

Making Manuscripts, Getty Museum

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuNfdHNTv9o>

[stringed music in the background throughout the video]

Title on film: Making Manuscripts

Narrator:

In the middle ages, parchment was used to make the pages of books. Parchment was made from the skins of animals. The transition from a fresh skin to a surface suitable for writing was a slow and laborious process. The parchment maker selected skins of sheep, goats, or calves. Skins were soaked in limewater for three to ten days to loosen the animal's hair. The parchment maker then scraped away the hair and any remaining flesh. After this, the skin was soaked in fresh water to remove the lime, and then stretched tightly on a frame. A special, rounded knife was used to scrape the hide to the desired thickness. The process of scraping continued over the course of several days. During this time, the parchment maker continually tightened the tension on the stretching frame, while the skin dried. The result was parchment, a smooth and durable material that could last over a thousand years. Before parchment could be written on, it had to be specially prepared. First, the parchment was rubbed with pumice powder to roughen the surface, and then dusted with a sticky powder. These steps made the surface receptive to inks and colors. The whole, finished skin was then cut down to the size of the pages needed for a particular book. A big manuscript was assembled from sheets almost as large as a single skin. For smaller books, the skin was cut into two or more pieces. The parchment sheets were folded and nested, to make gatherings, usually of sixteen or twenty pages.

The vibrant illuminations in a medieval manuscript often overshadow the words on the page, yet the writing of the script was as important as the painting of the images. The tools of a scribe, the person who copied the text onto the page, were simple. Pens, called quills, were made from the feathers of a bird, which were soaked in water, dried, and hardened with heated sand. The scribe carved the quill to a rough point, cut a slit to draw ink down, then trimmed the point to the proper width. The shape of the quill point varied with the style of the lettering being copied. Scribes made ink from a variety of materials. Gallnuts, growths found on oak trees, were often used to create a dark, black ink. Black ink

was also made by dissolving a common carbon substance. The resulting ink was called lamp black. Before the scribe began writing, he ruled the parchment using a straightedge. Medieval scribes and their patrons prized a regular and elegant script. If a scribe made an error, he would scratch it out with a pen knife. Because the page was made from parchment, which was very resilient, it could stand many erasures of this type. An illuminator decorated the pages of a manuscript using paint and precious metals. He began only after a scribe had finished copying the text. The illuminator first sketched his design, then added details such as the features of a figure or the interlacing of a decorated initial. Thin sheets of precious metals, like gold leaf, were always applied first. The illuminator put down a base coat, consisting of either a plaster-like substance called gesso, or a gum, as shown here. Once the gum base dried, the moisture in the illuminator's breath was enough to make the small piece of gold leaf stick to the page. Then, the illuminator brushed away the excess and polished the gold leaf. After applying the gold leaf, the illuminator painted his design. Each color was made from a vegetable dye, or a mineral substance, ground up and dissolved in liquid. The illuminator applied the paler shades first, then the darker tones. Once the illuminator applied black outlines, and delicate white highlights to the figures and vines, the illumination was finished.

After the scribes and illuminators had finished writing and decorating the parchment pages, the manuscript was bound. Groups of folded sheets of parchment, called gatherings, were sewn together with strong linen thread onto flexible supports such as these narrow, leather thongs. Next, the binder attached end bands, which secured the top and bottom ends of the pages in the spine of the book. The binder then laced the leather thongs along the spine through channels and tunnels, which had been carved into wood boards. These boards were the covers of the manuscript. The thongs could be held and placed by wood pegs or iron nails. The volume was then covered, usually with leather. Without pressure from the covers to keep the leaves flat, parchment expanded and contracted with changes in temperature and humidity. Pressure was applied by the addition of clasps or straps, which held the book closed. The binding of a manuscript could be decorated with any one of a variety of materials. A manuscript might be covered with leather, stamped or tooled with gold, or covered with silks or velvets. The most elaborate

bindings received sculpted decoration made from precious metals. The materials of the binding depended on the wealth of the patron, the type of manuscript, and its intended use.

End of narration.

Credits displayed on film:

Parchment-making images feature the workshop of Jesse Meyer of Pergamena Parchment, Montgomery, New York.

Quill-cutting, calligraphy, and illumination footage features the work of master calligrapher Thomas Ingmire.

Bookbinding footage features the work of master bookbinder and conservator of rare book, William Anthony.

Music: *Ai Tal Domna*, 2012, Javolenus. CC Attribution Noncommercial 3.0.

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Text Page and Christ in Majesty, Ottonian, about 1025-50. Artist unknown. Tempera colors and gold on parchment. Ms. Ludwig V 2, fols. 21v-22

The Annunciation to the Shepherds (detail), French (Paris), about 1420. Spitz Master. Tempera colors and gold on parchment. Ms. 57, fol. 89v

Initial S: A Griffin and Rider (detail). German, about 1240-50. Artist unknown. Tempera colors, gold, and silver on parchment. Ms. Ludwig VIII 2, fol. 76

Sacramentary cover, Mosan, about 1150. Maker unknown. Oak boards covered with red silk, fitted with hammered and engraved silver and copper. Ms. Ludwig V 2

Bible cover, German, about 1450. Circle of Steffan Lochner. Wood boards covered with original brown calf. Ms. Ludwig I 13

New Testament cover, Italian, 1400s. Maker unknown. Pasteboard covered with red silk brocade. Ms. Ludwig I 5

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