

Intro to Illumination

Lady Cecily of York

cathleenhughes@gmail.com

Introduction

We are going to briefly learn about the history of medieval painting and illumination in the context of making SCA scrolls, then move on to starting your own scroll. This class assumes no prior knowledge or art experience.

What is illumination?

Illumination is the artistic decorations surrounding the written text (the calligraphy) in medieval manuscripts. Many of these manuscripts were religious texts, decorated by scribes working in monasteries, however illumination is also found on charters, scientific treatises, literature.

In the SCA, our award scrolls are generally based on pages from books, but can be based on many things, including period artifacts, works of art, legal documents, embroidery, etc.

Finding period sources

We live in a golden age of information, and there are many high resolution scans of entire manuscripts available online from libraries and museums, free to view. Check the Scribal Resources handout for a list of websites.

But I can't draw!

Neither could many of the scribes making manuscripts! Production scribes generally copied from model books drawn by a master artist, and there is even evidence that they traced designs. If you are not confident in your drawing skills, tracing is a wonderful technique for achieving a period look, and copying directly from manuscripts is how I recommend learning. Plus much of illumination design is more akin to doodling than drawing.

Getting Started

Materials in bold are available for a \$10 material fee.

Materials

- Paper
 - **Bristol smooth paper** (or other hot-press watercolor paper)
 - Pergamenata - a plant-based imitation parchment
 - Parchment/vellum - made from the stretch skins of animals
 - Try to use standard frame sizes to make the recipient's life easier. Common frame sizes are: 5x7, 8x10, and 11x14.
- Pencil - for sketching the initial design.
- Eraser - a white or kneaded artist eraser works best.
- Ruler - for making straight lines.
- **Technical pen** - Micron, Staedtler, or similar. Gives clean lines and is easy to use.
- **Gouache paints**
 - These are opaque watercolor paints very similar to period paints.
 - Reeve's makes an inexpensive starter set available at Joann's, etc. If you decide you want to continue illumination, consider upgrading to artist quality gouache, which has more pigment in the paint. Winsor & Newton, M. Graham, and Holbein are good brands.
 - A good starting palette is:
 - **Ultramarine**
 - **Cadmium red**
 - Cadmium yellow
 - **Permanent white**
 - If you want to expand, other recommended pigments are:
 - Lamp black
 - Sap green
 - Yellow ochre
 - Burnt umber
- **Brush** - a small round brush is what I use for 99% of my work.
- **Palette** - something with a lid is helpful for keeping out dust.
- Gold leaf
 - Real gold leaf is tricky to use and rather expensive, but doable.
 - **Gold gouache** - makes an inexpensive and easy to use substitute.

Process

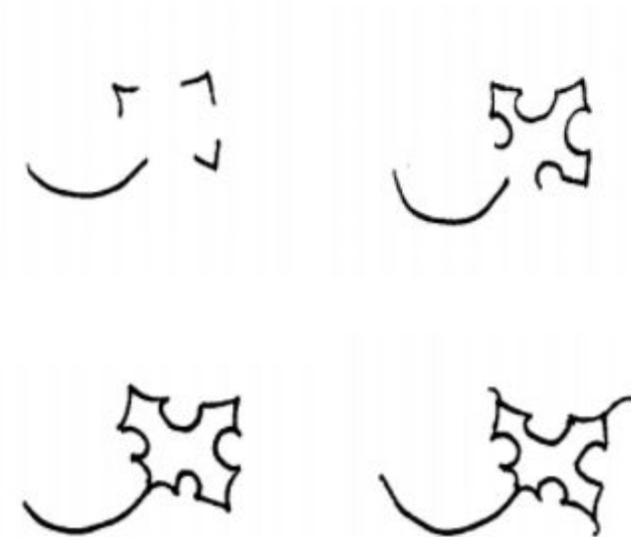
Note: this is my process for doing scrolls, but is not *the* way to do scrolls. Every scribe has their own preferred method, and you'll find yours by doing.

1. **Establish borders.**
 - Leave at least 1" blank around the border for framing (less on scrolls smaller than 5x7).
 - Be sure to leave enough room for calligraphy in the center.
 - You can measure the original source and scale it to your paper size, or just eyeball it.
2. **Sketch in design.**
 - Draw lightly, as you will be erasing these lines.
 - Sketch in major guidelines first, then fill in details.
3. ***Do calligraphy*** - this is when you would add the words. That way if you misspell the person's name and have to start over, you haven't wasted too much time.
4. **Ink the design.**
 - Optional, but will make it easier to paint.
5. ***Apply gold leaf*** - now is when you would apply it. It sticks to gouache as well as miniatum (the glue used to hold it down), so it goes down before you paint.
6. **Paint base colors.**
 - Mix a drop of clean water onto your dry gouache. The consistency you are looking for is that of **heavy cream**.
 - Paint in the edges of shapes first, then fill in the middle.
 - Keep mixing the paint to ensure even consistency. Add water as necessary.
 - Do all of one color before moving on to the next.
7. **Shading** - add your dark areas, then your light areas, if the design requires them.
8. **Whitework**
 - This is the fancy white detail lines decorating many manuscripts.
 - Use permanent white (not zinc white) to ensure it is opaque.
9. **Ink borders.**
 - Optional, but will let you clean up any borders that got a little messy painting.

Tips

- **Work at an incline.** Not necessary, but will save your back.
- **Use two cups of water.** One clean for mixing paint, and one dirty for cleaning brushes.
- **For shaky hands,** brace your arm against something, hold your breath during the stroke, and do not drink caffeine before painting.

Making Ivy Leaves



How do I start making scrolls?

Scroll blanks are an excellent way to develop your skills without the pressure of having an assignment with a deadline. Simply make a decorated border (leaving room for the text), and hand it over to your local signet.

Assignments - contact the kingdom Signet at signet@northshield.org asking to be added to the Northshield Scribes mailing list. You will start receiving emails every few weeks calling for volunteers for upcoming events. Reply that you would like an assignment, and the Signet will send you a person's name, the award they are receiving, the event, and the reasons why the person is receiving the award.

Partner with a calligrapher - find a friendly calligrapher and ask if they will do some calligraphy for you. The next time you take an assignment, pencil in your illumination, hand it over for them to add the calligraphy, then finish up the illumination (that way if they botch the calligraphy by say, misspelling the person's name, you won't have wasted hours and hours on painting). This requires teamwork and clear communication about deadlines.