

Puzzle Capitals / Filigree or Ornamental pen work

By Meister Harold von Auerbach

One of the easiest ways to do an elegant scroll when you have a really tight deadline is to use the "filligree" decoration of a Lombardic capital letter. This was a very common form especially during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, though usually relegated to versals following a primary, more highly decorated initial.

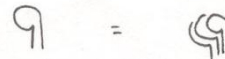
Most of the fine pen work used to decorate a letter uses only a few basic forms, but they can be put together in a number of different ways, depending on the type of space that needs to be filled. The most common forms are:

1. What Marc Drogin describes as the stylized acanthus leaf

a. the "nine"

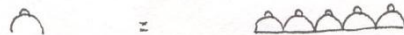


b. the "golf club"



2. What some anonymous person described as "the breast"

a. profile



b. frontal



I know, you'll never be able to do these designs seriously again. Just remember, the description is not mine, but I have to admit it is an explanation that isn't easily forgotten. These four forms comprise about 90% of the filligree work you will find in period manuscripts. I am including a sample page with variations on these designs.

Some manuscripts use a negative space design with a color surrounding and emphasizing it. A notable example of this is the Lutrell Psalter (Sorry I can't afford color copies for everyone, but I hope you can get the idea from the black and white.)

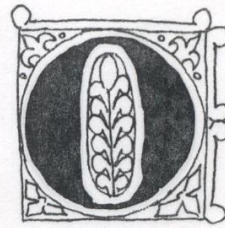
The stages in building a filligreed initial letter:



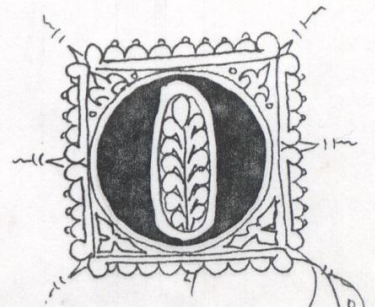
1



2



3.

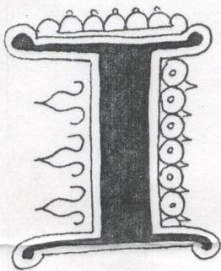


1. Outline the entire letter, inside and out. Marc Drogin describes this as drawing a moat around the letter.

2. Do the interior of the letter, in this case a stylized acanthus leaf bisecting the letter vertically.

3. Add to the outside line. Most rounded letters were squared off with the corner spaces filled in with fleurs-de-lys, tricorporate diamond patterns, or sometimes just circles. If you are already starting with a straight line, you might want to add a "boat", as demonstrated above, to add bulk to the design.

4. Finish off with bumps and peaks with vines coming off the peaks. If you wish to fill part of the border above or below the letter, add a large leaf.



Here are two ways of decorating a long straight area like an "I" or the front of a "K", "R", etc.



Larger initial letters can be divided into two colors with complimentary filligree work. Note that the designs inside the letter are all simply variations of the patterns given above.