

# *Whitework 101 : The Practical*

*by Lady Livia Zanna*

Whitework, as I'm using the term here, refers specifically to the style of decorating versal letters, border bars, and spacer bars used heavily in the 12th to 15th centuries.

The most common perception of whitework is fine white decoration done on top of red and/or blue bars or versal letters, as evidenced by French manuscripts in the 13th and 14th centuries. However, you can find whitework examples used all over Europe in all different types and styles of manuscripts.

As a technique, it has 3 components.

- 1) Your Brush
- 2) Your Paint
- 3) Your White Paint.

Your brush should be large enough to hold enough paint that you can move from the beginning of your stroke to the end. Smaller brushes, while easier to manipulate the smaller point, can't load with enough paint, and produce an uneven or heavy line from all the stops and starts. It should also be able to be shaped to a very fine point, since you want your work to be coming from the very tip of the brush at all times. Liner brushes can be used for this technique (and were recommended by Mistress Allessondrea ) but make sure your liner brush doesn't have stray hairs and a good point when you wet it. Most people seem to agree that size 1 or 3/0 seem to be a good size for this brush, and that natural bristles give a better flow of the paint. ( I tend to use sable and synthetic blends, and I have not had a problem with them, personally.)

I can not speak to the techniques used in acrylic paints, as I don't use them. This is not a criticism of acrylic paints, just a statement of ignorance. If you are using watercolor or gouache, you should let your bars and versals dry completely, so that you don't mis-color your background by accident. While this won't prevent gouache from smearing if you use too much water, it will prevent wet color from bleeding into your carefully brushed whitework.

White - For white, I feel that Permanent or Titanium white gouache are the best in terms of brightness and opacity, to use for gouache. I've used other whites and they would either tend to pick up the color of the paint it was on (which would look pinkish or bluish) or weren't as bright. I also tried Chinese white which didn't have the same brightness. I also found that Permanent white tended to be more viscous and therefore more opaque in terms of paint and coverage. Feel free to do your own experimentation, since you may disagree. :)

I would highly, highly recommend reading (if not printing out and studying) Meisterin Katarina Helene von Schönborn 's handout on whitework, found here, since she's done an excellent synopsis.

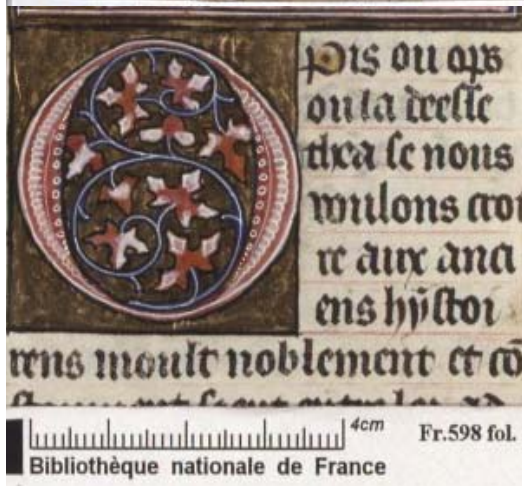
**<http://meisterin.katarina.home.comcast.net/whitework.html>**



Shown left is taken from the Psalter of Simon of Montecute, done in Ely or Cambridge in the 14th century. Notice the bar work down the right side with the varying patterns. Also, the spacer bars in the middle show a range of designs as well. They can be angularly geometric, or vines, flowers, or waves.

In this text, there aren't many examples of the whitework being shaded. Most of it is the brightest white contrast possible, with little in the way of softer whites.

This text is very similar to the Luttrell Psalter, which also uses spacer bars to "square off" the text, which are often using whitework as decorative accents.



This is a versal letter from a French manuscript from the late 14th century. Note the white "blur" of the large curve, and the highlights going over top in a whiter "curly" spiral, that softens the effect, and gives a "shaded" look to the white.

It's not shaded per se, but it fakes it very nicely.



**Marco Polo, Conditionibus et consuetudinibus orientalium regionum** England; 1st half of the 14th century

Notice how the artist used white-work to enhance the leaves, as well as his versal and the border bars.

This piece doesn't show much shading, but the white-work is very delicate and distinct.



**Regement of Princes, Thomas Hoccleve, 1411-1432.**

This one is later in the period, and has some very detailed and gradual shading on the "H". It still however, is highlighted by a thin line to add shape and definition.

The borders shown right are from the Manesse Codex, a German manuscript, made between 1305 - 1340. The white was interspersed with gold. Notice the white provides both contrast to the red and gold, but provides a more visible structure than the gold alone would. On the second border, the top and bottom were of shell gold vine on red, and the sides were blue with whitework and gold flowers. The whitework stands out much more clearly on this, even helping to brighten the gold, despite the fact that red contrasts better with gold.



## Technique and Tips:

\*Paint consistency - Your white paint should be the consistency of heavy cream, or maybe half and half for the brightest white. You can water it down a little to get a softer shade. Adding a drop of gum Arabic to the paint tray as you mix will help smooth it out, and keep it in suspension a little better.

\*You want to paint **only** with the tip of the brush. This is the difficult part, since you have to move your arm, not your hand. You don't want the brush to turn or lay flat as you "go around a curve" so to speak. You want to paint with your brush at a perpendicular to your paper. This will give you a better result and a more consistent line, since you'll be less likely to angle changes which will affect your brush stroke.

\*Use a magnifying glass, if you have one, for small spaces around versals and corners. The magnifying glass not only magnifies your work space, but it makes the tip of the brush easier to see, and your movements more precise. - Courtesy of Mistress Lucia

\*Try not to rest your hand down on your page while painting a stroke. You'll get a freer flow of movement if you don't stop and start.

\*You can use round toothpicks to make perfect dots. - Courtesy of Mistress Allesondrea

\* Practice, practice, practice. Whitework is a very specific technique, but it does force you to learn brush control, which can improve your painting all around.

\* Shading on whitework only appears in period on larger sections of whitework. You almost never find it on *skinny* French bars, or tiny little spaces. You'll tend to find shading on the whitework most often in the versal letters, or in large curling acanthus leaves, etc. This is not to say you can't, but one of the beautiful things about whitework can be its essential simplicity, and stark contrasts. Using shading too often during whitework can diminish the effect and make your piece less spectacular. You may go crazy with the whitework, only to stand back and wonder why your piece doesn't look as spectacular as the period pieces.

\* Whitework is not the same as whitevine. You may laugh, but I got confused for months about that.

\*On green backgrounds, try using yellow, instead of white. Because of color theory, yellow highlights better in green than white does, providing better definition.

\*While creativity is encouraged, almost all historical examples of whitework are done on either red or blue backgrounds. So using purple and green, (and you can find a few later period examples, of such colors) should be a decision carefully considered and done with a purpose. Or not. :D