Scrolls in the SCA

By Heather of Dormanswell, March 7, 2000. ©Heather 2000, 2009, used on the Vest Yorvik website by permission.

Addendum as of 2009: there are scribes' groups and e-lists for Ealdormere (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EScribe) and for the SCA in general (http://groups.yahoo.com/group/SCA_Scribes_and_Illumination), as well as a kingdom web page http://scribal.wolfium.com.

What I see as the difference between other arts in the SCA and the creation of scrolls, in general, is that scrolls are nearly always created for Royalty to present as awards. This means that you have a certain responsibility in level of quality and in the nature of the design. When you know or can discreetly find out anything about the person to whom the award is being given, or if it is a backlog and you can ask the recipient's desires, it is always nice to customise the scroll as much as possible. I will be talking only about scrolls on paper, but they can be done in other media. Although they are in wording proclamations or "legal" documents, their actual use will be as works of art for the recipients. I would not recommend transliterating English into non-latin alphabets; that seems phoney to me. Translating, yes, but only if you are comfortable enough in the other language to do a decent translation. Otherwise stick to English.

There are 4 types of sources for mediaeval calligraphy and illumination:

Primary – every now and then one has the chance to see original calligraphy and illumination. There was an exhibition at the AGO in 1987-88; I believe St Michael's College at U of T has some good things; and of course if you travel to Britain or Europe you can find displays. Given that one cannot study these while actually creating a scroll, they are more of interest than utility, but if you can get the catalogue of a display, that will be a good secondary source.

Secondary – There are books that have photographs of originals. While it is more difficult to find books that concentrate on the calligraphy rather than the illumination, they do exist. These are very useful, but it is often hard to find all the letters you may need – "y" and "z", for example, are rarely seen, and "w" did not exist for a long time. A good book is "Two Thousand Years of Calligraphy". Be careful; older books may contain lithographs. The lithographs are the author's hand-drawn reproductions, not original photos. On the Internet, there are a few things – start with Digital Scriptorium, a visual database of Medieval & Renaissance manuscripts at sunsite.berkeley.edu/Scriptorium/

Tertiary – these are books created with the author's reproductions of what he feels are generic examples of various styles. These are useful for showing height of the text in relation to pen size, getting all the letters, etc., but one must be careful, as with any

tertiary source. How useful they are depends on the level of scholarship of the author. A good one is Marc Drogin's "Medieval Calligraphy Its History and Technique" and "Yours Truly, King Arthur", a simpler version.

Modern Calligraphy books – These are quite dangerous although relatively easy to find. They are modern interpretations of scripts. With care, you can use them in conjunction with the other types of sources for an idea how to write any missing letters you may need, such as "w". Never use them as your sole source; that's worse than accepting what is in Victorian-era costume books as valid sources. At least the Victorian authors thought they were doing real research; the modern calligraphy authors have no such intention.

SCA Sources

These are sources that tell you what texts to use for various types of scrolls, what are the badges, etc. They also tend to have useful suggestions about materials and methods. Right now, the Ealdormere Scribe's Handbook is still being created, as far as I know, but such information as there is, is available on the Ealdormere Scribal Website, www.niagara.com/~barons/Signet/. Another really good site is that of Merouda Pendray mka Elyse Boucher at www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/2036/page1.html. For more information, contact the Kingdom Signet. She or he will assign scrolls to anyone willing and reasonably competent. You must keep secret any upcoming awards you are assigned (often only a week before the event). There are occasionally backlogs, which I prefer because I am not rushed with them. The West Kingdom has several thousand backlogs and is pleased to accept "blanks". Blanks are sometimes just the illumination but more often have also the generic parts of the text with blanks for the rest.

The parts of the text are as follows:

- Opening proclamation, e.g. "Be it known that"

- Names and titles of the Royalty giving the award, e.g. "We Generic King of Ealdormere and Soandso Our Queen"

- Name of the award, e.g. "are pleased to make an Award of Arms"

- Name of the person receiving the award, e.g. "unto Whatsisname of Vest Yorvik"

- Reason for the award, e.g. "by reason of his long service to his canton"

- Date and place the award was given, e.g. "Done this 8th day of March AS XXX in the Canton of Eoforwic"

- Plus space for the signatures of the royalty and their 2" diameter seal.

Of course the text need not be in this order and can be elaborated on greatly, including adding what the award entitles the recipient to ("bear the badge…" and give the heraldic blazon of the badge, etc.). The illumination however should *always* include the badge of the award, and if it is an Award if Arms or award that includes that, a shield with the recipient's device (left blank if unknown or not yet approved).

Materials

Pens and ink - I do not recommend calligraphy markers, the quality they give is poor and the ink fades rapidly. Calligraphy pen sets use fountain or cartridge pens. If you aren't going to do much, they are less hassle than dip-type pens but they do not use truly permanent ink. My preference is for Speedball "C" nibs and penholders with India ink. They can be messy and need to be cleaned after each use, but they can use permanent (India) ink and come as close as is practical to quill pens. Use an eyedropper to fill the pen (don't dip it, you will get too much ink). Those of you who are a bit crazy can go to the effort of making real quill pens – it is a **lot** of work but more authentic as steel nibs did not appear until the latter 18th Century. Note that the nibs always have a square "point"; the "C" nibs come in varying end width from 1 (quite broad) to 6 (narrow) for different sizes of fonts. A truly pointed end is not used until the 17th Century.

Paper – Best is acid-free rag paper. It should be smooth (hot press) but not glossy. You can buy large sheets and cut them up for scrolls. A watercolour or good drawing paper will do, so long as the ink does not bleed. Do not use drafting vellum, as it is too thin. Paper called "Parchment" is generally not good; it is acid-washed to give it the parchment look and therefore ages rapidly. Moreover, it is often yellow. Remember that real vellum is not yellow, neither is early paper which was made with a very high rag content, so it does not yellow the way cheap modern paper does. (Modern paper has a high wood content that contains acid, which yellows the paper and makes it brittle). If you (or the recipient of the scroll) is rich, you can use real parchment (sheep's skin) or vellum (calf's skin). It is wonderful to write on but expensive and must be handled with care so as to prevent buckling.

Other useful tools are a ruler, soft (plastic or gum) eraser, soft (2H or softer) pencil, a very sharp knife and a stone such as agate for burnishing. For simple illumination (no real metals), you will need fine, teardrop shaped brushes from size 0000 up to a 2 or 3 for large areas. I prefer gouache paints as these can have real pigments but work thinned with water (easy to work with). And finally, a drafting board (real or contrived) in a brightly lit area makes it *much* easier to work. I use a desk blotter propped up with a computer wrist rest in front and shelves behind.

Layout

The paper size should be a standard size, and no larger than 12x17 (ledger size), so that the recipient can get it framed without too much difficulty. Leave a minimum of 1½″ border, again for ease of framing, plus a space of at least 1½″ at the bottom for

the signatures of the Royalty, and more than 2″ diameter space for the seal. You should plan on incorporating the arms of the recipient for an Award of Arms, or the badge of the Order for other awards. You should have at least one large illuminated capital letter; remember this is to be a work of art for the recipient to display proudly. The higher the level of the award, the fancier the illumination should be.

Once you have decided on a layout, use the ruler and pencil (lightly) to draw it out. I need to draw lines for the text but unlike mediaeval scribes, I draw them at "x" height. For this reason is important to use a soft pencil lightly so the lines can be erased. Mediaeval scribes sometimes used red ink for lines, or ruled indentations into the page. In either case, those are at the top and bottom of the ascenders and descenders. I also like to pencil in the actual text. This allows me to work on the spacing so the lines come out fairly even (which is also one reason I prefer not to do "blanks" – scrolls with the name and date left blank so they can be handed out quickly at an event). Mediaeval scribes broke words at the ends of lines and just continued on the next line; we don't nowadays except according to the rules of hyphenation; so unless I am writing in Latin I prefer to make the text readable according to modern standards. Pencilling in the text also reduces the chances of making a spelling error when inking the letters.

Next, ink the letters. Each letter takes several strokes to complete; it is more like drawing than the writing we are accustomed to. Cover the part of the page where the ball of your hand rests with another paper, to prevent smudging of the pencil or getting the paper dirty. Each time you fill the pen (with the eyedropper, into the "reservoir" of the pen, not the point), test it on a scrap piece of paper; sometimes there will be too much ink and it will blot. By looking at the mediaeval script, you can see which part of the letters are thickest and which thinnest. The variation comes from the broad point of the pen; if you pull it vertically, you will get a broad stroke; if horizontally a thin stroke. You can thus see at what angle the mediaeval scribe was holding his pen. The angle does not change (usually); do not twist your wrist back and forth as you are writing. I suggest you hold the pen at a comfortable angle for your hand, and position the paper instead to get the correct angle for the script.

Errors do happen. Let it dry, then use the sharp knife to carefully scrape off the error (as mediaeval scribes did too). This will roughen the surface of the paper; burnish it smooth with a stone (I usually use a tissue between the paper and stone just in case the stone makes a mark). Do NOT use whiteout – it shows. So does the method above, but not as much and it is period. If the error is bad enough, you may need to start over. That is why I do not (if doing it all myself) start the illumination until the text is finished and dry. When you are quite sure it is dry, erase the pencil guides using a gentle circular motion.

Now you can pencil in the illumination. Mediaeval scribes used red ink for their draft, but I prefer to go straight from pencil to black ink outline, then erase the pencil before starting to paint. This is mostly because I only do very late or early

illumination, which has definite outlines. If you were doing real metal illumination, you would prepare the surface, gild and burnish it before moving on to the colours. When you start painting, protect the rest of the page with a paper and paint from top to bottom, left to right (right to left if left-handed) to prevent smearing.

Last but not least, sign the scroll on the back. Type a transcript of the text (no matter how legible you think it is) and tape it lightly to the back. Then put it in a folder to take it to the Signet. Special cardboard folders have been made (or you can make), so that scribes and recipients can transport the scrolls safely. Do not roll scrolls, especially if they have real metal illumination. Do not touch them except by the edges. Do not leave them out in bright light even if you used light-fast ink and colours (light damages the paper itself). Once the Signet has the scroll, your work is finished – until next time.