Making a Medieval Manuscript

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Materials

Papyrus
Brittle; not really suitable for book form
Used mainly for rolled scrolls
Codex form became primary in mid 4th C

Parchment - sheep or goat skin
Difficult to correct mistakes; used for court records

Vellum - calf skin
Preparation of parchment or vellum:
Soaked in vats of lime, occasional agitation to remove remaining flesh, hair, and dirt
Stretched on frames
Scraped with curved knife
Kept damp. Bleach sometimes added to water
When suitably smooth and correct thickness, allowed to dry in controlled environment
Before using vellum, pumice powder applied to raise nap

Pens

Reed pens used until 6th or 7th C
Quill pens became popular in 6th C
First 5 flight feathers of goose or swan make best pens
Quill soaked, dried then heated and stripped inside and out before cutting
Require regular sharpening

Feathers from a bird’s right wing curve naturally to the left and so are best suited to left-handers. Those from the bird’s left wing curve to the right and so away from the body when used by right-handers.

A dutching tool can be made from a brass cup hook. Hammer out the curve of the hook until it is straight. File the hook so that the underside is flat and goes to a blunt point, and insert the hook into a handle for protection from heat.

Quill knives usually have curved blades, with one side of the blade ground so that it has a curve into the cutting edge, and the other ground straight.
1. **Cut the tip from the feather with scissors or a knife**.
   - Trim the feather with scissors until it is about 20 cm (8 in) or pen length.

2. **Remove the barbs by pulling them from the cut end of the feather**.
   - But cut them from the barrel so that you do not weaken it.

3. **Soak the feathers in water for a few hours or preferably overnight**.
   - Make sure that the barbs are covered by water.

4. **Clean the membrane from the outside of the feather with your thumbnail or the back of a scissor blade**.
   - And use a crochet hook to remove the membrane from inside the barrel.

5. **Heat the ducking tool on a warm domestic iron (avoid setting or too hot)**.
   - Shake the water from one feather and place it on the iron. Insert the ducking tool into the barrel of the feather and use it to hold the feather against the hot iron. Rotate the feather.

6. **With the top of the feather uppermost place the new clear, yellowish, barrel on a flat metal surface and press hard with the ducking tool**.
   - This will square the barrel into an oval shape and will ensure that you can cut quills which have wide nubs.

7. **Hold the hardened feather in your left hand (right if you are left-handed) with the top uppermost**.
   - Turn the feather over and make a long scoop cut starting about 2.5 cm (1 in) from the tip, towards the tip and which goes about half way through the barrel.

8. **Place the blade of the knife against the side of the feather, about 1.5 cm (0.75 in) from the tip**.
   - And make a cut which curves in and then goes straight towards the tip.

9. **Place the knife at the point where you started the previous cut**.
   - Rotate the feather anti-clockwise so that the top is underneath, and as you do so the knife will be in the correct position for making a similar scoop cut to the previous one, which shapes the nib.

10. **Trim the end from the quill by placing the feather - top side down - on a flat surface such as a cutting mat**.
    - Make a slit by placing the point of the knife at the centre of the nib. Press downwards until it clicks.

11. **Shape the end of the nib by holding the feather on a cutting mat - top side uppermost**.
    - Place the knife at an angle of about 45° at the very tip of the nib and shape the end. This makes a bevel cut and adds a spring to the quill.

12. **Narrow trim the tip to ensure that it is straight (or left or right oblique) by rocking the knife for the last nib cut**.
    - Again you will hear the click as the knife takes the smallest amount from the quill tip.
Ink

**Carbon** - Soot and binder

**Oak Gall** Gallnuts are formed by wasp laying its eggs in the bark of an oak tree. Gallnuts crushed then soaked in water to release tannins and gallic acids. Mix with copperas and gum Arabic to produce ink.

Gilding

Flat gold leaf could be attached with glair or gum. Raised gold leaf placed on gesso ground. Raised gesso can also be tooled. Gold can also be ground and used as pigment (painted onto page).

Paint

**Pigment**

Animal, vegetable or mineral
Science and increased trade in 14\(^{th}\) C added many colors to palette (Eg- Mercury based vermilion, copper blues; brazil wood from Ceylon)

**Binder**

Gum arabic or glair (beaten egg whites)

**Opacifier** (optional)

Chalk, ground eggshells, or white lead

Around 1200 AD ingredients became commercially available.

Other tools

Sloped writing board

Scriveners wheel to mark spacing of text

Blunt pointed tool used to score guidelines into page until late 12\(^{th}\) C

Graphite or pigment used for guidelines starting in late 12\(^{th}\) C

T-squares or set squares used to keep lines parallel

Compass for drawing circles
Making the manuscript

Design sequence
Cut vellum to correct page size
Eight leaves of approx 10"x7" per hide; fairly standard size for many 12th C texts
Pages folded together to be assembled into a quire. Quires later stitched together into book.
Pin pricks through several pages at once for lettering guide lines
Determine location of illuminated letters, miniatures
Write text
Draw artwork
Either original or from exemplars/ model books
Add gold leaf
Paint illuminations
Add ink to edges of gold leaf and as needed for illuminations

Bibliography


General Reference


Writing desk

Illuminator’s desk

Parchment shop

Layout of sheets to be cut from vellum border

Apprentice painting background or border


Two versions of same drawing