

# Illumination: Process & Terminology

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One reason why the craftsmanship of the Middle Ages was so admired in the nineteenth century is that the effort involved in creating an illuminated manuscript provided a model for cooperation and devotion to an artistic task.

The following people were responsible for various parts of a manuscript

**Parchmenter:** the person who prepared the animal skin. Technically, “**parchment**” refers to that made from sheepskin, and “**vellum**” that made from calfskin, but the words are generally used interchangeably today.

**Scribe:** the person who prepares the surface of the parchment, by scraping it with a knife and/or rubbing it with pumice (a porous stone ejected during a volcanic eruption) to raise a nap on the surface to help hold the ink and color in place. The scribe then delimits (rules) the sheets, and collects them in gatherings of about eight pages. Finally, he or she (and there were women illuminators) sharpens a goose quill with a **pen knife**, dips the pen in ink, and inscribes the text onto the page—leaving blank spaces with lightly inscribed instructions for the illuminator.

**Illuminator:** the person responsible for decorating the text with miniatures (images) and other embellishments. After outlining a letter or a figure to be colored, more detailed elements were added, followed by sizing to hold gold leaf in place. The gold was applied first because paint would not allow the gold to adhere, and then burnished (polished). According to the Octavo article cited later, “the word ‘**illumination**’ derives from the effect created by the play of light on a turning gilded page.” The surface to be painted might also have to be polished to flatten the nap raised by the scribe to make the paint adhere better.

**Rubricator:** the scribe responsible for inserting red text into the manuscript for emphasis. After printing was invented, rubrication was often added on a second printing pass or included by hand.

## Some of the technicalities:

The **size** (or sizing) applied under the **gilt** (gold leaf) was made from egg white and water and called “**glair**” or from chalk or plaster-based preparations (later).

Colors consisted of ground minerals or dyes mixed and bound with a medium of egg yolk, egg white, or gelatin.

Vermillion was made from mercuric sulfide (also called cinnabar or minium—from whence the word “**miniature**”). Blue comes from azurite (or from ground lapis lazuli). Other colors come from saffron, dyers’ herbs such as woad, deadly nightshade, buckthorn, malachite, ochres, and realgar—all of which required different handling techniques.

Paler colors were laid first, then heavier; black and brown outlines were then added, and then thin outlines.

## Additional Terminology

**Signatures:** combinations of letters and digits used to indicate the sequence of pages or gatherings. Today the word “signature” is often used in place of “gathering.”

**Catchwords:** bits of text from the beginning of the next gathering, included at the end of a gathering to indicate which one comes next.

**Gathering:** segments of vellum consisting of paired pages which were sewn separately into a codex.

**Codex:** the standard book form that replaced scrolls (or *volumes*). It consists of gathered segments, originally sewn together in sections and then bound on completion. (In some cultures, however—such as the Maya—*codex* refers to a fan-folded book made of bark paper coated with lime wash and then painted.) The cords that bind the gatherings together form the **ribs** that are often embellished or gilded after the leather cover is applied to the boards that enclose the gatherings.

**Drolleries:** amusing drawings of animals (real or imaginary) and/or people included in the borders of some manuscripts.

**Horror vacui:** Literally meaning “fear of emptiness,” this Latin term describes the distaste for empty spaces in a manuscript that may have been brought about by the expense of producing parchment. Scribes and illuminators often used space-filling designs to eliminate “vacuums” in their manuscripts.

**Delimiting** or **Delimitation** refers to the pricking of holes and drawing of lines that formed a visual spatial outline for the text and images to be placed on a page.

**Initials** (initial letters) may be **historiated** (those that incorporate images related to the story being told in the text), **decorated** (with designs around them), or simply **emphasized** by size or color.

**Borders** were frequently used around part of the text, but seldom around all of it. These may include images of insects, animals, the labors of the months, or other common themes, as well as mythical animals and/or drolleries, along with designs made of floral imagery.

A **chamois** (soft suede leather) was frequently used by readers to keep a valuable book from getting dirty from oily or unwashed hands. Many images of prayer books (**books of hours**) and other texts show them being wrapped or held in chamois cloths.