

# Whitework Illumination

*by Mistress Ygraine of Kellswood*

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**Y**ou know it best as the doodly white designs on blue or red backgrounds, prevalent in the manuscript pages of high middle ages France. It is a beautiful and useful technique, and it is pretty easy to do.

**O**kay, so it is not always white, not always done on red or blue, not always French, and found earlier and later than the height of our period of study... In one afternoon, my apprentices and I browsed through my library and found examples of what could be called whitework as early as 12<sup>th</sup> century England (the Winchester Bible), and from origins which included Palestine, Italy, Belgium and Germany. We even found “whitework” done with yellow on green. The classic versions, though, are white on red or blue, in French manuscripts of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.

**W**hen to use it: In the “vine and bar” style, on the bars of red or blue from which the tendrils and leaves grow; sometimes the vines themselves bear a stripe of white and the leaves often have white highlighting. On versals (the decorated letters that start text sections) done with solid colors, or on solid color backgrounds behind gilded versals; usually these letterforms are Lombardic (see below). On the frames around miniatures.

**H**ow to do it: Paint an even, opaque background color of blue or red; let it dry as thoroughly as you have time for – overnight

is great. Mix an opaque white paint to the consistency of heavy cream. Using a nicely pointed brush which holds a lot of paint, touch the point of the brush very lightly to the background and paint your design pattern as thinly as possible. When your brush runs out of paint, reload it and continue by overlapping a bit where you left off. Try to blend where the old and new paint overlap; this works best if the earlier paint is still damp. Strive for lines of white which are consistent in color and thickness. You can shade areas of your pattern, if appropriate, using tiny lines of white or by taking advantage of your brush running out of paint (a “dry brush” technique).

**I**f you use Windsor Newton gouache, I recommend these colors: “Spectrum Red”, “Cobalt Pale Hue” blue, and “Permanent White”.

## Useful books:

**I**n general, I highly recommend the series of books on period manuscripts published by George Braziller, or any books authored or edited by Janet Backhouse.

The Book of the Hunt by Gaston Phoebus – any version of the best known copy, from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, of this late 1300’s hunting instruction manual! A full reproduction is available by Harvey Miller Publishers, ISBN 1872501974; it is pricey (about \$90) but you get **all** the pages. There is an older book of

selected pages with very friendly translations entitled Illuminated Manuscripts: Medieval Hunting Scenes, by Miller Graphics, ©1978 by Productions Liber SA; it has no ISBN. There is also a very affordable (about \$12) paperback version published in 2002 by Hackberry Press of Texas, but already out of print; The Hunting Book of Gaston Phébus; ISBN 1-931040-38-9. Lastly, many images are provided at the website of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (link below). The illuminations in this manuscript are loaded with lovely diapered (patterned) backgrounds, and each is framed by a border of classic whitework.

The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting 1200 – 1500; Richard Marks & Nigel Morgan; ©1981; George Braziller, NY; ISBN 0-8076-0972-2.

The Illuminated Alphabet; Calligraphy by Timothy Noad; Text by Patricia Seligman; ©1994; Quarto Inc., Running Press, Philadelphia PA; ISBN 1-56138-458-5. This has some useful how-to instructions for a variety of styles.

Illuminated Initials in Full Color; Selected and arranged by Carol Belanger Grafton; ©1995; Dover Books; ISBN 0-486-28501-4. This is a great little book for ideas on versals, because you get several pages of each letter done in many different styles. Caution: Be aware that these are all **redrawn** from the originals, and they lose some of the flavor of the real thing; also, no sources are cited.

Illuminated Manuscripts: The Book Before Gutenberg; Giulia Bologna; ©1988; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, NY; ISBN 1-555-84275-5. A favorite collection containing many famous examples.

The Illuminated Page: Ten Centuries of Manuscript Painting; Janet Backhouse; ©1997; University of Toronto Press; ISBN 0-8020-4346-1. A splendid and useful collection.

Manuscript Painting at the Court of France: The Fourteenth Century; Francois Avril; ©1978; George Braziller, NY; ISBN 0-8076-0879-3. A useful selection of pages from many different French manuscripts, 1310 to 1380.

Medieval Manuscripts in the British Library: The Bedford Hours; Janet Backhouse; ©1990; New Amsterdam Books, NY; ISBN 1-56131-021-2. This book provides the highlights of a lovely early 1400's French manuscript.

Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art; Roger S. Wieck; ©1997; George Braziller, NY; ISBN 0-8076-1419-X. Stunning examples, all from the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library.

Western European Illuminated Manuscripts of the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in the National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg; Tamara Voronova & Andrei Sterligov; ©1996; Parkstone Press/Aurora, Bournemouth, UK; ISBN 1-85995-240-2. An invaluable collection, arranged chronologically.

The Winchester Bible; Claire Donovan; ©1993; University of Toronto Press; ISBN 0-8020-6991-6. This 12<sup>th</sup> century English manuscript is another personal favorite source of inspiration.

## Websites of interest:

East Kingdom, Tyger Clerk of the Signet,  
resources for illuminators:

[www.signet.eastkingdom.org/illuminators.php](http://www.signet.eastkingdom.org/illuminators.php)

Kingdom of Atlantia, resources for scribes:

<http://scribe.atlantia.sca.org/links.html>

The Bibliothèque Nationale de France:

<http://expositions.bnf.fr/usindex.htm>

Maestra Dresden Pennello di Quadro Voce:

<http://d-128-95-70-126.dhcp4.washington.edu/~scribejm/scrolls/homepage.html>

The borders contain some of her lovely  
whitework, as do many of her other scrolls.

Mistress Ygraine of Kellswood:

[www.kellswood.com/krafts/](http://www.kellswood.com/krafts/)

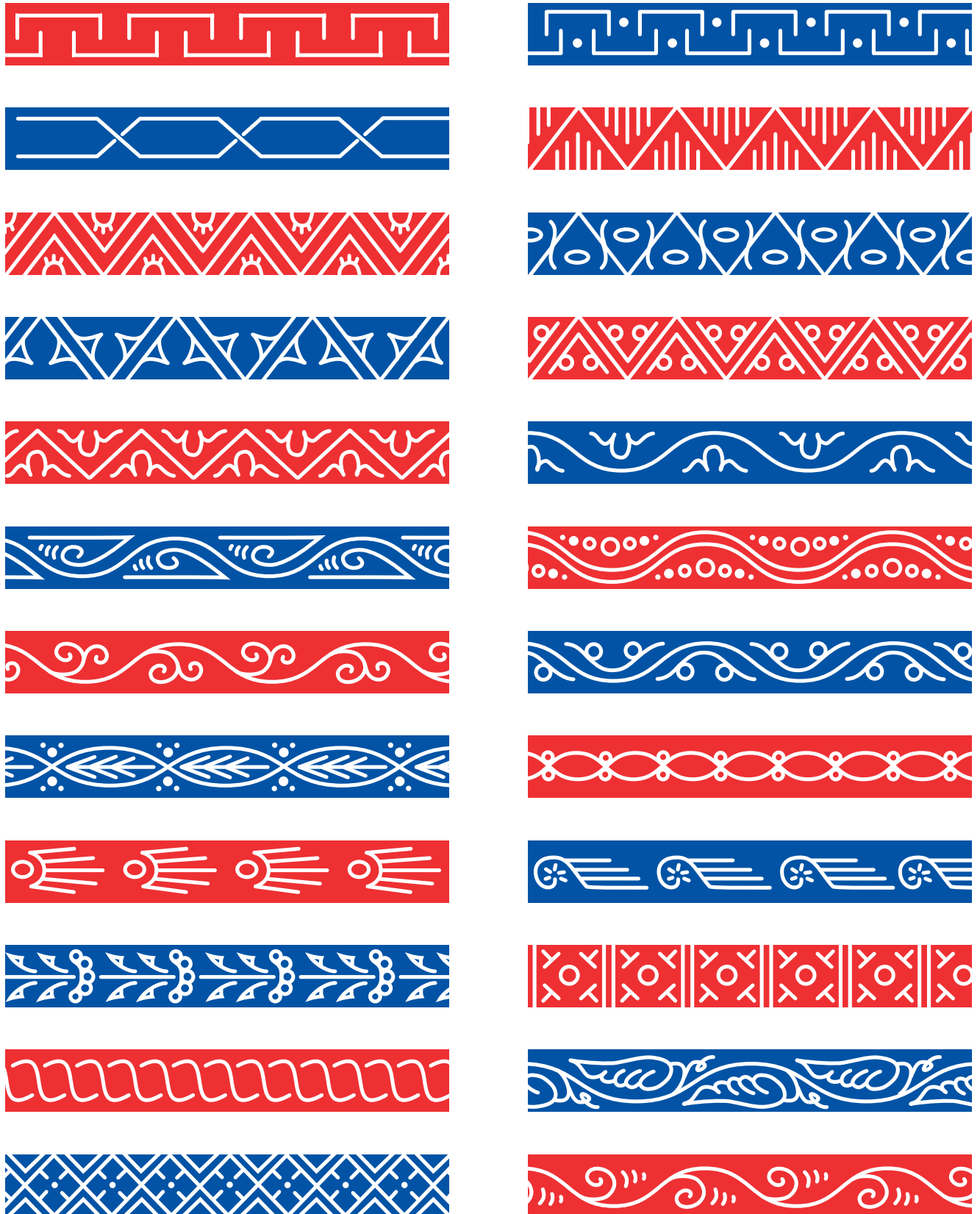
See the “Do It Yourself” page for current copies  
of all my handouts.

## Lombardic letters:



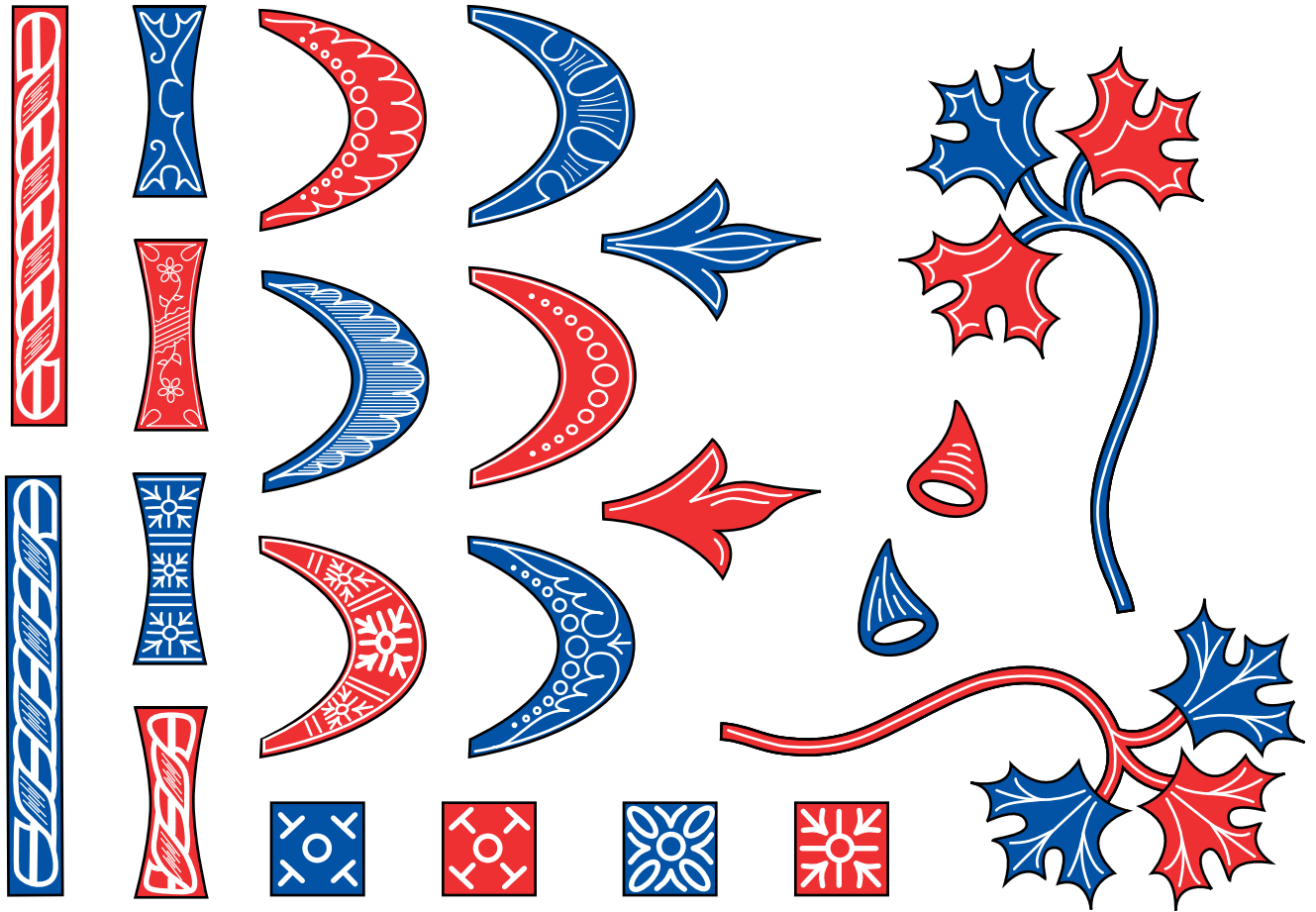
These letters are from one of the many computer fonts based on handwritten medieval Lombardic versals. They are provided here just to give you a rough idea of the letter shapes. I recommend that you draw your own, referring to real examples from manuscripts. In general, the more exaggerated and puffy, the better! (This example is from [www.identifont.com](http://www.identifont.com)).

## Whitework Bar Examples



All these examples were drawn by me based on borders found in *The Book of the Hunt* by Gaston Phoebus, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. francais 616, circa 1407.

## Whitework Shape Examples



All these examples were drawn by me and inspired by a variety of sources.