Western Gothic Manuscript Style and its decoration

There's a particular sort of manuscript decoration that folks in the SCA often refer to as "whitework". (There is not an official Art History Word for it, so we'll call it that.) Whitework -- lines, squiggles, floral, or geometric decorations painted in white on top of some solid color -- is a common feature of western European manuscripts in the Gothic art style.

In this class, we're going to briefly talk about historical background on the Gothic manuscript styles and some characteristic decorations that are fun and not difficult to do. I'll have some examples of manuscripts from different times and places across the style period, and then using some sample decoration patterns we'll do hands-on painting.

Important to know for Gothic styles:

- Style from late 12th through early 15th century
- No relation to the actual Goths!
- Preceded by Romanesque style and followed by Renaissance
- Decorative motifs show up in other arts and architecture
- Overall art style common across Latin (Catholic) parts of Europe

Some historical developments preceding and during the Gothic art era:

- Generally booming population of Europe (until mid-14th century)
- Expanding towns/trade/middle class
- Increasing lay literacy
- Old writings circulating after rediscovery in mini-renaissance of the 12th century
- Foundation of universities, including those specializing in law and medicine
- Foundation of mendicant religious orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites)

...which led to:

- Manuscript production moving from monasteries to secular workshops
- Rise of copyists' shops and book trade
- New types of books: Books of Hours, Canon law compilations, romances, poetry
- Increasing ownership of existing book types like Psalters, Bibles, chronicles
- More pictures in books
Decorative styles involving gridded miniature backgrounds and whitework on bars, miniature borders, and initials appeared in books. Given the increased demands for books with pictures at the time, it's not a surprise that these styles of decoration can still look good even if not done with great skill.

The classic "whitework" look was centered in France, but manuscripts were made in the same style in England, Spain, the Low Countries, and possibly northern Germany. While the overall Gothic art style did extend across the Catholic portions of the continent, the manuscript styles that centered on Italy and southern Germany had different emphasis in their decoration.

These manuscripts can be excellent models for SCA award documents. The same qualities that would have made it easy for a workshop with artists of varying skill to hand-paint dozens of illustrations in every copy of "The Romance of Alexander" make this style suitable for our preprinted charter documents. If you're a novice painter, you can still contribute to a real award and get practice in the process.

Important features of Gothic manuscripts:

- Painting (if any) usually with a limited color palette on each page
- Painted features are often outlined in black ink
- If no painting, there may still be decorative letters (versals) in colored ink
- Text is usually in Gothic calligraphy hands like Blackletter or Batarde
- Fancy initials are usually done as Lombardic versals

The number of colors used and the degree of detail and realism in the miniatures increases over time, but more importantly with the expense of the manuscript. A Psalter or book of Hours commissioned by a rich noble in 1230 may look more artistically "advanced" than a romance illustrated on a budget in 1380.

References:

Janet Backhouse - The Illuminated Manuscript
Christopher de Hamel - A History of Illuminated Manuscripts
Jonathan J.G. Alexander - Medieval Illuminators and Their Methods of Work

Marks and Morgan - The Golden Age of English Manuscript Painting
Thomas Kren - French Illuminated Manuscripts in the J. Paul Getty Museum
Roger Wieck - Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art
Claude d'Anthenaise - The Hunting Book of Gaston Phoebus
Marc Drogin – Medieval Calligraphy: Its History and Technique

Library manuscript searches:
British Library:  
http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/welcome.htm  
Bibliothèque nationale de France (Gallica):  http://gallica.bnf.fr/  
Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML Vivarium):  
http://www.hmml.org/vivarium.html  
Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland (e-Codices):  
http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch  
U. of Glasgow:  http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/manuscripts/search/  

Unless specified otherwise, images in this set of handouts were taken from the online image galleries of the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (which are in the public domain).  

Some examples of western Gothic Manuscripts – details in context  

Here are examples that span the Gothic art period. When looking at them, try to figure out which are luxury manuscripts and which were made on a budget.  

British Library Royal 10 A XIII f. 2v (Expositio in Regulam S. Benedicti)  
Ca. 1170-1180, Canterbury. Saint Dunstan is writing with a quill and knife. This book on Saint Benedict’s rule was written by and for monks. The style is a transitional step between Romanesque and Gothic.
British Library Arundel MS 157 f.9 (Psalter)
1st quarter of the 13th century, Oxford
This was probably made for the monks and/or nuns of an Augustinian priory.

British Library Harley 1527 f. 34v (Bible Moralizee)
2nd quarter of 13th century, Paris
This Psalter was owned by King (and later Saint) Louis the Pious of France. A larger than usual proportion of decorative details are done in gold.
British Library Royal 10 D VII f. 233 (Decretals of Gregory IX)
Last quarter of the 13th century, Paris
The Decretals are books of canon law (church law). The smaller writing around the edge is commentary. This miniature shows a marriage ceremony.

Bibliothèque nationale de France Français 1349 f.188v (Ptolemy, Quadripartitum)
1320-1350, France
The Quadripartitum was one of the most famous astrology texts in the Middle Ages.
2nd quarter of the 14th century, Paris
A lion is taking emperor Cassidorus’ children into the mountains in “Roman de Kanor”.

Ca. 1360-1375, London
“L” here is for Lex, the law. The judge here is wearing a cap of maintenance and a fur-lined cloak with a pattern similar to heraldic “vair”.
Bibliothèque nationale de France Français 13091 f.153r (Psautier de Jean de Berry) Ca. 1380-1400
This is a Psalter made for Jean, the Duke of Berry. It has text in both Latin and French in parallel columns. Figures in the miniatures have dimensional shading and naturalistic details, but the backgrounds are still stylized.
Jewish manuscripts in western Europe were often illustrated in a style similar to the manuscripts of their Christian neighbors.

This chant in this monastic missal (Mass book) is on four-line staves.
Bibliothèque national de France MS français 616 f. 68
(Gaston Phoebus’ Hunting Book)
Early 15th century, Paris
This is one of the most richly-illustrated copies of Gaston Phoebus’ hunting treatise.

University of Glasgow MS Hunter 371 f. 1r (Giovanni Boccaccio’s “Fall of Princes”)
1467, Paris
By the mid-15th century, the “whitework” style is only used on fancy capital letters. Thick bars are no longer used to frame illustrations.
How do we know how these were made?

Unfinished manuscripts and modelbooks.

NYPL Spencer 26 f.104 (the Tickhill Psalter) – unfinished
1st quarter 14th century

British Library Royal MS 20 C VII f. 102 (Chroniques de France) – unfinished
4th quarter 14th century

mid-15th century
Compact pattern library for in-class painting

Pick two or three border patterns.

Pick one decorative pattern to fill the rounded part of the initial “h”.

And pick one background pattern for the miniature.

Now have fun painting!