

Lombardic Capitals

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What are Lombardic capitals?

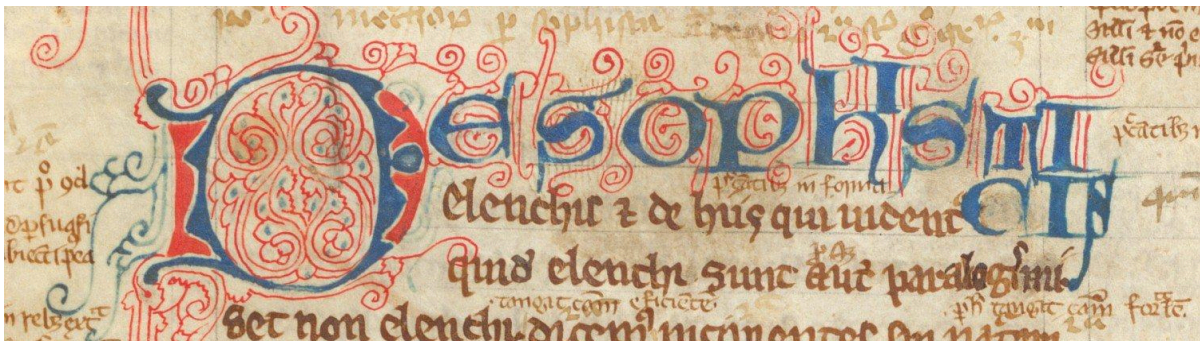
- A combination of Roman and Uncial letter forms, beginning to appear after about 1100, continuing throughout the SCA period and still in use after the invention of the printing press. Printed manuscripts would still have capital letters written in by hand in the Lombardic style.

Characteristics of Lombardic Capitals

- Exaggerated thick and thin strokes
- Each letter tended to fill a square or nearly-square space; the major exception was the narrow form of I/J (there is a wide form of I as well), W, and sometimes M.
- May be illustrated (“historiated” or “inhabited” initials) or decorated in various ways depending on time period and location
- Several letters have multiple forms; some inscriptions used more than one form in the same word (example carvings, page 5 of this handout, from: <http://www.typeoff.de/2005/09/lombardic-lettering-at-chartres/>)

Versatility! Some options and uses for Lombardic capitals

- Several small (one-line high) gold capitals throughout the text, alternating red and blue backgrounds
- “Puzzle initials” of interlocking shapes in red and blue, surrounded by pen work filigree (no gold)
- A shell gold background with a flower painted on it inside the letter
- A gilded initial with an entire scene or portrait painted inside
- Diapered backgrounds
- Textured aka tooled gold backgrounds (requires raised gilding)
- Large capitals to start off the text or section, smaller capitals to mark new paragraphs within the section (this looks great on scrolls, by the way)
- More than just red and blue! The Morgan Black Hours uses gold letters on a green background, some puzzle initials included purple or green penwork, etc
- Monsters shaped like letters with heads and feet where the serifs and flourishes would go



Shaping the letters

- Relatively few types of strokes:
 - “Straight” lines are most often actually flat curves, generally concave (bow inward)
 - If you “can’t draw a straight line,” fear not! You don’t have to!
 - Circles or wide ovals
 - Vertical “flat” ovals: small, medium, large on the *interior* of the letter
 - Partial ovals or arches, open to top or bottom
- Some artists find the letters easier to paint in than to draw first; some find them easier to write with a calligraphy pen (nib horizontal rather than the usual 45 degree angle). Despite the challenges, we are drawing in pencil today to help you see the underlying structure of the letters.

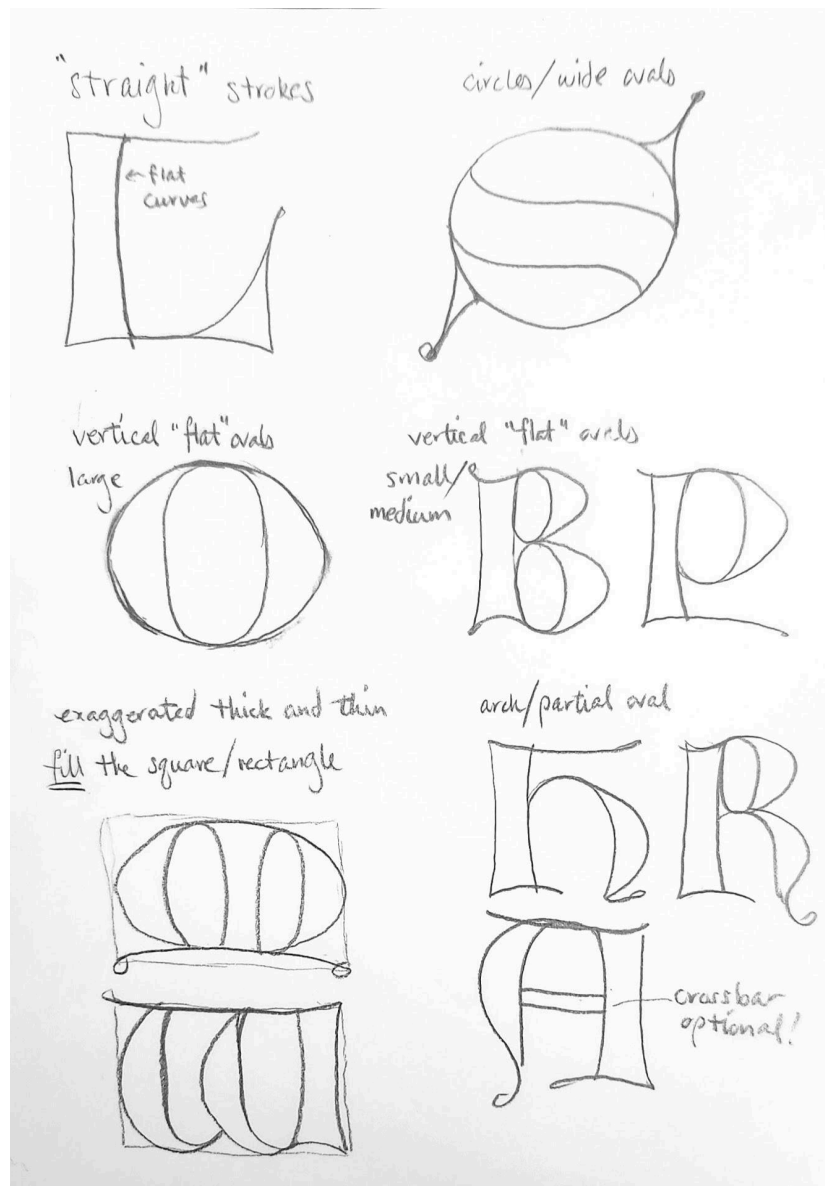


Image drawn by the author, 2025

Materials

- Pencil
- Crow quill pen and black ink
 - Alternately: fine line brush and black or dark brown paint
- Round brush with a good point, size 0 or 1 (or perhaps a 3/0)
- Red or blue paint, white paint
 - Recommended: Dr. P.H. Martin's Bleedproof White from John Neal
<https://www.johnnealbooks.com/>
- Source of gold:
 - Gold leaf
 - Shell gold in some cases
 - Gold gouache or other gold paint (for this class, Coliro/Finetec metallic paint "Arabian Gold" available from John Neal)
- Letter exemplars, such as the illustrations at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lombardic_capitals, or period sources such as at <http://www.typeoff.de/2005/09/lombardic-lettering-at-chartres/> (see page 5)
 - David Harris's *The Art of Calligraphy* is another good source that shows multiple forms of the letters, and is available online in its entirety:
 - <https://daretobebetternow.files.wordpress.com/2016/01/the-art-of-calligraphy-by-david-harris.pdf>
 - Harris claims that W is a modern construction. He is incorrect. Yay German!

Steps

1. Pencil in a square (usually)
 - a. a 1x2 rectangle for the narrow version of I/J, or a 3x2 rectangle for W
 - b. Doesn't have to be an exact square; a wide rectangle is okay, but *think* square
 - c. Letter height for these capitals varied, anywhere between one line all the way up to eight lines high; follow your manuscript exemplar where possible.
 - d. Their outer edge was typically (but not always) flush with the edge of the text block, or slightly outside it, but generally did not touch the border illumination.
 - e. Always plan and leave room for your capitals as you write your text: place a square or rectangle where the capital will belong, then continue the text.
2. Lightly pencil in the shape of the letter inside your square, being sure to touch the edges of the square or even go slightly beyond it
 - a. Not all letter styles in period did this (for example Roman letters), but you want to avoid letters that look "floaty" or timid, like they're afraid to fill their space. Be robust!
3. For the sake of simplicity in this class, you have only two choices to make (see p. 6 for examples):
 - a. *Either* a gold letter, or a gold background
 - b. *Either* red or blue for your other (non-gold) element
 - i. These are **by no means** the only options in period exemplars, but they represent an overwhelming majority, and we're trying to keep it simple for this class
4. **If you're gilding**, always gild first, then paint, regardless of whether you chose the letter or the background to be gold

5. If you're not gilding (as in today) do the letter first, then the background
6. Add white detailing to the red or blue area (yes, whether it's the letter or the background)
 - a. Meisterin Katarina Helena von Schoenborn teaches a white work class that expands on this aspect of the decoration
 - b. When in doubt, follow your period exemplar
7. Outline the letter and the background in either ink or black/dark brown paint
8. Step back and admire your work!

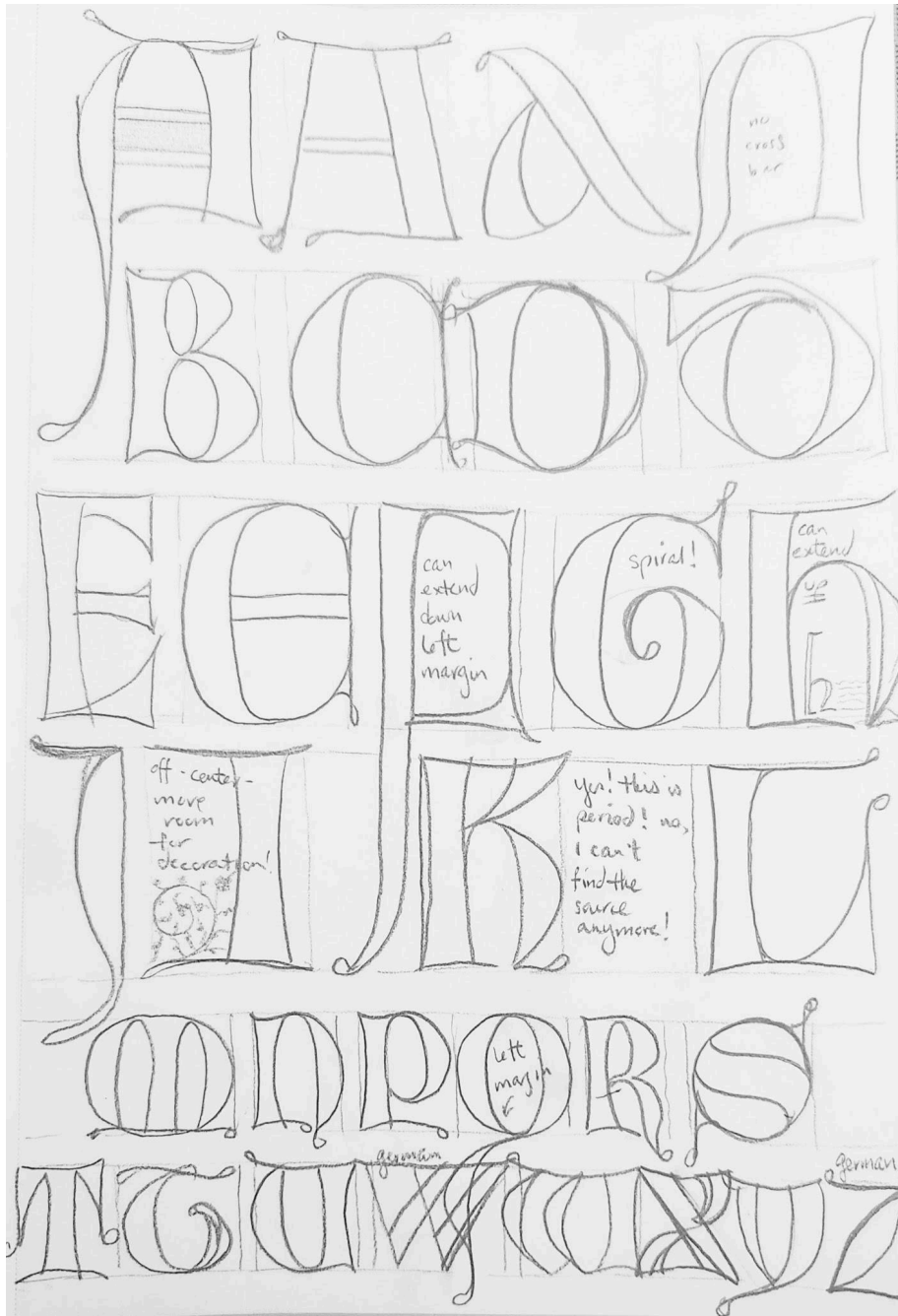


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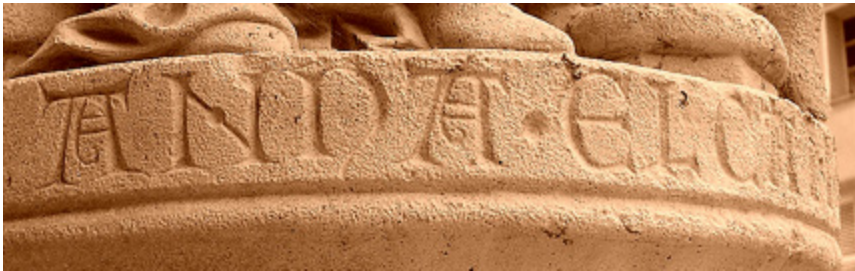
Examples from Chartres Cathedral, carved during the 1200s



Note two E forms in this picture



Note two T forms



Note two N forms



This A is noticeably different from the one in "Anna", above





Leaf from a 15th century Book of Hours, Delft ca. 1430