

## **Advice for New Scribes**

by Mistress Alicia Langland

Get ready!

First of all, you need to let the Sylvan Signet know you're interested in becoming a scribe, whether you'd like to do just calligraphy, just illumination, or both. It's also helpful to know how much advance notice you will need to complete a scroll (most people prefer about a month), what styles you prefer (Celtic, Gothic, etc.), and if there are any scrolls you would especially like to do (for example, scrolls for specific individuals, for children, or for someone who likes music). Of course, the Sylvan Signet will also need your name (both modern and SCAdian), address (regular and e-mail, if you have one), and phone number.

Before the Signet office can send you any assignments, we need to be familiar with your work. Show or send a sample of something you have done. For illumination, an uncalligraphed, blank border in a period style, suitable for use as an Award of Arms scroll, would suffice. For calligraphy, anything written in a period hand is acceptable. Please do not think that you must create a gilded masterpiece or a Magna Carta; something simple is fine! Having a scribal Laurel, Arts OHM, Maunche, or Guild Minister vouch for your skill level and reliability would also work. Once the Sylvan Signet is familiar with your work, she (or your local Guild Minister) can contact you with specific assignments.

Now it's time to get a project. Many beginning scribes request a scroll being given to someone they know. This gives them a chance to really personalize the scroll. Another good way to "get your feet wet" is to collaborate with an experienced scribe. (In fact, most Medieval manuscripts were created by artists working in collaboration!)

If you would like to do scrolls but are hopeless at working under pressure, your skills can still be put to good use! You might offer to work on backlog scrolls -- scrolls that for some reason were not completed on time. Since these awards have already been bestowed, the scrolls don't come with a deadline. Doing blank borders to be used in the future is another way to practice your illumination without the pressure of deadlines. If the idea of doing someone's award scroll makes you extremely nervous, try a thank-you card, note, tourney prize scroll, newsletter artwork, or poster. Whenever you accept an assignment, be sure to allow sufficient time to complete the scroll. If you have to rush, you probably won't be satisfied with the result. Each piece you do should represent your best effort; ideally, each piece should be better than the previous one you did.

As a scribe, always remember that the Royalty have entrusted you with a secret - that a worthy someone will be recognized for their efforts; please be discreet with any information you are privy to!

It is always safe to ask the person who gave you the assignment for help getting information. Go there first.

## Get set!

Before you get out your paper, get an idea. Look at scrolls other people have received. Look at pictures of period manuscripts; try to figure out what makes it "look Medieval" and how the Medieval scribe "did it." When picking a style, some people try to match the style to the recipient's persona, time period, interests, favorite colors, etc. Others choose a style that says, "DO ME!" Obtain suitable materials, the best you can afford. Start with the basics: later, if you enjoy doing scrolls, add a little bit at a time. Don't buy everything at once!

## Go!

### Layout

Choose a paper size equal to standard-size picture frames (9x12, 11x14, 16x20, etc.). Leave a 1"-2" border on each side so the picture frame or a mat won't cover your work. When laying out the design, don't draw the design right on the good paper. Sketch your design on other paper until you are satisfied with it; then transfer your design to the scroll paper. This allows you to make changes in your design without messing up your good paper. Pay attention to composition (where things are on the page), balance (all the design elements are not concentrated in one area), and proportion (artwork is the right size for the paper, and calligraphy is right size for the illumination). To help with this, use period manuscripts as a guide. Some scribes copy a specific page from a particular manuscript, making slight changes as needed to fit the award. Others combine elements from different pages as long as they are in same style.

Whatever design you come up with, avoid "fantasy scrolls." Even if your scroll is not based on something produced in the Middle Ages, it should look like something that might have been. Also, be careful not to mix incompatible types or time periods (Celtic illumination with blackletter calligraphy, for example). When laying out the scroll, don't forget to include space for the calligraphy and any required elements for that particular award. (See elsewhere in this handbook for specifics.) Leave space at the bottom for signatures!

Decide on the wording for the scroll, and then practice writing the text to see how much space it takes up. Practice with the same size nib that you intend to use for the actual scroll. Amend the wording as needed.

### Process

While working on one part of the paper, keep other parts covered to protect them from oils in your skin and the inevitable OOPS!

Once the final design has been transferred to the good paper, outline the design in ink. Do the calligraphy.

Erase all lines. (Wait until the next day to give ink ample time to dry!)

Apply gold leaf, if desired. (This is NOT required! Some styles don't use any gold at all!)

Paint the design. It's helpful to look at it occasionally from across the room. This enables you to see areas that need more work.

Go over the outline again to "crisp up" the design.

Done!

Write your name (SCA and modern) on the back, so the recipient can send a thank-you. If you want, include important info about the design (based on... taken from... etc.). Try to place this information behind a painted area so it will not show through on the front. Put your "maker's mark" somewhere on the front of the scroll (inconspicuously). Photograph or photocopy the scroll; put the pictures in your scribal scrapbook. With the picture, keep a record of the materials, techniques, and sources you used. Later, you will enjoy looking back over the work you have done, and you can use this to gauge your progress.

Protect the finished piece with a piece of acid-free paper.

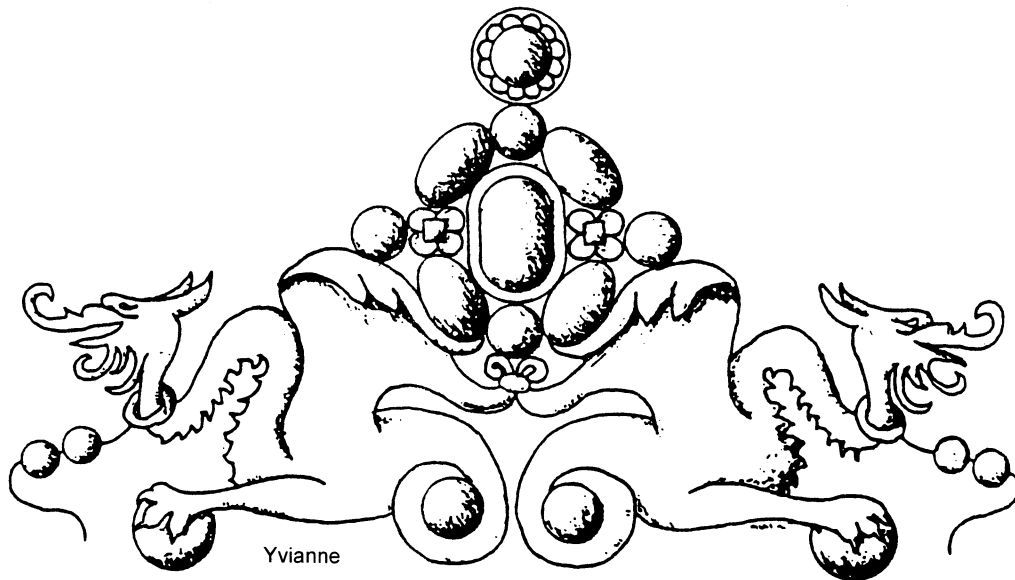
Transport all scrolls flat. Cut two pieces of sturdy cardboard larger than the actual scroll; use drafting tape to tape scroll to the inside. Then tape the cardboard together to make a cheap portfolio.

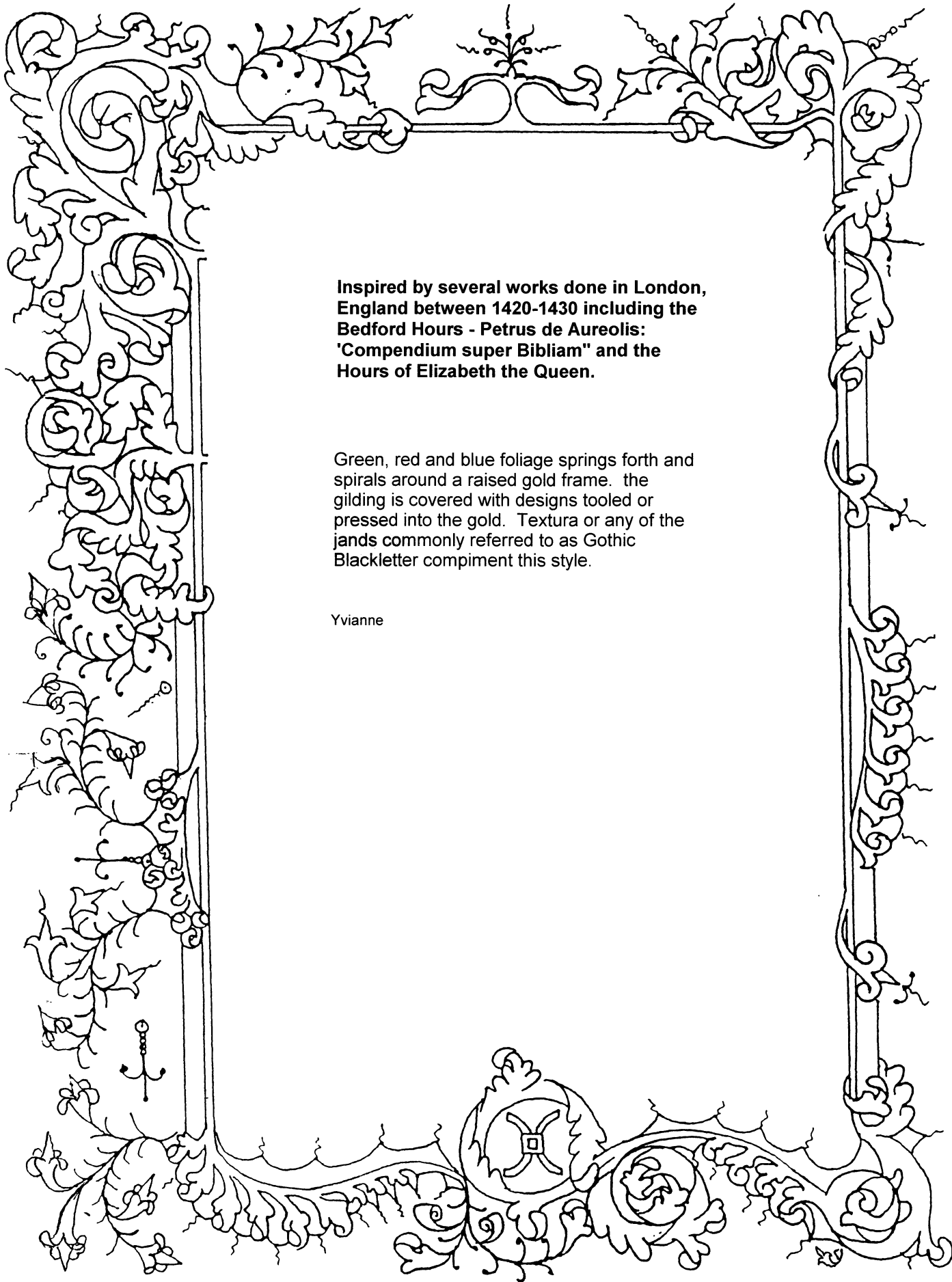
Make sure the scroll is delivered on time. It should be taken to the Royalty room as soon as you or the person conveying it has trolled in; don't make the Royalty send someone in search for it. If you must mail it, be sure to contact the person to whom you plan to send it BEFORE you mail it. Find out where to send it (some prefer to have scrolls sent to a work address rather than to home) and when the person is leaving for the event. Give permission for the carrier to leave the scroll at the address if no one is home; don't make the person have to go to the Post Office to pick it up! You may want the person to phone you to let you know it was received.

Breathe a sigh of relief. When you're ready, ask for another assignment!

Congratulations!

As a scribe, you will enjoy the satisfaction that comes from creating something of beauty. You will enjoy learning how scribes worked in the Middle Ages. Best of all, though, you will enjoy seeing the recipient's face glow as they look in awe at the scroll in their hands.





Inspired by several works done in London, England between 1420-1430 including the Bedford Hours - Petrus de Aureolis: 'Compendium super Bibliam' and the Hours of Elizabeth the Queen.

Green, red and blue foliage springs forth and spirals around a raised gold frame. the gilding is covered with designs tooled or pressed into the gold. Textura or any of the hands commonly referred to as Gothic Blackletter compliment this style.

Yvianne

## **So You Want To Be A Scribe**

### **How to Get Started in the Scribal Arts**

Contrary to the opinions of many non-scribes, ANYONE really can do scribal work. Because of the nature of illumination and calligraphy, anyone who ever learned to hold a ball point pen and write their own name can make a scroll. All it takes is patience and persistence, and a guiding hand to using the right tools and references.

For example, one scribe I know uses a light board to trace the basic outlines of his work and then inks and paints them in. Another commonly used technique for people who aren't comfortable drawing is to draw or trace the basic design of a repeating pattern on tracing paper and then, using graphite transfer paper, lay the design down on your good paper. Yet another scribe drew several examples of French leaves on heavy paper and then cut the best one with an X-acto knife to make a stencil so all her leaves now look alike.

These and many other little tricks can get around problems with drawing skills. There are also many kinds of design equipment on the market today that can help, ranging from sets of French curves for French vine work to circle templates for Celtic spirals to Ames lettering guides for drawing in the backgrounds for miniatures. Some types of illumination are almost draftsman-like, such as Celtic knotwork.

Calligraphy is almost entirely a matter of practicing letter forms and working slowly and consistently. Illumination and calligraphy are not easy, but nothing worth doing is. Just don't let your preconceptions regarding "talent" stop you from even trying a fun and fulfilling art form.

Please read these pages with this in mind: All scribes were beginners once. Some of us were lucky enough to start our scribal careers under the tutelage of experienced illuminators and calligraphers. Some had to learn the basics on our own. Some of us live in groups where there is a good support system set up and where scribes are prized and plentiful. Some live in areas where there are almost no scrolls given, even for major awards and there is no information available to those who are interested in this art. Hopefully this will help.

### **Basic Information of Scribal Practices**

There is no good reason to break your piggy bank when you are starting out as a scribe and just want to get to know whether you really want to do this or not. Many of the materials we have listed below can be found in your house. Don't be afraid to improvise. If an experiment doesn't work, nothing's been wasted. You can just look at it a learning experience and start again.

As you get more involved in the scribal arts, you will find yourself wanting more and better material to work with. You may want to work with more authentic materials such as vellum, gold leaf, or ground pigments. These can be added slowly to your kit as your budget allows. There is no need to lay out a large amount to try the art.

Materials List--Getting started for under \$25.00  
Drawing Materials

### **1.Pencils**

Any kind of soft lead pencil will do, as long as you keep it sharp and draw lightly. These cost \$.50 or less. You may find you have the best luck with typical click or mechanical pencils as you don't have to keep stopping to sharpen them. You can get specialty mechanical pencils with very fine leads and cushions on the holder to prevent stress from writing for \$3.00 and up. They're nice but the plain ones work fine.

### **2.Erasers**

A good eraser is a god-send. A bad one can ruin your work completely. Get yourself a white plastic eraser, either a block for about \$1.00 or a clicker for about the same. Be sure they are white so that you don't leave color on your paper. You can take the red erasers that come on the ends of pencils and throw them away, as they not only turn your paper pink but they also wear holes in most papers.

I also find a white typewriter stick eraser (\$1.50) to be valuable for removing mistakes in ink and paint. These are a bit grainy and will remove a little paper, so it is better if you are using a heavier grade of paper. An alternative is laying a razor blade or X-acto knife on its side and gently scraping away your mistake. This works well on vellum and good paper, but don't use it on cheap papers or you end up with a very thin spot or a hole.

### **3.Rulers, T-squares, and other templates**

I find a good ruler indispensable. One with a steel edge is best for cutting your paper to size, while the clear ones used for quilting and architectural layout are great for drawing lines and setting up borders on your page. These start at about \$3.50 for a small plastic one and can go as high as \$35.00 for a professional steel ruler with a T-square attached. You can, if you are careful, do any of these things with the plain \$.50 wooden ruler that you used in grade school. If you do invest in a clear plastic ruler, NEVER use it for a straight edge for cutting. Your X-acto knife will go right through the plastic and ruin your ruler.

A cheap plastic T-square is also helpful. They run about \$0.50 each. Other layout aids, such as circle templates and Ames lettering guides, can be useful but they aren't a necessity. If you find that they will be useful, you can always pick them up later.

### **4.Pens and Inks**

If you are absolutely insistent on having a fountain pen for calligraphy, but you don't know if you're going to stick with it or not, buy a set of Schaeffer calligraphy pens. They run about \$5.00 for a pen holder, three nibs (tips), and a few tubes of ink. You would probably be better off buying a "dip" pen set up which would consist of a Speedball pen holder (\$1.00), a couple of nibs (\$0.50 each), and a bottle of good ink (Calli waterproof

black ink, \$3.50). It may be slightly more expensive but definitely more satisfactory in the long run as you will be working with a better quality of ink, and the pen will work smoother and give a better line quality.

For drawing purposes some folks use fine-point technical pens, but they can run up to \$22.00 each. Even the so-called disposable pens can run as much as \$12.00 to \$15.00. For the beginner, I recommend a steel-tipped dip-style drawing pen - a "crow quill." The holder is about \$1.00 and the nibs are \$0.50. It takes a little practice to get used to it but it does stand you in good stead for using more authentic tools. It has the added advantage over rapidographs and other tech pens in that it is easy to clean and has no moving parts to get screwed up. Tech pens clog easily, must be stored carefully, and have to be cleaned regularly. You can't easily switch colors of ink, so they are inherently limited. They also don't travel well, so if you plan to do any scribal work at events don't bring your tech pens.

### **5. Gold Paints and Inks**

We have used many different types of gold over the 15 years I have been doing scribal work. When I started, Testors gold model paint was state-of-the-art. This stuff eats through your paper and, if you aren't careful, leaves a nice greasy halo around the gold. There are much better alternatives available.

Holbein or Winsor Newton, among others, puts out a very nice gum arabic-based gold ink for about \$4.00. Their gold gouache (a specific type of watercolor paint) also works well and runs about \$12.00

There are also some interesting options available with composite gold leaf (a very thinly beaten or rolled composition of metals that has a number of metals and a minute amount of gold.) One company, Renaissance, markets a gold leaf glue (\$6.00) and a composite gold leaf (\$7.50 for 30-4" X 4" sheets) that behave similarly to gum ammoniac (a glue made of plant sap used to hold down very thinly beaten or rolled 22-24k kt. sheets of gold-\$40.00 for 25-2" X 2" sheets) method of gold leafing.

### **6. Paper**

Paper is the one area where I strongly suggest you don't stint on cash. There are many kinds of cheap watercolor paper and drawing paper available for practicing on, but when it come to actually doing a scroll, buy the best you can. I usually recommend Arches 100% rag, acid-free, 140-lb. Hot-press watercolor paper. It ranges from \$3.00 to \$6.00 for a 22" X 26" sheet. You can get four 11" X 14" scrolls that will fit in standard picture frames from one sheet of Arches. This is important because if you want people to treasure your work, you have to make it easy for them to take care of it. Scrolls that do not fit standard frames are less likely to get framed and therefor are more susceptible to damage.

Let me explain some of those terms I used to describe the paper I've recommended.

- 100% rag-This refers to the material of which the paper is made. Rag-made papers are usually linen or cotton and are of a better quality than those papers made of wood pulp (such as newsprint). The higher the rag content, the better and longer lasting the paper.
- acid-free-This means that the paper is neutral Ph. An acidic paper, such as newsprint will deteriorate much more quickly than an acid-free paper. For an

experiment, save some of your old newspapers for a while. Check them after a week, a month, and six months and compare how much more fragile they get as time goes by. Try leaving them in sunlight and see the process accelerate. Light has as much effect on the disintegration of paper as acid content does. This is why you should try to keep your scrolls on walls that don't have light shining on them.

- 140 lb.-This is a reference to how thick the paper is. It means that there was 140 pounds of material used to make 100 sheets of this paper. 90 lb. paper would have used only 90 pounds of material for 100 sheets and therefore it would be much thinner. Typical typewriter bond is about 20 lb. Conversely, 90 lb. watercolor paper is acceptable to use and it is somewhat less expensive, but keep in mind that it is harder to correct mistakes and it is much more prone to dents and wrinkles. You also need to keep in mind that it is better to transport scrolls done on paper flat rather than rolled. Rolled scrolls show a tendency to flake off their paints and to dent and wrinkle.

- Hot Press-Just like your good shirts, hot press means exactly that--pressed hot. This gives a much smoother, more even finish to the paper that, while it doesn't make as much of a difference for illumination, can greatly benefit the calligrapher, especially when one is just starting in the art.

There are some papers that I strongly recommend NOT using. Obviously, newsprint is one. Although remarkably cheap and very good for practicing drawing in soft pencils and charcoal, it is not suitable for much of anything else--not even as cover sheets as it tends to be acidic and the acid will leach into your good paper.

Another is Bristol Board (not to be confused with Bristol papers). Bristol Board is usually laminated (2 or more thin sheets glued together) and when you try to erase a mistake, you can easily put a hole in the top layer, effectively ruining your work. It also tends to run acidic because of the glue used to laminate the layers together. Additionally, Bristol often has a treated surface that is sometimes hard to calligraph on and won't take some kinds of paint.

You may also be tempted to use some of the brownish or yellowish fake vellum that is sold in pads specifically for calligraphy. Don't. Inks and paints start to fade after about two years and the paper lasts about five years before it crumbles away. It is very high in acid, in part because of the coloring. Yes, it is made that way to look "antique," but we're re-creating the Middle Ages, not digging stuff up from then. We would want our paper to look NEW, not OLD!

One last caveat--not all vellum is vellum. Most vellum sold in art stores is architectural vellum, a specific type of paper. It hasn't been near a sheep, much less is it made from one. It is nice to calligraph on but it doesn't take paint well, nor does it hold up well. Avoid it.

## **7. Paints, Palettes, and Brushes**

I recommend watercolor paints in tubes. These are already somewhat liquid (as opposed to the dry pans that you used in grade school) and are usually of a better quality. Niji makes a beginner's set with a reasonable color choice that markets for about \$5.00.