

# Beginning Illumination

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The purpose of this class is to get the novice started in illumination, to show you that it isn't as scary as it might seem. To this end we are not going to delve too far into the technical details of either historical or SCA illumination, for this initial foray into the field you will be getting some hands on experience. Contained below are discussions on the basics of Illumination, appropriate painting mediums and appropriate stocks for painting on. Then, we will paint!

## What is Illumination?

Illumination, from the Latin *illuminare*, "to enlighten or illuminate," is the embellishment of a manuscript with luminous colors (especially gold and silver)... (Brown, 69).

Within the context of the SCA we use illumination to decorate award scrolls, basing the design and execution on period manuscript pages. In period award scrolls were legal documents and did not have such elaborate embellishment, this makes the scrolls that we produce unique to the SCA. As with most other things in the SCA it is impossible to make general statements about colors, techniques and design because each period and region had their own distinctive illumination style. The purpose of this class is to get you started in painting so that you can then explore and find the areas that interest you.

The two things that you can do to become a better illuminator are equally important. One is to paint, as with almost everything, practice makes perfect. By taking this class you are taking your first step on this journey. The other, equally important, thing is to look at period examples of illumination. This is the way to learn good color choices. There are literally thousands of surviving examples of illuminated manuscripts, these can be easily acquired in book form and there is a vast amount of examples catalogued on the internet.

The term for someone who creates illumination is Illuminator. The term scribe more accurately refers to the individual producing the calligraphy, in period these two positions were rarely filled by the same individual. During the early Middle Ages most illuminated manuscripts were produced in ecclesiastical scriptoriums or a workshop associated with a specific court, but with the rise of the University systems in 1200 workshops grew in more urban areas. With this development more lay people, both men and women, entered the field and by the Late Middle Ages most Illuminators were lay (Brown, 70-71).

## Mediums

A good beginning medium for painting scrolls is either Gouache or Watercolor. The following mediums are unacceptable and should not be used to illuminate a Kingdom Scroll: felt tipped pens, "Magic" markers, colored pencils, watercolor pencils, watercolor pens, crayons or gel pens. These items are of suspect permanence and are prone to fading. The scroll that you have worked so hard on will soon fade away to nothing.

Gouache and watercolor are made up of similar ingredients; pigments suspended in water soluble binder such as Gum Arabic. The primary difference is that the pigments in gouache are opaque where watercolor pigments are translucent. Gouache provides the dense coverage seen in most period manuscripts. It is possible to achieve a similar result with watercolors by not diluting the paint as much as you would for normal watercolor painting.

Gouache can be purchased in either Student or Artist grades. In Artist grade gouache the opacity is provided by the pigment itself. In Student grade the opacity is provided by white fillers such as chalk. Excellent examples of Artist grade gouache are Winsor & Newton and Holbein. The drawback to Artist grade is the cost, for a beginner it is completely acceptable to use the Student grades two examples are Pebeo and Savoir Faire. If you find Gouache at a local store read the package carefully, check the ingredients and make sure that there is no acrylic in the paint.

Watercolors are made by many of the same manufacturers as gouache and have similar differences between Student and Artist grade. Use the same check on ingredient lists to ensure no acrylic content.

In period the pigments were mixed with various binders to achieve different effects. The two most common binders used in manuscript illumination were Glair (egg white) and Gum Arabic. With research it is possible to discover the proper pigments and binder to use for whatever style you are attempting to reproduce, but that would be another class.

To put together a starting set of gouache consider the following suggestions:

- Blacks: Lamp Black, Jet Black, Ivory Black
- Whites: Permanent White (use for lining), Zinc White (for mixing)
- Blues: Ultramarine (if mixed with a little Zinc White it will look more period), Prussian Blue
- Greens: Windsor Green, Permanent Green, Olive Green, Sap Green
- Yellows: Yellow Ochre, Permanent Yellow Deep, Cadmium Yellow Pale, Deep Spectrum Yellow.
- Reds: Spectrum Red, Alizarin Crimson, Cadmium Red Pale, Red Ochre
- Metals: Gold, Silver (here it is good to invest in the higher quality gouaches)
- Other: Flesh Tint, Purple Lake, Burnt Umber, Raw Umber, Burnt Sienna, Raw Sienna

To use gouache it needs to be mixed with water, distilled is best. It is a matter of feel and preference to find the proper viscosity that you are comfortable working with. This is where practice helps. Another liquid that can be added to assist in smoothing out the paint is Ox Gall. Mix the liquids and the paint well until the paint flows behind your brush, I recommend that people think about stroking the paint on as opposed to tickling the paper. The most difficult thing to achieve is large areas of consistent solids; you can even look at period examples and see problems in this area.

### **A brief word on Paper**

The predominant substrate used for illumination in period was parchment which is cured and prepared animal skin (also called vellum depending on the animal). It is possible to purchase parchment now, but it is a very expensive commodity. A less expensive modern substitute is Opaline. Opaline is made by taking the scraps produced in the production of parchment, cooking them down, and forming them into a paper like product. So it is made of parchment, but has smoother characteristics and requires less prep work. You will sometimes hear it referred to as “Spam” by some scribes.

For most people paper is a more viable and affordable alternative. The best papers for scrolls are acid-free 100% rag, with a weight between 80 and 140 pounds. Suitable papers include watercolor papers, illustration board, and Bristol board. Many companies produce suitable papers; prominent ones including *Arches Watercolor*, *Stonehenge*, *Lans*, *Rives*, *Strathmore*, and *Fabrino* (which has made paper since the Middle Ages). Most good papers come in 24" x 36" sheets, which can be divided into smaller sections for scrolls. Many of the more common papers, such as Strathmore, are available in pads of suitable sizes. Always use white or cream colored papers. With any paper make sure that you do your work on the smooth side of the page, the rough side will not be cooperative.

### **Practice**

For the purposes of this class I have chosen to focus on three decorative techniques that are relatively ubiquitous within our period of study: Vinework, Diapering and Acanthus Leaves. You can find examples of these elements in a majority of regions, but of course there are always exceptions. Each of these techniques have variants depending on the location and time period you are looking at, many examples even vary within the same area. This is where looking at period pieces will help you make good choices.

### **Conclusion**

Illuminating scrolls can be very rewarding for everyone, regardless of perceived “artistic talent”. It is an art that takes precision and attention to detail, but anyone can learn the necessary skills. It is also a valuable service to your fellows and your Kingdom. There are many levels of scroll production that one can participate in, from painting on scroll blanks to designing and crafting original scrolls with many intermediate levels in-between. I encourage you to visit the Parchment Pursuivant website at:

[www.serenadariva.com/Parchment/index.htm](http://www.serenadariva.com/Parchment/index.htm) if you are interested in continuing your growth in this area.

**Cited Work:**

Brown, Michelle P. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. California: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1994. ISBN: 0892362170

**A few suggested texts for further reading:**

*Codices Illustres: The World's Most Famous Manuscripts* by Ingo F Walther & Norbert Wolf.  
ISBN: 3822858528

*The Craftsman's Handbook: "Il Libro dell' Arte" by Cennino d'Andrea Cennini* by D.V, Thompson, translator. ISBN: 048620054X

*History of Illuminated Manuscript* by Christopher de Hamel, ISBN: 0714834521

*The Materials and Techniques of Medieval Painting* by Daniel V. Thompson. ISBN: 0486203271

*Medieval Calligraphy: Its History and Technique* by Marc Drogin. ISBN: 0486261425

**E-Sources:**

A Very Proper Treatise: *The Arte Of Limning*: [www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/2036/LIM1.HTM](http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/2036/LIM1.HTM)

Cyber-Scriptorium, SCA: [www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2963/](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/2963/)

Göttingen Model Book Online: [www.gutenbergdigital.de/gudi/eframes/index.htm](http://www.gutenbergdigital.de/gudi/eframes/index.htm)

The Gutenberg School of Scribes: [www.rencentral.com/GSS/index.shtml](http://www.rencentral.com/GSS/index.shtml)

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