

# WHITEWORK IN MEDIEVAL MANUSCRIPT ILLUMINATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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## **What is whitework?**

Whitework is a decorative technique employed in medieval manuscript illumination to fill blank spaces of color.

## **In what time periods was whitework found?**

Generally, whitework is found in manuscripts dating from the 13th through the 15th centuries, although examples of its use can be found as early as the 9th century in Carolingian manuscripts. It was used sporadically in early period as a border filler, but did not come into frequent practice until sometime in the later 13th century. With art and manuscripts progressing toward realism in the late 15th century, the practice of using whitework as a filler started to die out.

## **Where in manuscripts can whitework be found?**

Because whitework was used primarily as a filler, it can typically, though not exclusively, be found in borders and in capitals. It is also sometimes found in the fillers or spacers within the body of a text.

## **What are the typical characteristics of whitework?**

In the 13th through 15th centuries, the period wherein whitework was typically utilized, it could be found in many styles. Usually simple lines and shapes were employed to fill space, although in some instances the lines became more elaborate and were even shaded. The background for whitework was almost exclusively a true red or blue, though in earlier periods more muted colors were used. It is also most often employed in association with gold leafing of some sort, especially during the Gothic era.

## **What materials do you need to do whitework?**

Different artists, as I'm sure was the case in period, employ different methods for painting. I use gouache paint as a substitute for period pigments due to its accessibility, ease of use, opacity, and texture. Windsor & Newton is my preferred brand, as I have found other brands grainy, and a grainy base paint makes whitework all the more difficult. The colors I have found to most closely simulate those of medieval manuscripts are ultramarine, spectrum red, and zinc white. As far as brushes are concerned, for especially fine lines, I use an 18/0 or 20/0 natural hair "liner" brush. For shading and blending, I use a harder synthetic 10/0 "spotter" brush. When starting out in whitework or illumination, I would recommend experimenting with your brushes to determine which ones work best for you.

### **How thin or thick should I make my paint?**

Again, this is subjective to each individual artist, but consistency of paint is the most important and one of the most difficult aspects of good whitework. If the white paint is too thick, it is difficult to create a line of any length and it will often come out “smudgy” and inconsistent. If the paint is too thin, the line will not be dark enough and will be thicker than it should be. It is best to play with the consistency of your paint to find that perfect balance of paint and water. Experiment with your lines on both blues and reds. The white pigment will interact differently with each color. For example, the white will not be as vibrant on the red as it is on the blue, so a thinner paint, while it may be visible on the blue, will be completely lost on the red.

### **How much pressure should be applied to the brush when painting whitework?**

Practically none. If you find that you are having to use a bit of pressure, then your paint is too thick. When I do whitework, I can’t even feel the paper under my brush. The paint should flow easily enough so that the merest touch of the brush will make an impression.

### **What should the lines look like when they are painted?**

Ideally, the lines should be thin, consistent, and as delicate as a strand of hair—**Ideally!** Don’t fret if yours doesn’t look perfect at first. Whitework is very much a learned skill from much practice. Once you get the hang of your paint and the amount of pressure to use, all will fall into place. But don’t expect it overnight! And practice, practice, practice.

### **What styles or what type of lines should be used in whitework?**

Here, I recommend doing some personal research. There are tons of different styles out there that you can employ. Doing your own research is invaluable in any type of illumination that you may want to do. In every culture and time period there can be found something unique with regard to illumination, and whitework is no exception. The good news, though, is that with whitework, you can generally apply any design you find into Gothic illumination. So once you pick up a style, you can use it again and again.

### **Some tips:**

1. Generally, if you see something you like in a border, you can modify it to work in a capital.
2. Circles, dots, and simple lines make great space fillers when you can’t figure out what to do or when nothing else will fit.
3. Squiggles are perfectly acceptable.
4. If you screw up, gouache is forgiving and can easily be painted over. Try new things without fear of failure!