

Helpful Hints

The following are the collections of “Helpful Hints” and “FYIs,” given in the Falcon Signet letters to the Kingdom during the term of Duchess Alethea Charle. These writings were supplied by Alethea, Countess Margarete de St. Martin Sur Mer (Maggie) and Mistress Tatiana Dieugarde.

A.S. XXXIV—April’s Helpful Hint

When writing with a dip or cartridge pen, it is preferable not to use waterproof ink. Waterproof ink will clog your pen and it is difficult to clean off of the pen. It is glossy and does not flow nearly as well as a non-waterproof ink will. This is especially notable when you are attempting to reproduce a hand with a lot of flourishes. In short, it can ruin your pen and make it hard to use.

A.S. XXXV—May’s Helpful Hint

One of the secrets to a beautiful, medieval, calligraphic hand is the even size, spacing, and vertical lines of the script. This is a very difficult thing for our modern hands to master. I suggest purchasing graph paper on which to practice writing. Depending on the size of your nib, you may want paper that has 8 squares to the inch (using one square for the body of your letters) or 10 squares per inch (using 2 squares for the body of your letters). Allow the vertical lines to guide you in making all of your letters straight up and down. When writing on an actual scroll, I draw a graph on my paper/vellum (which I erase later) to help make sure my letters are as nice as I can make them.

A.S. XXXV—June’s Helpful Hint

Medieval manuscripts were primarily done on parchment (vellum) or, in later period, and for lesser-valued manuscripts, paper. These days, vellum is often cost prohibitive for our scribes to use in the production of scrolls. Therefore, we tend to use paper. I recommend, when choosing your paper, to look for one of a heavier weight. This will keep the paper from buckling when paint is applied. Watercolor paper works well, but often has a rough texture that makes calligraphy difficult. Avoid using watercolor paper that comes in a pad, and if using watercolor paper, use the backside, as it is often much smoother. My favorite paper to use is “Bristol Board” (this does come in a pad, and you want to use the one labeled “smooth”) because it is heavily sized and very smooth. It is the best paper I have found to most closely approximate the feel of vellum. It causes the colors of your paint, the ink, and the gold leafing you apply to leap off the page at you. A parchment-colored “card stock” can also work very nicely and is most often the paper used for AOA level scrolls.

A.S. XXXV—August’s Helpful Hint

Many of the pigments used for paint in the Middle ages were toxic as well as difficult to make/obtain. To be honest, many of us are not able or interested in going to the trouble of

making them in order to paint a scroll. Therefore, we look for modern equivalents that look like the ones used in period, are affordable, and non-toxic. I recommend **gouache paints**. They have the same opacity as period pigments, are water-soluble, and can be mixed and blended much easier than latex or egg tempera paints. There are vast ranges of potential colors, all of which can be mixed by the scribe at the time of need and saved for another time. Once dried they can be reconstituted as needed by simply adding water. And, they won't poison you if you, say, *accidentally* licked your brush to bring it to a nice point. The best colors to start with are **White, Black, Spectrum Yellow, Spectrum Red, and Indigo Blue**. With these colors you can mix almost any color you like. I don't recommend getting carried away when buying paints, as these paints are not particularly cheap. They will, however, last a long, long time. You will also need several plastic palates to keep your mixed paints on. Be sure to store them in an enclosed space when you are not using them, because they are great dust magnets.

A.S. XXXV—October's Thought for the Month

The following was a note from an 8th-century scribe:

“O lucky reader, wash your hands and thus touch the book, turn the pages gently, hold the fingers far away from the letters. He, who does not know how to write, cannot imagine the work involved. O how hard is this writing: It clouds the eyes, squashes the kidneys, and at the same time brings pain to all the limbs. Three fingers write, the whole body suffers”

A.S. XXXV—November's Helpful Hint

[From Maggie.] When doing a piece that includes both calligraphy and illumination, it is wise to complete the calligraphy first. It is much easier to correct painting errors, such as stray paint that has dripped off of your brush or a paint stroke gone awry than it is to have to start a piece all over again because you left the recipient's name out of the text or your pen decided to start spewing ink all over the page. In the next two issues, I will discuss how to correct or hide some common calligraphy and painting/illuminating mistakes.

A.S. XXXV—December's Helpful Hint

Correcting Calligraphy Mistakes

[From Maggie.] If you make mistakes while doing calligraphy, you may be able to correct it without starting over. If you spill a drop of ink, there are a few techniques you can try:

1. If it's a small drop and in a relatively translucent shade, you can try taking a wet paintbrush and brushing out the spot by using water to thin it out. Don't use too much water though, or you'll end up with a warped page. This is only safely done on a part of the page that isn't too close to other text, or else you run the risk of causing additional ink bleeding. You may try several thin coats of water, as well, allowing the page to dry completely between each coat.
2. For thicker, more opaque inks, you may try very delicately chipping the ink off with the tip of an exacto-knife or straight razor blade (exercise caution!). The scraping

should be done very gingerly, as to avoid scraping completely through the paper. Once done, run a soft eraser over the area to remove any paper lint and create a smooth surface. If you are only able to remove some of the ink without causing further damage, you may also opt to try removing the rest of the ink using the first technique above.

3. Cover the mistake up with paint that you've carefully mixed to match the color of the paper. Combinations of white, browns or yellows will usually yield colors similar to vellum or parchment. You will have to experiment using a scrap of the same paper or a small area on the back of the page to match the color. Remember that most colors change a shade or two as they dry.
4. Ignore it! Mistakes such as misspelling a word or leaving a word out are period. You will have to use your best judgment to determine whether the mistake, even if it's a drop of ink, warrants tossing a piece out the window and starting over or whether it adds character.

A.S. XXXV—January's Helpful Hint

Correcting Painting Mistakes

[From Maggie.] Stray paint does not have to mean doom to a piece of artwork you've been working on. Here are some suggestions for correcting or hiding such mistakes:

1. Cover it up. As with calligraphy mistakes, you can mix paint to match the color of your paper, if the mistake was made with a relatively light color. Apply the paint you've mixed over the mistake in thin layers (probably 2 or 3). Be sure to let the paint dry completely between layers.
2. As with ink mistakes, you may try gently scraping the paint off, using an exacto blade or straight razor (very carefully!) once it has dried completely. The effectiveness of this technique will depend on the type of paint you use and its tendency to "soak into" the page.
3. Hide it! Incorporate the mistake into the existing artwork/design. Nobody but you will ever know that it wasn't intentional. For instance, you could turn a drop of paint into a flower or a beast.

Be creative!

A.S. XXXV—March's Helpful Hint

There has been some discussion on the scribe's list regarding the lines on bible pages seen in period and how to duplicate them on the scrolls we make. My answer to the list was as follows:

In the Middle Ages "ruling" was placed on each page of a book being calliged and illuminated. These are the lines placed prior to painting and calligraphy and are used to make the text more uniform. They are pretty much the same on every page. The scribes then used the ruling to not only guide the calligraphy but to help block out the artwork (If you look closely you can see where the artist painted directly over the previously placed ruling). The calligrapher became very adept at writing exactly between the ruling. If you will notice the calligraphy rarely touches the lines. And, if it does, only the ascenders and descenders do. In the SCA these lines are sometimes placed in the scrolls we do, usually

on the more specialized scrolls and scrolls done by more experienced artists. It takes a lot of practice to write in the exact center of these lines, so if you are wanting the effect but aren't up to doing it from scratch, try this approach: Rule/line your page and do the calligraphy as you usually would. When you have completed it, erase the pencil lines you used and then, with a red, blue or gray colored pencil, lightly redraw the lines in the exact center between each line of text. Remember to include rules/lines to each side of your text and to extend the rules/lines on the side a little above and below your text. Look at a Medieval manuscript closely and you will see what I mean.

A.S. XXXV—April's Helpful Hint

Are you having difficulty getting your calligraphy to look the way you want it to? Are you missing words and letters and, sometimes, entire sentences? Are the words “practice, practice, practice” getting very annoying? Well, here are a few more pointers that might help you out.

First, never drink caffeine or alcohol before sitting down to work on your scrolls. They will either make your hands shake or make you lose some fine motor control, which is necessary for the constancy of your lettering. Also, try not to exercise, especially with the upper extremities, before doing your calligraphy. Muscle fatigue will make your hands shake.

Second, try not to listen to music (with lyrics) or the TV while doing your calligraphy. It is too easy to lose your place or substitute words or letters where you do not want them. Someone talking with you will do the same thing.

Third, try typing the text in large type and copy from that. Place a piece of paper over the typed version. This will cover the words of the lines you are not working on. Then, cross out the words (on the typed version) you have already written. It helps keep you from losing your place or writing something over again. Often times we are concentrating so hard on getting the letter shapes correct that we lose track of what we are actually writing.

A.S. XXXVI—May's Helpful Hint

This is taken from the information HE Tatiana gave to the Calontir Scribe's list: In designing the preprints AoA scrolls for the upcoming reign I drew from the Book of Kells, the Lindesfarne Gospels, the Book of Durrow, the Book of Durham, and the Psalter of Ricemarchus. There is also one that is based on Viking stone carvings.

Take heart budding illuminators! The generic 'Celtic' style is one of the easiest to paint as a preprint because it's all flat washes. No shading involved. If you can color within the lines, you can paint these preprints. Adding red dots around the illuminated letters like in the Book of Kells is also an easy way to dress up these scrolls.

The biggest trap when people are first starting out is choosing the wrong colors. When I'm teaching, I tend to limit people to a few colors. For Celtic, I stick with primary (red, blue, yellow) and secondary (green, orange, purple) colors. Sure you can find examples of peach and turquoise in the Lindesfarne Gospel, but I would save it until you are more sure of what you are doing.

A.S. XXXVI—June’ Helpful Hint—actually it’s more of a FYI ☺

Did you know that *gold leaf* was made by beating gold nuggets into extremely thin sheets? It was said that a good “gold beater” could make up to 145 leaves from one ducat. Gold leaf was rarely used prior to the 13th century, with the exception of the most lavish documents. One possible reason is that the monastic cloisters were open to the wind. A proper sheet of gold leaf is so light that one little puff of air can send it floating across a room.

A.S. XXXVI—August’s Helpful Hint (FYI)

Ever wondered what your favorite manuscript colors were made of in the Middle Ages? Or why we prefer not to use them in their period form? In the next few installments I plan to illuminate you. (Clever play on words wouldn’t you say?) ☺

Let’s start with purple. Very Calontir, but not a particularly common color to be seen used in the Middle Ages. Ever wonder why? Well, it was considered a Royal color in the early Middle Ages, to be used in only the most expensive and important manuscripts, and it was very difficult to obtain and process. The most valued color of purple was made from the bodies of shellfish obtained from the waters surrounding Phoenicia. It was a very long, difficult and smelly process to get the purple dye. In fact, it took several pounds of material to obtain just a few ounces of the dye. There were several other methods of obtaining purple dye, like mixing a blue with a red, but they were not as brilliant and were not well suited for use as pigments.

A.S. XXXVI—September’s Helpful Hint (FYI)

Last month we discussed the color purple. This month I want to talk about the medieval scribe’s next most popular pigment. As you may have noted the color blue, or ultramarine, is used a lot in the most valuable of manuscripts. It is an intense, beautiful color, and like purple, not so easy to obtain. Ultramarine was made by grinding the stone lapis lazuli into a fine powder. The different colors were then separated by hand and mixed with various binders. One could obtain different shades of blue by doing this. There were basically two distinct hues used by medieval painters: a light (warm) shade and an intense (cool) shade. The warmer shade was used for clothing, sky, etc. The cooler shade was more rare, and almost tended toward purple. Not surprisingly, this color was used for royal or divine robes, or for the more decorative backgrounds which were then often embellished with gold.

A.S. XXXVI—October’s Helpful Hint (FYI)

I believe we have been discussing colored pigments in this latest series. We have covered Purple (every Calontiri’s favorite) and Blue. This month we will be discussing *my* favorite color, RED.

There were several sources for red pigments, but the two most popular were orange tetroxide and red mercuric sulfide. Both were chemically manufactured and both were called by the name “minium” (after which the term *miniature* was obtained). To make the color orange-red, powdered white lead is roasted in an uncovered iron pan until it turns

yellow and then orange-red. This particular color tends to tarnish. Orange-red was used most frequently in early period illumination. Red minium, or mercuric oxide, was much preferred and was more commonly known as “vermilion.” It was made by cooking mercury and white or yellow sulfur in a clay flask surrounded by a charcoal fire. The smoke coming from the flask was watched until it progressed from a yellow to a red color. That is how you knew it was done. Sounds fun doesn't it?

I hope that these writings have been helpful and informative, and that in some way they have inspired people to want to learn more, and perhaps give being a scribe a try. ☺