

Tips and Tricks

As with any craftsman, scribes have little tips and tricks, which make life so much simpler if you know them. Here are some of these, shared with us by scribes from around the known world.

Celtic illumination rarely used gold. There is only one Celtic manuscript we know of which contained gold leaf. It is called the Codex Aureus, and is very late period for this style. We suggest you stick with the color scheme used in the Book of Kells: red, yellow, green, and occasionally lavender.

Felt-tip calligraphic markers can be made more acceptable for emergency “field scribe” use by opening up the pen case and refilling it with a non-clogging technical India ink.

The most common mistakes beginning calligraphers make:

Pushing the pen instead of pulling it toward you.

Not keeping both edges of the nib in contact with the paper.

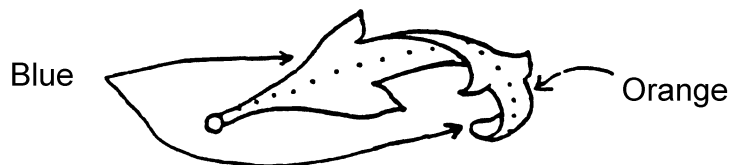
Spacing the letters too far apart (in most hands the letters should be touching each other or almost touching).

Slanting the letters inappropriately (vertical guidelines in addition to the horizontal ones will help).

Always keep a clean sheet of white paper between your hand and the page. It will keep perspiration and dirt on you hand from accumulating on the scroll. This will keep your calligraphy and illumination clean and longer lasting. Cover your work with a sheet of plain paper when you are not working with it, to protect it from dust and dirt. This is especially important when working with gold leaf.

DO NOT use sticky-notes to cover up names or text on a scroll. The glue on the sticky-notes will leave a residue that discolors over time.

Acanthus leaves are usually done in complementary colors: one side blue, the other orange, for example. Sometimes they have dots running down the rib of each leaf.



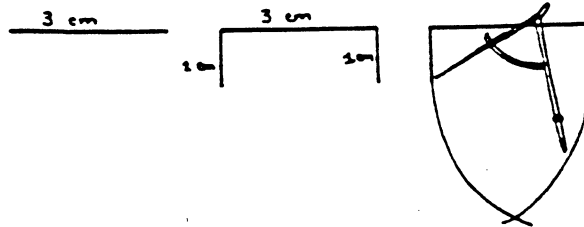
To get a nice gradation of color on acanthus leaves and other flora (and fauna), lay down successively lighter shades side by side, then take a wet paintbrush and gently rub perpendicular to the lines of color until they are well blended. Finish by using smoothing strokes parallel to the lines of color.



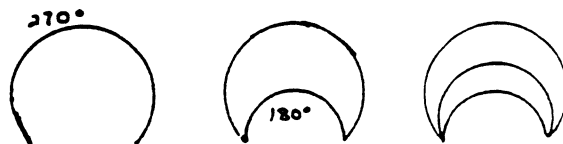
Ivy leaves, those little tripartite leaves so common in French Gothic illumination, are easier to draw smoothly if you keep a waltz rhythm in your head: three beats for each leaflet.....



To draw a well proportioned shield, draw the vertical lines $1/3$ the length of the top edge, then use a compass to draw the curves as shown.



To draw a well proportioned crescent, make the outer edge 270 degrees ($3/4$) and the inner edge 180 degrees ($1/2$) of the circle. Draw a line bisecting the crescent as shown to finish it off.



Miscellanea

Keep Copies!

It is a good idea to keep records of the scrolls you have done. A scrapbook of color photocopies or photographs of your scrolls not only gives you a “brag book” to remember your work by, but also may be used as a portfolio should you decide to become a professional calligrapher. In addition, such a scrapbook makes a nice display for your local group to have a demonstration.

Keep records of your materials, techniques, and sources

This will help you in many ways. If the recipient comes to you years later to have his or her Arms added to the scroll, it will be easier to copy your earlier style (it's amazing how hard it can be to mimic your own work from a few years ago!) and use the same materials. It will help you to look back on your work and judge which techniques did and didn't succeed for you. If you later decide to enter a scroll in an Arts & Sciences Competition, you will better be able to document it.

Get together with other scribes

While books are fine and good places to start learning your art, nothing substitutes for one-on-one exchanges of ideas. If there are other scribes in your area, consider starting a guild. Go to scribal classes at local and Kingdom Universities and to the Pennsic War. Talk to other scribes, especially those with sycamore, an OHM for Arts, or Laurels in the field; they are charged by their membership in these Orders to teach what they know to others. Ask their advice – how do they do that shading, what pens do they like, which books do they recommend? Bring along your supplies to quieter events and start working; it's sure to attract a small crowd and may get some experienced scribes to stop by with suggestions. Drop in at the Scribes' tent at Pennsic – not only will they appreciate another artist's help, but the exchange of information and ideas, and the variety of books available, will help to increase your own knowledge.

Look at the Work of Others

You can learn immense amounts by looking at other people's artwork with a detailed eye. Not only real period manuscripts, but also other SCAdians' work, can give you wonderful ideas on how to improve your own work. Look for the little things, like how the gold leaf is engraved, or what style of calligraphy someone used to make a scroll look Arabic. The greenest beginner still has something to offer the most jaded Laurel.

Accept Criticism Graciously, Offer it Gently

It's easy to get wrapped up in pride over your creation. If another scribe makes a legitimate suggestion for ways to improve your work, seize upon it as a chance to learn. Such critiques are almost certainly not meant as attacks on your person. If you are asked your opinion of a newer scribe's work, find something to praise before you suggest improvements. Every artist views his or her creation as a special child.

Seek out the Real Thing

If you have the chance to look at real period manuscripts, live and in person, DO IT! there are many things you will learn from seeing period books as they really are. Most facsimiles will have errors in color reproduction; burgundy may come out orange, or blue can become purple. You do not get a feel for the size of an original by looking at a facsimile, either. For instance, period manuscripts usually have very small calligraphy.

The texture of an illuminated page is not discernable except in person – how high is the fold leaf raised? Check out the Rare Book Room of the local library, and keep an eye and ear peeled for special exhibits at museums. If you can afford to do so, travel a few hours to go to such exhibits – the things you will learn are beyond the price of a tank or 2 of gas!

Consider Your Goals

There are many reasons people become scribes. Some of them are good ones, some are not so good.

Are you a scribe because you think it's something fun to do once in awhile, makes you a well-rounded Scadian, and serves the Kingdom?

Terrific! Aethelmearc needs such people, and would not be able to avoid acquiring a backlog without you. Keep up the good work, and know that the Signet office appreciates your service.

Are you a scribe because you like doing artwork and want to get better at it?

Wonderful! Remember to keep that attitude. Approach each scroll as a learning experience. Try to find something new to try on each one – a new period, new style, new equipment, materials or techniques – so that you approach each scroll with pleasure and anticipation. When the finished scroll fails to live up to your initial imagined picture (this happens to everyone, so don't be discouraged), try to figure out why, so that you can avoid the same problem next time. If you find that scribing has become a chore, stop for awhile. Take up fighting, or sewing, or dancing, or something else until you are ready to approach your artwork refreshed. If you burn out, the Kingdom will have lost a great treasure.

Are you a scribe because you think it will gain you awards and appreciation?

You might as well quit now. Scribes are under-appreciated and seldom known or noticed. The best reward scribing will give you is your own self-satisfaction, and if you don't have that, you will have nothing.

Know Your Limits

If you are asked to take on an assignment and you are not certain you can complete it in time **JUST SAY NO**. The Sylvan Signet has many scribes to call on. The only way for all of them to be happy and productive is for none of them to burn out. Artistic burnout turns a joy to an aggravation, a learning adventure to drudgery. It also generates scribes who chronically fail to finish scrolls in time, leading to distraught Royalty, disappointed recipients, and a dismayed Sylvan Signet. Take on as many assignments as you like, but know when to say no.