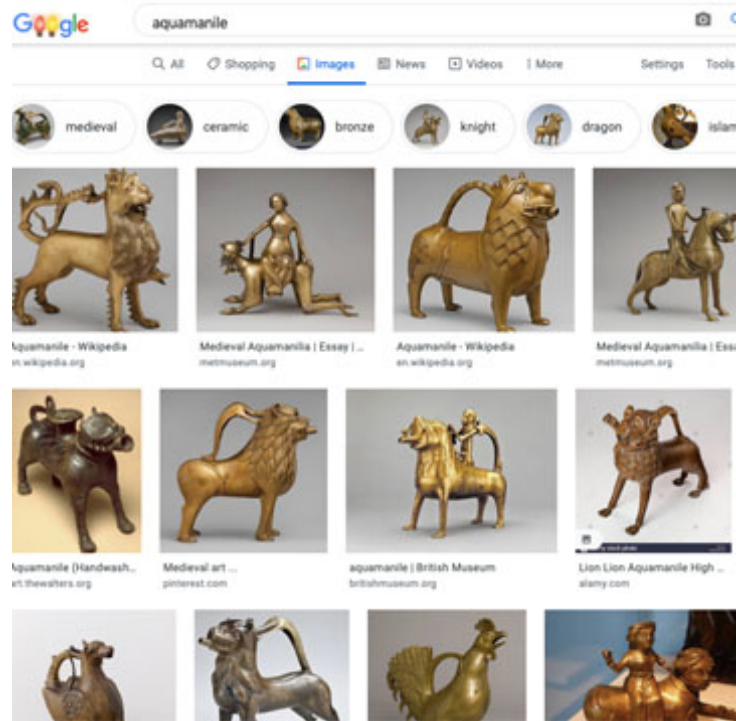




Hands are tricky to draw, so I take a lot of reference pictures of myself holding various objects. The thing that I have in my hand in the second picture, standing in for the knop of Abraham's serving dish, is the result of letting vines for warty pumpkins and ornamental gourds cross-pollinate in my backyard.

The basin in the foreground was just used for washing the angels' feet; I wanted this to be distinctive, and to have a nearly identical vessel reappear later in the *Summula Pictoria*, at the Last Supper. I made it eight-sided, to suggest a baptismal font. With it is an aquamanile in the shape of a lion.

Aquamaniles were vessels for pouring water, typically for washing hands (hence the name), either at Mass or at the secular dining table. Especially fanciful ones were made in medieval brass workshops of the Mosan valley, often in the shape of lions, griffins, or Aristotle being ridden by his mistress like a horse.



Abraham Rejects Hagar and Ishmael, by Jan Mostaert

I liked the posture of Abraham in Josse Lieferinxe's painting, and drew a very similar figure myself, although making his advanced age of ninety-nine more apparent. In the medieval paintings I studied, I noticed several that depicted Abraham wearing a red garment with an ermine shoulder cape. This is of

course an anachronism, and a surprising one given that day is hot and sunny, and that Abraham was presumably still recovering from having circumcised himself recently. I do not know that these medieval artists meant any deliberate symbolism, but I liked the idea that it suggested to me, that Abraham cared so much about honoring his guests that he would dress in his most formal clothing, despite his own discomfort.



I wanted Abraham to have a distinctive sword, one that would be recognized easily in other scenes from his life (especially the Sacrifice of Isaac), and in

miniature as a circumcision knife. I chose a curious falchion depicted in the Crusader Bible, with a notched blade and an upward-curving guard for the hand.



Detail from an illustration in the Crusader Bible, Morgan Library

A curious matter that I came across in my research concerns the Jewish interpretation of this scene. To medieval rabbis, it was seriously troubling that Abraham (who, as a sort of ideal Jew, would have intuited the laws later revealed to Moses) would have served flesh together with milk and butter at the same meal. One speculated that Abraham's calf had no mother, and therefore fell not under the prohibition of being cooked or eaten with a mother's milk - rather, the calf had been conjured by Abraham through kabbalistic means. As a Christian, I of course have no reason to think that Abraham would have cared

about this taboo, as I believe the Mosaic dietary law was temporary and only extrinsically good.



I added a lemon and an onion to the dish with the calf's head. These do not symbolize anything; they are just there for flavor.

The various depictions of the Hospitality of Abraham that I studied had either rectangular or round tables; there were enough of each that I concluded neither were untraditional. I chose round. On the table are the three ash cakes baked by

Sarah, three platters, a knife, and a chalice for wine. These are meant to suggest and prefigure the bread and wine served at the Last Supper.



The art historian Volkmar Gantzhorn argued in his book *The Christian Oriental Carpet* that carpets are traditional indicators of sanctity, like halos for the feet. I have designed special carpets for 12 of the most important figures in the *Summula Pictoria*. Abraham was not one of these, but I thought that the three angels representing God really ought to have carpets, especially considering that their feet were just washed, and that it would be silly for them to be walking on dirt immediately thereafter. I created these designs, one for each angel, incorporating orthogonal letters spelling the word DEUS.

I do not use consistent linear perspective in my drawings; indeed, I deliberately avoid doing so, for reasons that I explained in my essay *Heavenly Outlook*. However, floor coverings look very awkward when drawn without any perspectival diminution. It is possible to draw them in perspective using a receding grid of pencil lines and figuring the design square by square. It is much faster to scan the drawing, paste the rug design onto it in Photoshop, use the rotate, skew, and distort tools to put it in its correct shape and position, and then print that as a guide to trace. So long as everything starts out and ends up drawn by hand, I have no problem using a computer for intermediate time-saving steps like these. As it happens, the vellum used for this drawing was so

thick that it was easier to redraw the rugs using the printed sheet for reference rather than to trace it.



The Bible says little about Eliezer of Damascus, Abraham's steward and original heir. Many Jewish legends, however, surround him. Some of these are related to stories about young Abraham and his contest with King Nimrod. Eliezar is said to have been a slave of Nimrod, or even his son. Others identify Eliezar with Og, the last of the Rephaim, a giant who supposedly survived the Great Flood and who was the same King Og of Bashan who fought the armies of Moses.

While I don't discredit the stories of Abraham and Nimrod out of hand, I find the identification of Eliezar with Og of Bashan incredible, and the idea that any man survived the Great Flood outside of the Noah and his family theologically inadmissible. However, Eliezar being a giant (as Og was, and as Nimrod was sometimes held to be) seems plausible; the Bible clearly says that men of gigantic stature - entire tribes of them - were common in these early times.



I have chosen to depict him as a giant, and as a Hamite (like Nimrod), holding a jug of wine to serve the guests and stooping to fit into the picture frame.

I based Abraham's tent, in which Sarah stands laughing, on the pavilion in the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestries, referencing also some pavilions constructed by medieval reenactors. For the inscription, I chose the words that God spoke earlier to Abraham: *Look up to heaven and number the stars, if thou canst. So shall thy seed be.* I found the Hebrew text of these words, set it in a typeface of my own design, and used this as a reference while writing it freehand around the tent.



Lady and the Unicorn, Anonymous 15th century Tapestry



בט נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים אנ
תוכל לספר אתם פה יהיה זרעך

השמימה וספר הכוכבים
קראטון פשדגכע יחלזסבהנמ



The outer borders of the small drawings in the *Summula Pictoria* correspond to the subject in their centers: blue for prelapsarian scenes, murrey for Old Testament scenes after the Fall, white (or blank calfskin, actually) for the lives of Mary and of John the Baptist, green for parables and prophetic visions, and red for the martyrdoms of the apostles.

While toying with the inner border and the sun in the sky, I got the idea to extend the image into the other border, drawing the pinnacle of the tent and one wing of an angel thee. I added also stars, referring to Abraham's innumerable progeny.



The tree under which Abraham stood has traditionally been identified with a particular ancient, gnarled oak in Hebron. I did not copy this tree directly in my drawing, but I bore photographs of it in mind. When it comes to depicting trees, Eyvind Earle and Sultan Muhammad are my favorite artists.



The Oak of Mamre

At this point in the drawing, Sarah the Matriach is the last figure - indeed the last significant person or thing - that I need to draw on the front of the calfskin. I drew a picture of Sarah, with the Hospitality of Abraham in the background, in 2016. Still being fond of that work, I was tempted to copy the figure more or less exactly into this new drawing, but the pose was not quite right, so I drew her anew, her hand gestures suggesting the thought in her mind: *Surely you don't mean that I and he will have a baby?!*



Here I sketched out for the first time the figures for the persons of the Holy Trinity, appearing as three angels. This presents a strange challenge; what sort of faces ought they to have? Certainly when I draw the second person of the Trinity in a time before His incarnation, I give him the appearance of the young man Jesus Christ - as here, at the Marriage of Adam and Eve.

But what to do when depicting all three persons together? In the entire *Summula Pictoria*, this is the only drawing that requires it. Since the persons are described as angels, and since Abraham interacts with them as though they were men, it is not possible here to depict the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove.

God the Father is often depicted in sacred art as an old man, usually with a flowing white beard. This is, contrary to what certain Orthodox polemicists will claim, completely traditional in both the Western and Eastern Churches. The Athonite painters' manual compiled by Dionysius of Fournas states plainly: *We depict the Timeless Father as an old man, as Daniel saw him clearly.*



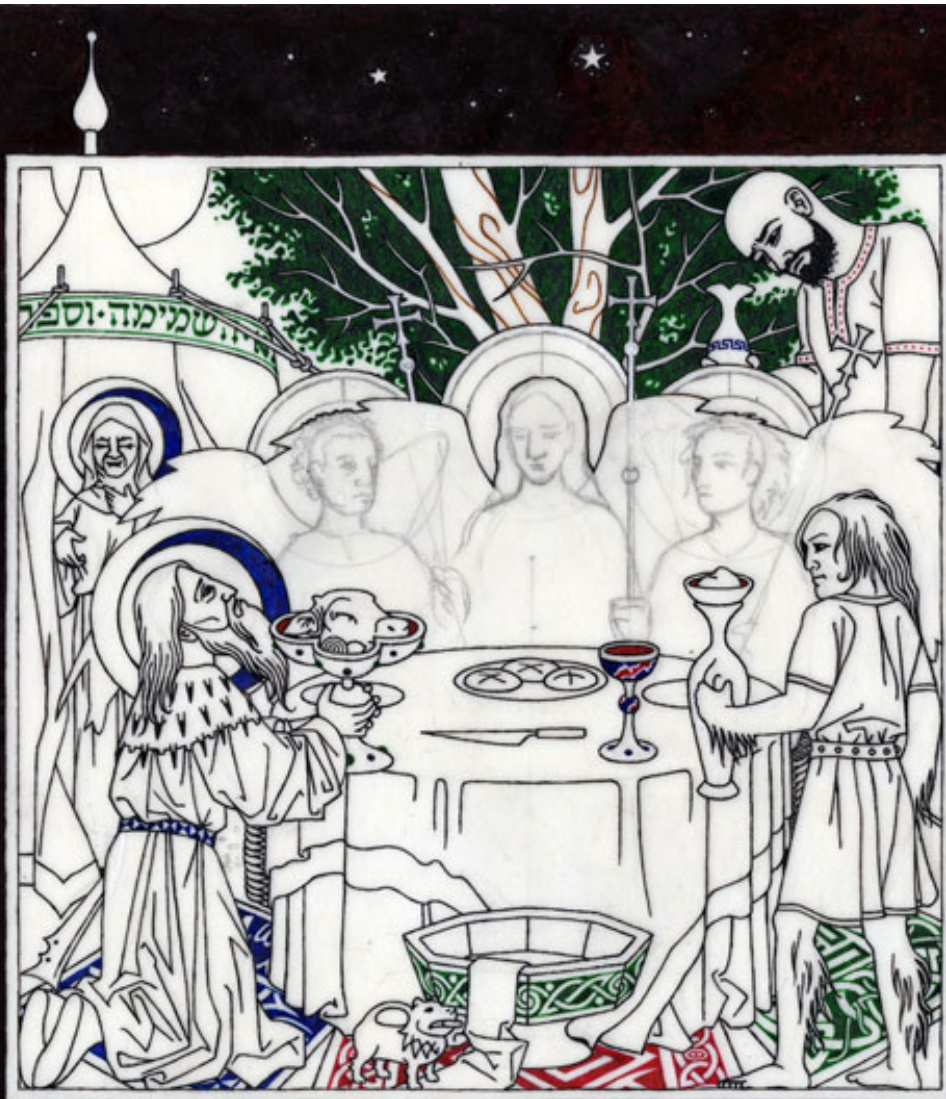
Russian Trinity icon



Mexican Trinity retablo

While I always defend this tradition against those who attack it (the sort who have read Leonid Ouspensky once and think they know everything about iconography), I am reluctant to use it myself, especially here. When the Trinity is

depicted as the Ancient of Days, the young man Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost as a dove, that makes sense: these are the forms under which the three persons appeared to human eyes. The distinctness of each person is the doctrine given emphasis. But were the Trinity to be depicted as the Ancient of Days and *two* young men, it would suggest that one person of the Trinity were more eternal than both others, which is of course heresy.



The option of depicting the Trinity as *three* young men has been explored in sacred art at least since the late Middle Ages. I have seen more examples in *retablos*, the folk icons of Latin America, than anywhere else. I rather like this approach, as it depicts a different doctrine very clearly: the coeternality of all three persons of the Trinity. This is not, however, without controversy: some have accused these depictions of suggesting that there are three Sons in the Trinity, or that the three persons are indistinct. It was on such grounds that Pope Benedict XIV condemned this artistic practice.

To be perfectly honest, I am not convinced that Benedict XIV made a good decision or a well-thought-out argument to support it. Nor do I consider Urban VIII or the Great Moscow Synod or anyone else writing in the past five centuries to be more authoritative than the artistic tradition itself, as far as the proper depiction of the Trinity is concerned. But neither am I in a hurry to challenge them. I am, after all, neither a cleric nor a theologian.

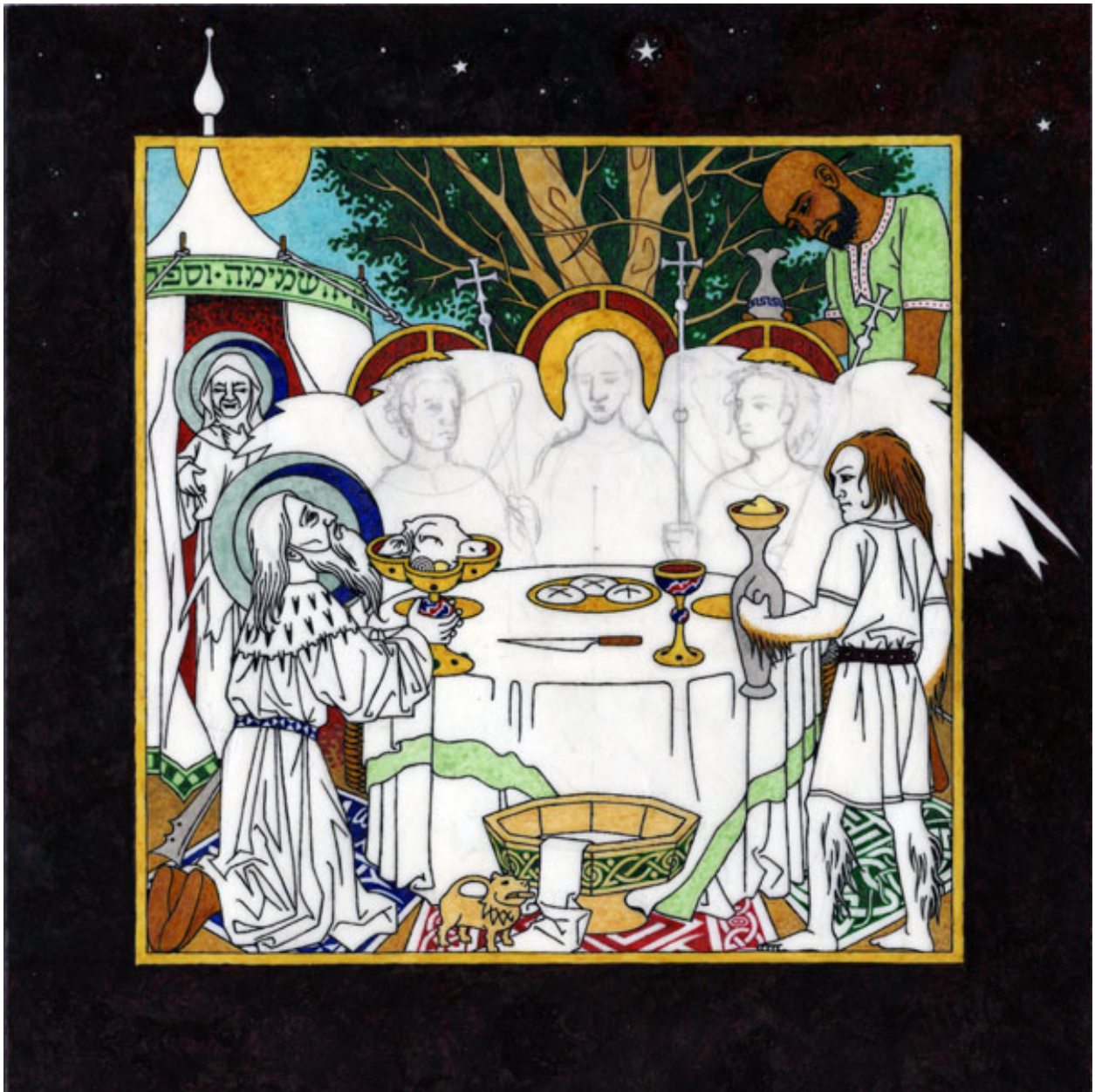
So I decided to do something entirely different. Because the persons of the Trinity, in this event, appear as angels and are traditionally depicted as such, I drew them as angels, young men with wings. None of them has the bearded face of Jesus Christ, and all of them look very different from each other. I used the same models for their faces as I use for the archangels Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. This is not to suggest that these figures are in fact those three specific archangels - the cruciform halos clearly indicate a divine rather than angelic nature - but rather to suggest that God used them as a sort of disguise. This refers also to the traditional Jewish interpretation of this event (mentioned last month), in which the three visitors are associated with the three archangels, and with the three specific purposes of the visit: to heal the wound of circumcision (Raphael), to deliver the news of the coming child (Gabriel), and to destroy Sodom (Michael). I like to think that this interpretation, although meager, has a shadow of truth to it.

At about this point in the drawing, I realized that in all of the artistic precedents that I studied, the three visitors hold staves, which I forgot to include. I was able to scratch away enough of the tree in the background to correct this oversight.

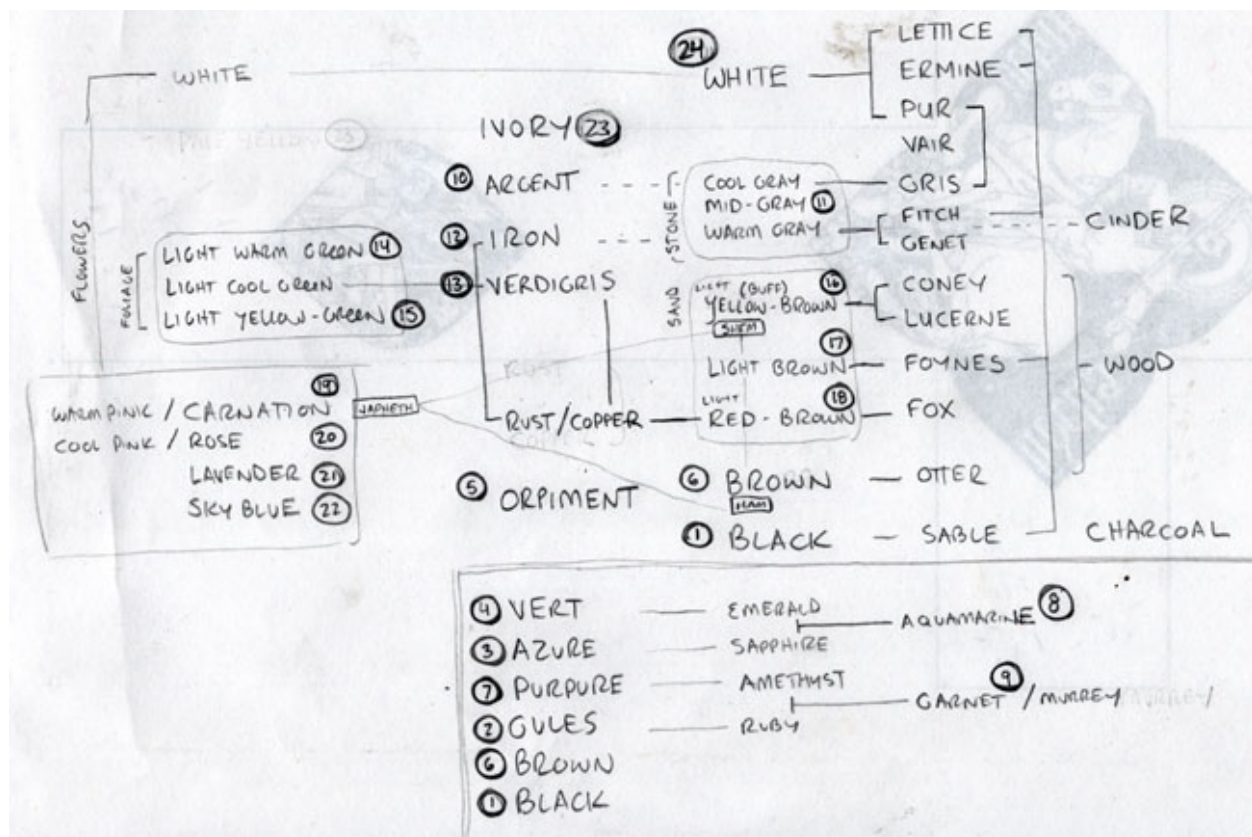


Here, all of the dark and medium-dark drawing on the front side of the calfskin is complete. I scanned the drawing at a very high resolution at this point, to

prepare a black and white file. 'This I use both to make coloring sheets, and as a guide should I ever decide to make another copy of this drawing. Once this is done, I start adding lighter colors.



My personal color theory is difficult to explain in words. When I think about what colors to use in my artwork, I tend to make charts like these:

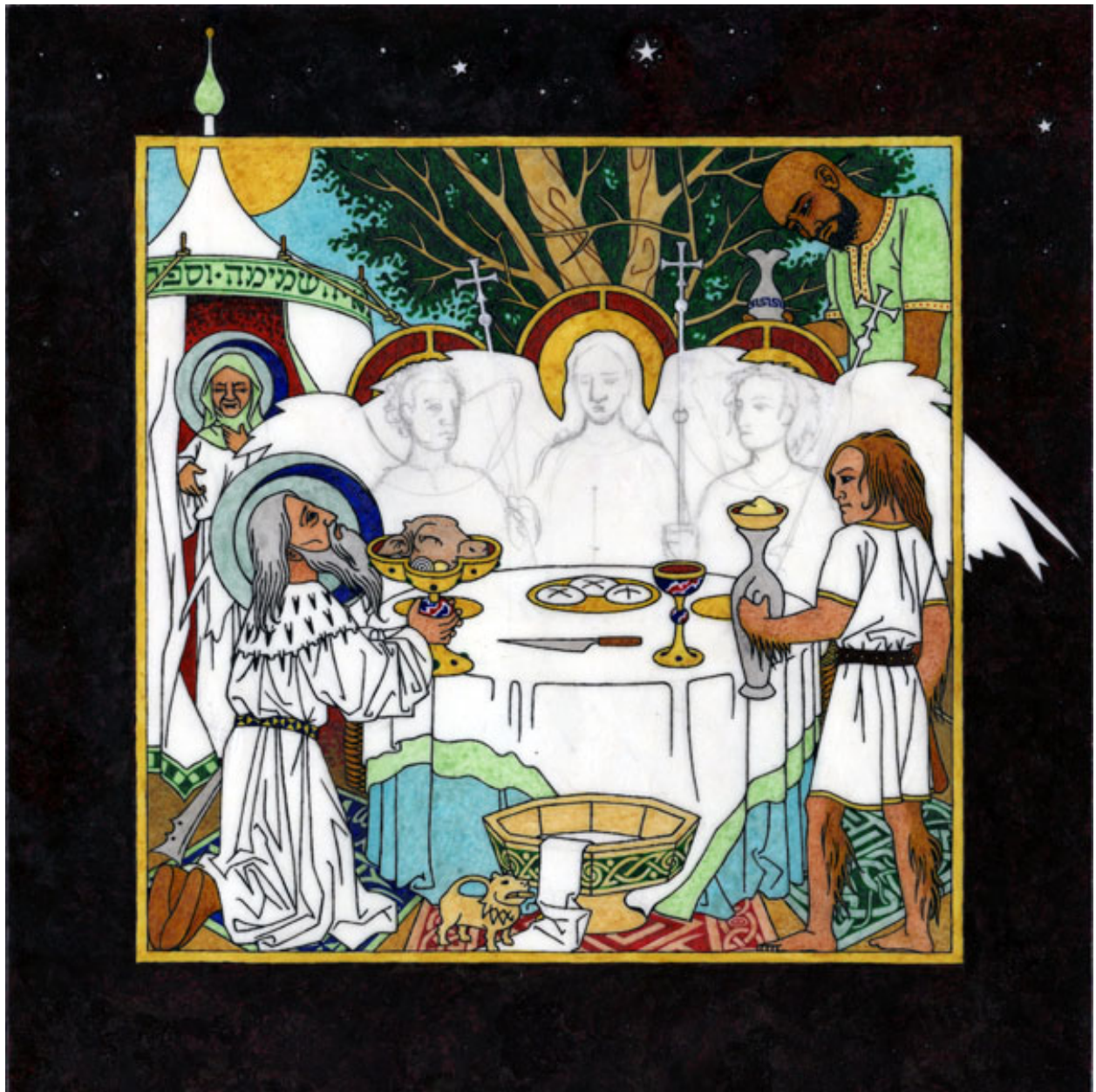


I like to use a limited number of specific colors, which I mix in bottles and keep between drawings (unless they spoil, as eventually happens with the more dilute ones. When this happens, the colors still look fine, but the smell from the bottle can turn my stomach). I've found that 24 different colors usually suffice, and I have a specific quality that I want from each one. I like my red darker than what usually comes in a bottle of ink, so I mix a few drops of black into it. My blue has a few drops of green. I have three grays - one cool and slightly blue, one neutral, and one warm and slightly brown.

The chart above is my way of thinking about the relation between the different colors, how they are grouped and what they represent. I consider various color categories from medieval art and Christian tradition: heraldic tinctures, furs, gemstones, flowers, and metals.



In this drawing, sixteen colors appear, plus white (the blank calfskin): #1 black, #2 red, #3 blue, # 4 green, #5 orpiment, #6 brown, #9 murrey, #10 cool gray, #11 gray, #13 verdigris, #16 yellow-brown, #17 light brown, #19 warm pink, #20 cool pink, #22 light blue and #23 ivory.

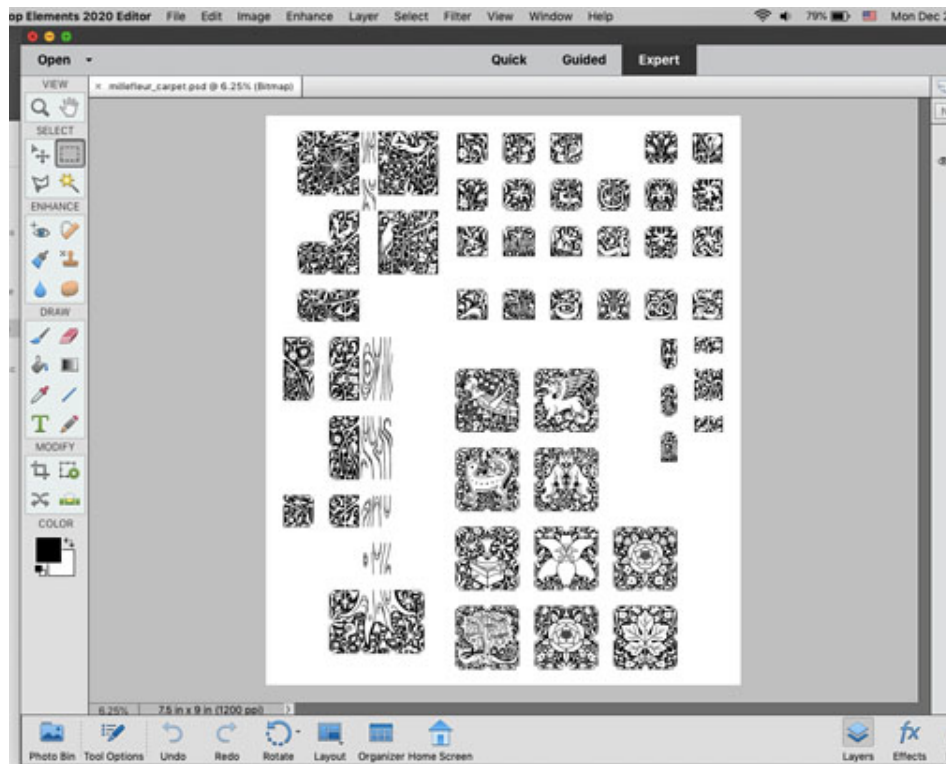


Turning the drawing over, I start by outlining the areas that will have drawing on the back. If the calfskin were thin, this step would not be necessary. Because this particular piece is unusually thick, I need these guides just to be able to tell what I am doing.



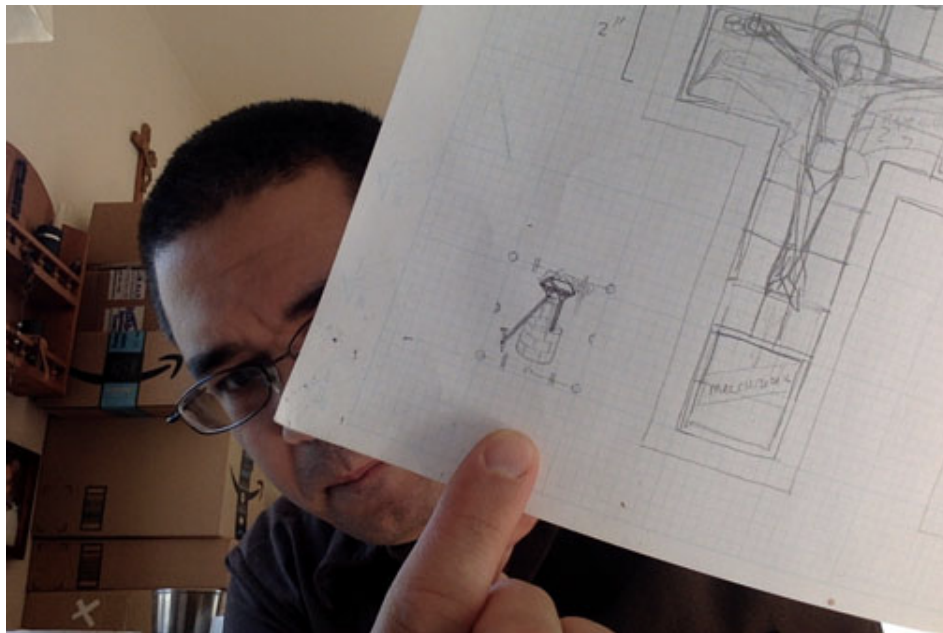
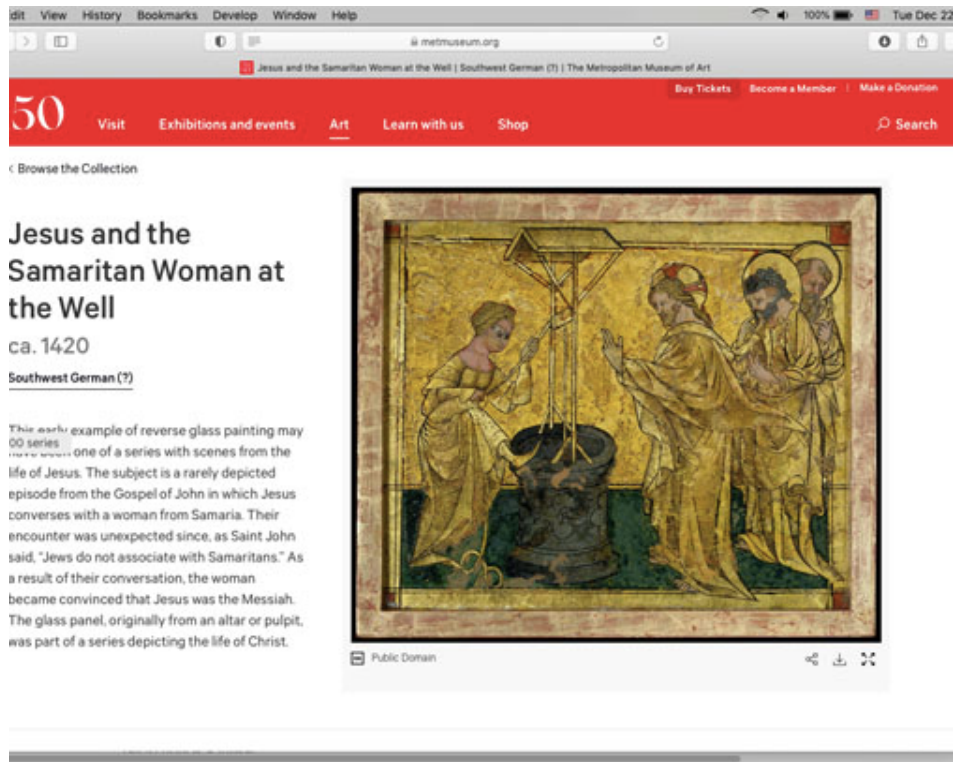
The damask for this drawing required three elements. A water well is my emblem to represent Abraham and the Hebrew patriarchs in general. A salamander, the mythical creature that lives in fire without being burned, represents theophanies and miraculous encounters with the divine. A peridexion tree is a symbol of the Trinity; its meaning is explained in the Aberdeen Bestiary:

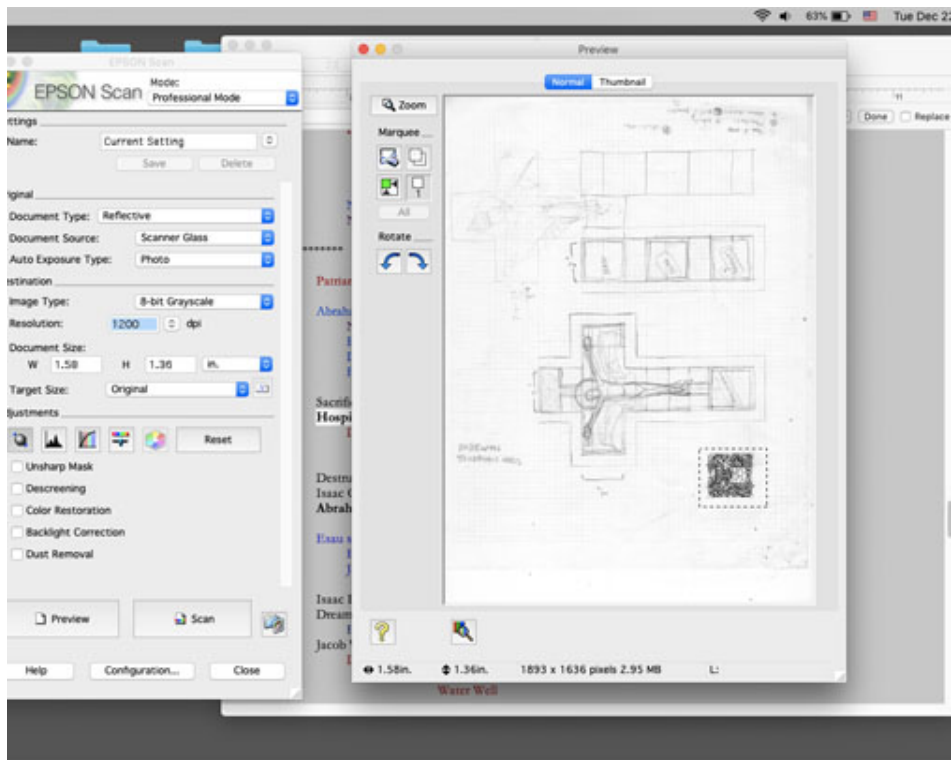
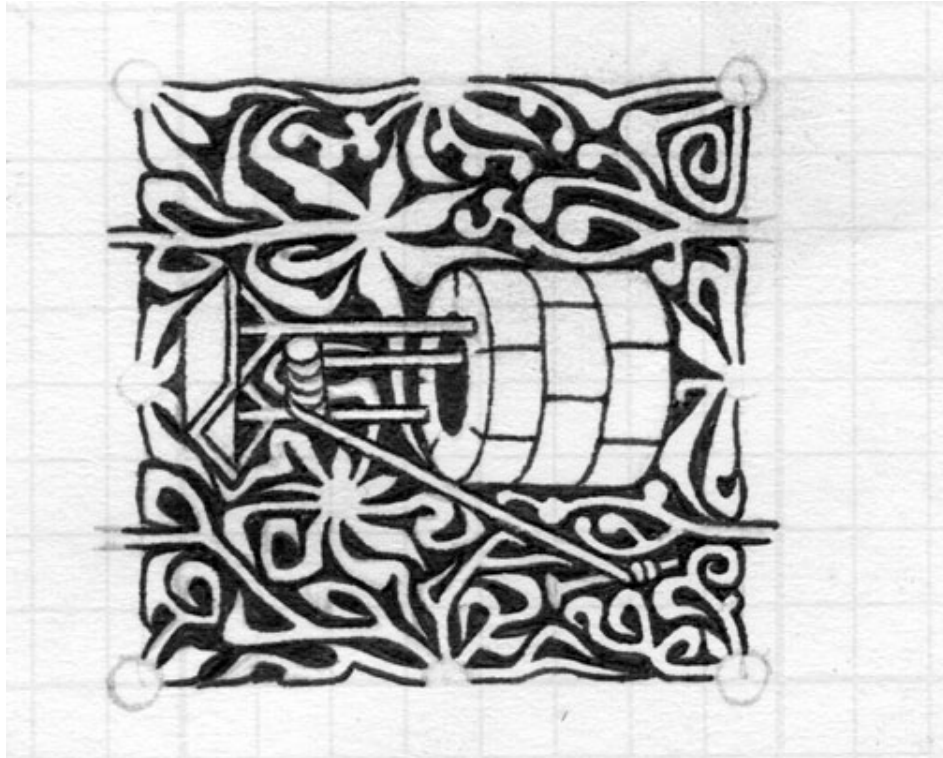
The perindens is a tree in India. Its fruit is sweet throughout and exceedingly pleasant; doves delight in it and live in the tree, feeding on it. The dragon is the dove's enemy; it fears the tree and its shadow, in which the doves dwell; and it cannot approach either the tree or its shadow. If the shadow lies towards the west the dragon flees to the east, and if the shadow falls towards the east, the dragon flees to the west. If it should happen that a dove is caught out of the tree or its shadow, the dragon kills it. Take the tree as God, the shadow as his son; as Gabriel says to Mary: *The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee*. Take the fruit to be the wisdom of God, that is, the Holy Spirit.

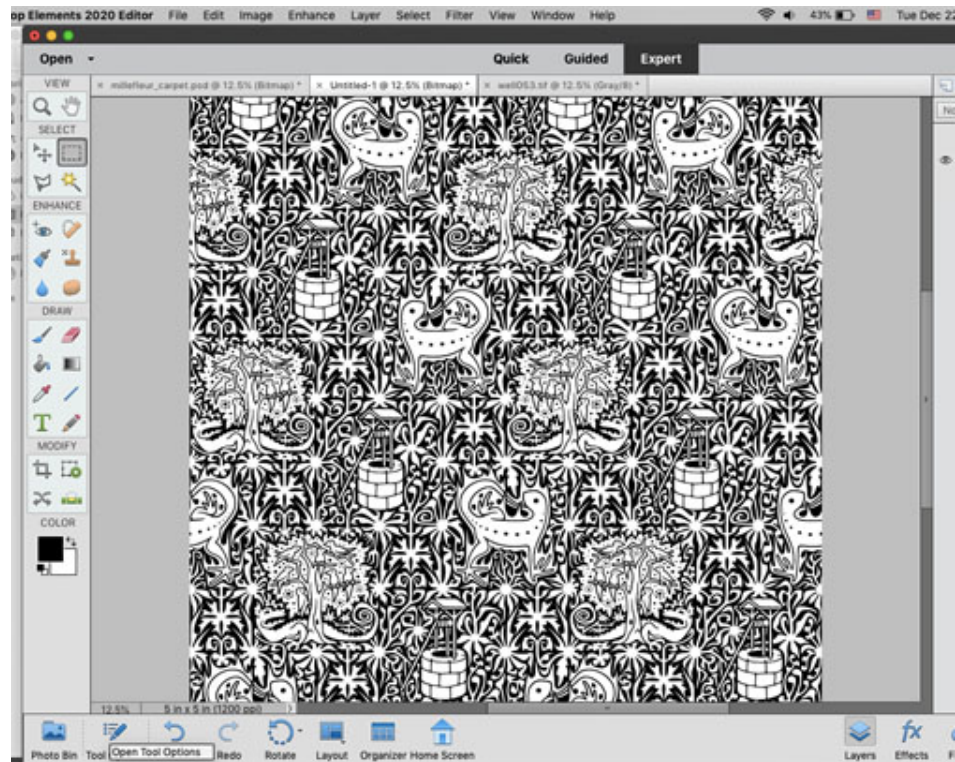
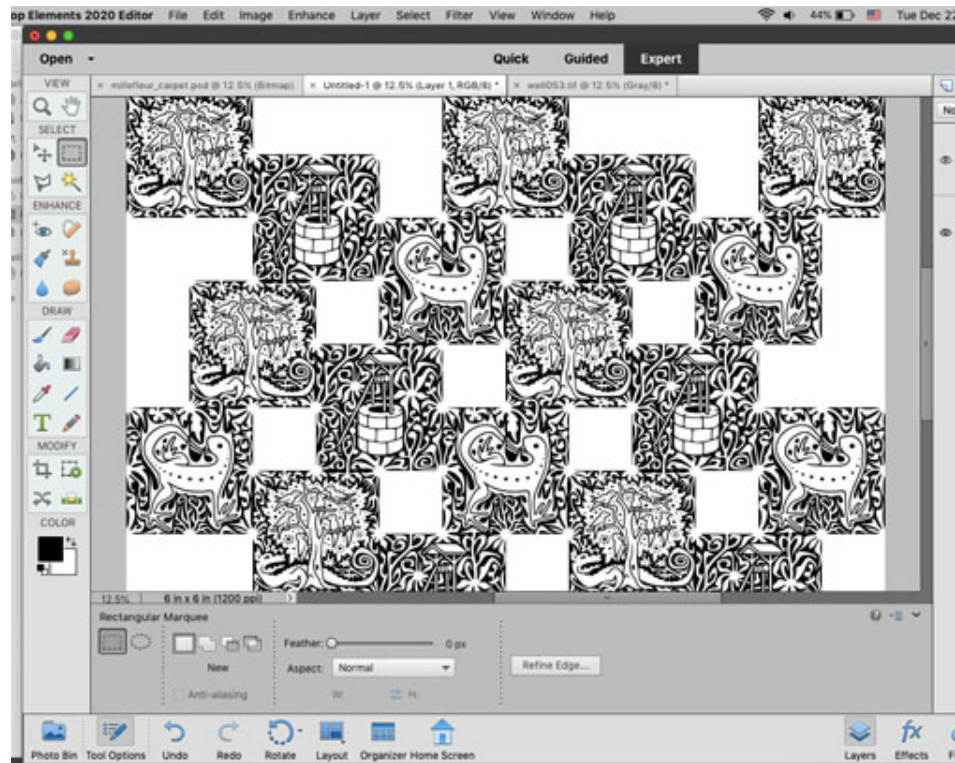


I had already drawn the salamander and the peridexion tree before starting this drawing, and had high-resolution bitmap scans of them available. These scans I save as square or rectangular units, which can be fitted together to form a continuous millefleur pattern. I only needed a well. This I drew in ink on graph

paper; I scanned the drawing, reduced it to black and white, and retouched it a little to make sure that it fit smoothly with the other ornamental units.







From here, I assemble the full damask pattern in Photoshop, and print two copies of it.



The first printed sheet with the damask pattern I lay under the drawing to trace. The second I set to the side, so that I can see the details of the pattern better. If the calfskin were thin, this second sheet would not be necessary.



Tracing damask on a light table is especially hard on the hands. I can get cramps if I forget to stretch every so often. I keep Baoding balls nearby for this purpose.



The reconciliation of the races of mankind is a theme that I wish to illustrate throughout the *Summula Pictoria*. Traditional exegesis identifies three races descended from the three sons of Noah. Semites, associated roughly with the continent of Asia, include Hebrews and Arabs. Japhethites, associated roughly with the continent of Europe, include Greeks, Romans, and Persians. Hamites, associated roughly with the continent of Africa, include Egyptians, Ethiopians,

and Canaanites. These races lived together between the Deluge and the scattering of peoples after the Tower of Babel. Mystically, they are reunited in the persons of the Three Magi, who traditionally are depicted as being one of each race. Their adoration of the Christ Child represents a New Testament, in which there is neither *Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian...*

To emphasize this idea, whenever possible and appropriate, I depict groups of three persons to include one of each race. That is why I chose a white model for Michael's face, an Asian model for Gabriel's, and a black model for Raphael's. The association between angel and race was arbitrary.





I posed myself for the clothing and hands of these figures, wearing a secondhand chasuble and alb, holding a broomstick.



I used photographs of hawks as a reference for the wing feathers.



And at this point, it is just a matter of coloring in everything else. Here are the final scans of the back and the front.



