



Viscountess Nerissa de Saxe's

Guide to  
Calligraphy  
and  
Illumination

FIRST EDITION



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## Introduction

The purpose of this booklet is to finally put into writing the knowledge I have garnered from various sources over the past four years. It is not meant to be taken as a definitive work, only as a guide to the beginning scribe.

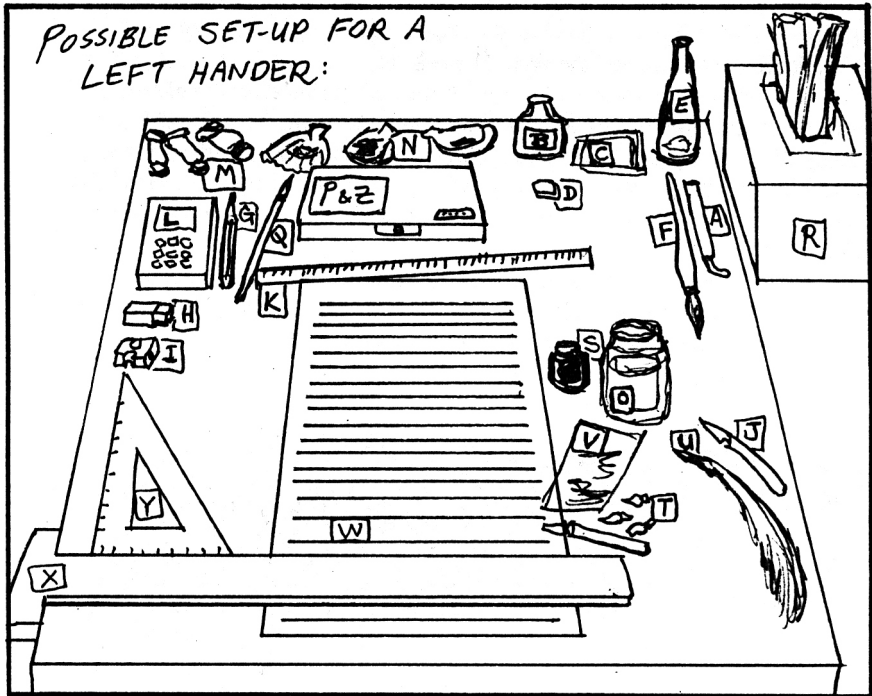
There are still many things I would have wished to add in: how to cut a nib on a feather or reed, how to make your own pigments, etc, but due to space limitations, these may have to wait for later editions.

Happy reading.....

Note: MS throughout this booklet means Manuscript

Revised First Edition, 1998.

## Tools of the Modern Scribe



- |                         |                          |                   |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| a) Burnisher (agate)    | j) Scalpel               | s) Ink            |
| b) Gum arabic           | k) Ruler                 | t) Pen & Nibs     |
| c) Gold leaf (transfer) | l) Calculator            | u) Feather/s      |
| d) Shell gold           | m) Gouache Tubes         | v) Scribble paper |
| e) Gold dust bottle     | n) Palettes (sea-shells) | x) T-square       |
| f) Gold dust brush      | o) Water in a jar        | y) Set square     |
| g) Pencil (HB)          | p) Ruling Pens           | z) Compass        |
| h) Eraser               | q) Fine Brush            | & your acid-free  |
| i) Pencil Sharpener     | r) Tissues               | paper             |

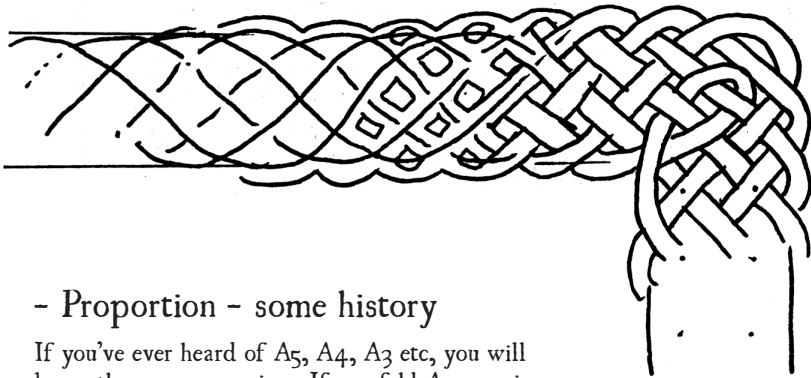


## GUIDE - Layout

The very first thing to do is to look through a wide range of books on Illumination and choose one style to work on.

Within your chosen style you must accommodate the elements you will be working with. For example: do you need room for a Seal? How many illustrations must you arrange into a pleasing composition; three, four? Do you have lots of wording, do you need one or two columns? All these considerations must 'mesh' with the style you've chosen to work in. Get creative.

The two keys to a successful Illumination are: Proportion and Colour. If you get these right, you can't go too far wrong. Colour will be touched on in the Illumination section of this booklet.



### - Proportion - some history

If you've ever heard of A<sub>5</sub>, A<sub>4</sub>, A<sub>3</sub> etc, you will know they are paper sizes. If you fold A<sub>3</sub> once in half you get A<sub>4</sub> sized paper, A<sub>4</sub> in half for A<sub>5</sub>, etc.

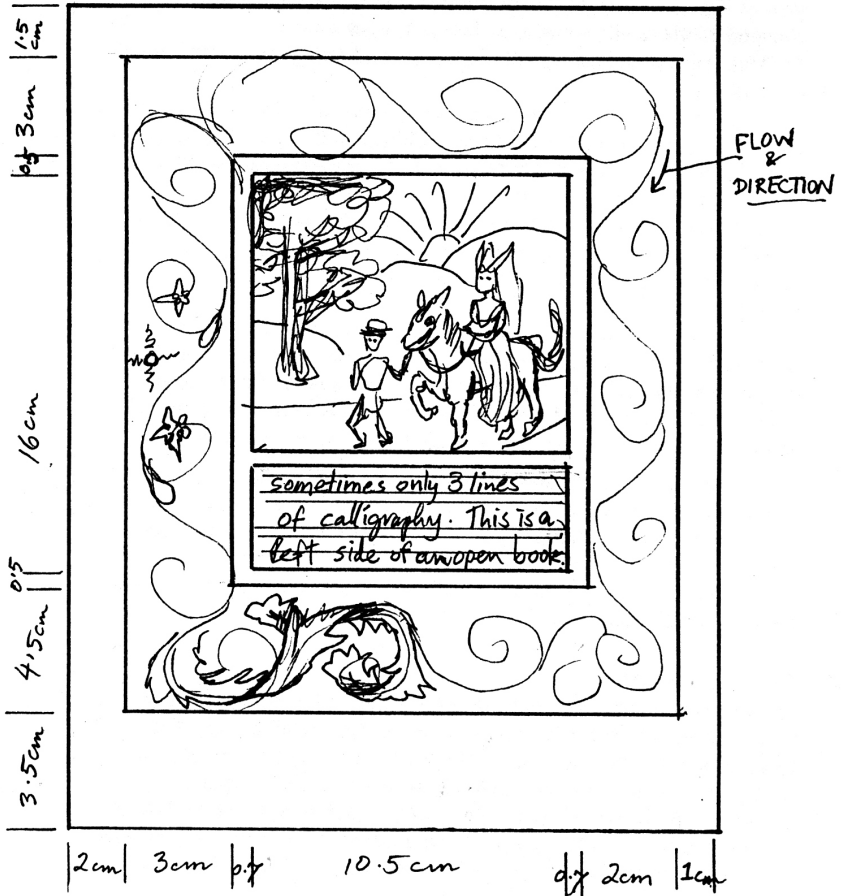
This system that we are familiar with today is based on Medieval MS', which in turn depended on the size of the young cows' skins that vellum was made from.

Some books on Illumination will tell you the size of the 'leaves' (pages). However, due to floods, rising damp and the like, some original MS' have had their page edges cut back where the vellum curled, or the paints have run. Another concern for us is the tendency of modern books to supply pretty pictures of Illuminations without showing the page edges. It is very important to leave lots of space at page edges for framing purposes, and to add to your work's appearance.

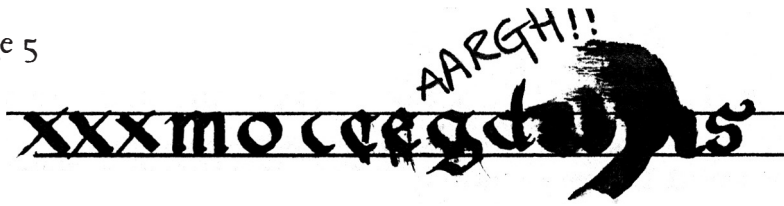
## - Proportion - an example

The proportions used in Period MS' are not metric, nor are they symmetrical. They are the reason I specified a calculator in the Tools list! Here's an example of typical 'good' proportioning in a MS:

★ "white space" is very important.



For further reading on proportion, look up the Golden Rule or Section. It was deemed the Classic proportioning system by the ancient Greeks, and is still used today.



## GUIDE - Calligraphy

After you have roughly worked out your Layout, you will need to practise your calligraphy to evenly fill its allotted space. The Layout may have to be changed a little to allow an extra line or two, or fewer.

\*\*\*Make sure your final 'good' work is on acid-free paper (or vellum of course).

I recommend modern calligraphy pens for learning, and a nib and inkwell for practise and the final work. Chinese Ink is best. It usually comes as a stick of ink that you water down, but can be purchased liquefied.

For the beginning calligrapher, you will need a guide that shows you the order and direction of each letterform (see recommended browsing list). Also note that some alphabets have different angles, varying from 10 to 45 degrees. The heights of your guidelines are measured in nib widths, with space for the ascenders and descenders.

It's best to start with lots of x's and m's to get your strokes confident and even. Then do a row of a's. Stop and compare your row with the guide's, and underline your best 'a'. Repeat this for the rest of the alphabet. The hope is that you will constantly look back to the original letterforms and develop an eye for it, improving your own lettering.

If you make a mistake on your final 'good' work, try to leave the appropriate space for the correct letters, and keep going. If you make more than three significant mistakes you may wish to start anew. Otherwise, mistakes can be covered with gouache the same colour as the page (like whiteout) or if you are working on vellum, simply scrape away a layer of the skin (practise on a scrap) and fix the mistake.

### Tips for scribes:

- a) To keep your work as clean as possible, keep a folded tissue under your writing hand at all times. Use paper to cover the rest of the page too.
- b) When the time comes to tackle the 'real' scroll, try to do it all in one sitting. Handwriting can change subtly with your different moods. Of course, avoid distractions (children, noise) at this time if you can help it.
- c) I personally don't affix my page to the table top while writing, as I can push each line away as I progress down the page, helping to keep the writing even.
- d) Don't lean down on the edge of the table, as you might fold your work.
- e) Experiment. Using gold ink on black paper is heaps of fun!

## Tips for Left-handed scribes:

- a) Don't use left-handed nibs. They are often more trouble than they are worth, especially if you are asked to write without notice, and handed someone else's calligraphy pen.
- b) Turn the page. If you are having trouble with smudging, turn the page at any angle that helps you.
- c) As you follow the direction of each stroke in a letter, you may find that you 'push' the stroke, rather than pull. If so, you will have difficulty using feather quills. Have a go at using the feather upside-down so the two tines will push together when you write, instead of separating too much for the ink to reach the page.  
And don't use any right-hander's pen if it's really special to them, ie, expensive.

Happy Calligraphying!!!



## GUIDE - Illumination

At this stage, you will have pencilled in the basic guidelines from your Layout sheet, and your calligraphy will be complete.

If you have not already done so, you will have to pencil in outlines of all your decorative elements and illustrations. It's best to work these out on your Layout page, to avoid excessive erasing on your final work.

### Step One - Applying Gold Leaf

Note: You may consider having a raised gold effect on a capital letter.

This is the fun part! With a fine brush, paint the appropriate areas with Gum Arabic (Gold Size). If it's invisible on the page, add some gouache to the solution. When finished, give a few breaths on these areas to increase stickiness, and press your transfer gold leaf on to the page, rubbing the backing sheet with your burnisher. If you have loose gold leaf, be extra cautious as it will fly off or crumple with the slightest breeze. Next, pick up loose gold dust with a large dry brush, and shake it off into a bottle for recycling later.

Use your burnisher by gently rubbing over the gilded areas, with crystal paper placed over the gold. This helps give an extra shine to the gold. Agate is best, but other polished semi-precious stones can be used (jewellery).

Gilding is the first step because burnishing can cause your painted areas (gouache) to become shiny here and there - an undesirable effect.

## Step Two - Using Gouache

I believe that gouache is basically opaque watercolour. If you have watercolours, you can try adding a little egg yolk to them for a gouache substitute. I haven't tried this myself.

Gouache can be rehydrated and used again after it has dried. Because of this, you should keep your artwork away from water, and out of direct sunlight if possible. You don't need very much gouache to paint a very large area. It needs to be watered down to exactly the right consistency, slightly thicker than milk. Your painted areas should be flat and free of streaks. If not flat, the paint wasn't quite wet enough. When mixing colours, do so thoroughly to prevent streaks.

I use the following colours in the 'Windsor & Newton' range of Artists' Colours: lamp black & permanent white, primary yellow, cadmium deep red, purple lake, ultramarine, permanent green middle, burnt umber. Other very useful colours are flesh tint (but add white), imitation gold and yellow ochre. On the backs of these small tubes you will see what Series they are (indicates price) and Permanence (light fastness). Permanence AA is best.

When working on a project, you will have to look carefully at the colours used in the original MS. Notice how the colours are evenly distributed throughout the piece. If you are working on a project with a coat of arms, you should paint the device first. It is a constant when choosing how to colour everything else. Also keep in mind that most seals are made of a dark red wax.

## Step Three - Colouring

Assuming that you have decided on your Layout page what colour everything will be, (I usually use colour pencils) you will paint the entire page one colour at a time. If you are right-handed, it is best to start from the bottom left corner (bottom right for left-handers) and work your way diagonally up the page. Then, do the next colour sweep, all the blue on the page, etc.

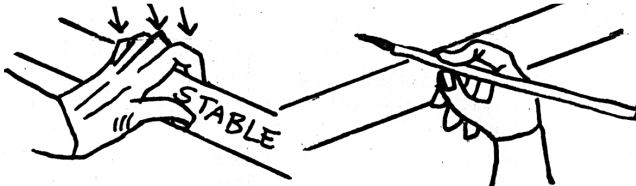
### HANDY TIPS:

#### How to paint a straight line with a ruler:

If you are right-handed, grip the ruler in your left fist, pressing firmly on to the table with the ruler slanted and only touching the table along the bottom edge. With your right hand grip the brush with thumb and forefinger, and curl the other fingers to slide along the length of the ruler. Hopefully the only variable here is your paintbrush as the metal part of the brush slides along the length of the ruler.

#### How to use ruling pens:

These are like a special pen with a nib on one end. You can use gouache in ruling pens to draw innumerable straight lines of consistent thickness. These pens often come in sets with compasses too. Extremely useful for charts and cartography.





## Step Four - Blending Colours

- a) Dry Brushing. Incredibly fine, delicate lines can be achieved with an almost dry brush. Going from extremely dark to light colours can be achieved with these fine short strokes. If you are adding depth to a face, a series of differently coloured strokes can give shadow and highlighting over the top of your base layer of paint.
- b) Rehydration. This involves having a clean brush, very slightly wet, and mixing the dry colours which are already on the page. You must keep the brush free of pigment and not too wet, every time you mix the colours of a new area.

### How to fix mistakes:

If you accidentally drop your brush and smear colour on the page, don't panic. Get all the pigment off your brush, and wet the mistake whilst daubing at it with a clean tissue (avoid further smearing with the used tissue). Keep your brush free of paint, and try not to over wet the affected area, as the paper may become rough and dirty.

## Step Five - Finishing Touches

Outline your gilded areas in a very dark and ink-like brown gouache paint. For this stage either use a metal Crow's Quill nib, or your finest paintbrush. For the Illumination, sometimes things are outlined in black, but usually not. Have a good look at your original source. This is the final stage so that any messy edges can be cleaned up, providing a sharp look to the whole work.

Don't forget to mark your work. These are usually a small squiggle or letters that don't distract the viewer from your art. You might also write your name and the date on the back, and any additional information.

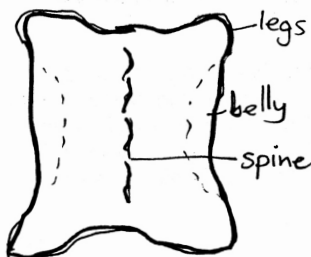
## Making Vellum

From *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, pg. 84:

“There is a twelfth century account of how to make vellum in the *De Diversis Artibus* of Theophilus, probably written at Helmarshausen Abbey in north Germany.

Skins are soaked in running water for several days. Then they are immersed in a solution of lime and water for up to a fortnight. Then all the hair is scraped off and the skins are put back into the lime solution for as long again.

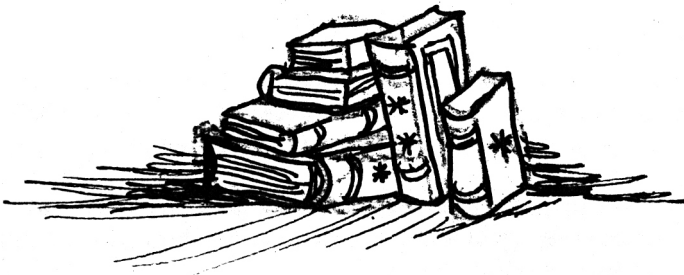
Next they are rinsed, stretched over a frame and dried in the sun, and cleaned over and over again with pumice and water. Plenty of fresh running water was crucial for vellum making.”



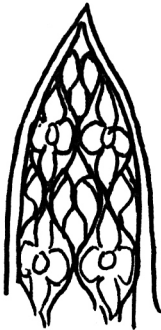
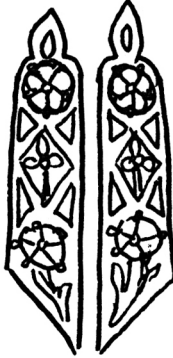
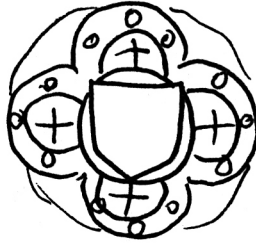
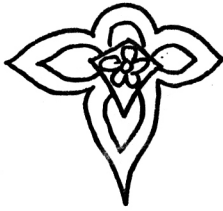
**TO STRETCH VELLUM:**  
 slit the edge,  
 use a pebble  
 and string.  
 This makes for easy  
 tension adjustment.

## Recommended Browsing List

- Early: *The Book of Kells* and *The Carolingian Bible*
- Mid: *The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting: 1200-1500*  
by Richard Marks. London: Chatts & Windus, 1981.
- And... *Illuminated Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*  
Oxford University: Clarendon Press, 1967.
- For Close-ups: *Gothic Illuminated Manuscripts: 69 Plates in Full Colour*  
by Emma Pirani. Milan: Fratelli Fabbri Editoria, 1966.  
ISBN 0 600 01250 6
- Interesting Italian: *The Visconti Hours*
- Excellent Details: *King Rene's Book of Love*  
(Le Cueur d'Amours Espris)  
New York: G. Braziller, 1975.
- Renaissance: *Renaissance Painting in Manuscripts: Treasures from the British Library.*  
New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1983.  
ISBN 0 7123 0024 4
- Calligraphy: *The Art of Calligraphy: A Practical Guide to the Skills and Techniques.*  
by David Harris. New York: DK Publishing, 1995.  
ISBN 1 56458 849 1
- And... *Scribes and Illuminators (Medieval Craftsmen).*  
by Christopher de Hamel, 1992. ISBN 0 7141 2049 9.



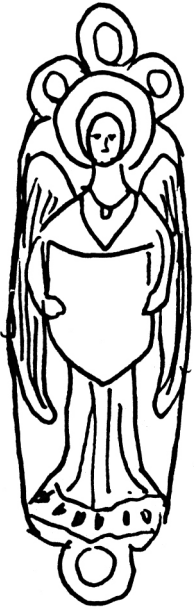
I strongly suggest that you go to second hand bookstores in the heart of your capital city. They might have an Illumination section, or you may have to sift through the Art History area. My ideal book is one high in colour plates, but small and easy to travel with. My very favourite book so far is the Renaissance one above. It is excellent, but most British Library books are.



## About The Author

Jennifer Fraser is a freelance artist at time of writing. She has some artistic training, having studied at the Queensland College of Art (Australia) for three years.

Viscountess Nerissa de Saye is a quiet French Noblewoman of the Fourteenth Century. She enjoys singing, scribal arts, heraldry and harp playing.



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