# Charter Construction

by Elisabetta Annisa Gabrielli

**My Process:**

I start with the text, and a piece of reference material, such as a page from an illuminated bible, book of hours or medieval document. I may use several related examples and draw elements from each. I print pictures of each of these out, along with the exact text, so I can tape them to my desk and refer to them while I work.

On a piece of graph paper, I sketch a rough idea of my layout, pondering the following questions:

- Should the page be vertical or horizontal?
- Should there be a border?
- Should there be a large initial?
- Should there be smaller initials?
- Should the margins be wide or narrow?
- Should the design be symmetrical or not?
- Should there be a single text block or columns of text?
- What kind of hand should the text be?
- How should the initials be drawn?
- What should the text size be in relation to the page size and decorative elements?
- Should there be an illustration in a frame and what shape should it be?
- Should there be margin figures and how will they relate to the rest of the elements?
- Should any figures be issuing from or sitting on borders, or floating in space?

Once I have a general plan, I test the calligraphy to check line spacing with the pen I will use and to see if it will fit in the allotted space. Adjust, repeat. I make an exemplar of the entire alphabet so I don't have to improvise mid-page.

Now I start marking on my paper. For a charter master I use white hot press watercolor paper with a fairly smooth surface. Color and rough texture may muddy the copies which will be made from it. First I mark out the margins and text lines lightly in pencil, and then I sketch the decorative elements very roughly. I don't spend too much time on these, in case I mess up the calligraphy and have to start over.

Next, I do the calligraphy, checking the text often. I do not take any liberties with the text provided to me by the people who will present the award. Personally, I feel that the words are theirs and not mine to interpret.

After checking the finished calligraphy carefully for mistakes, I pencil in the decorative elements more fully, again being gentle with the paper so that everything erases cleanly and there are no dark spots on the master.

I use a fine-point metal dip pen, called a "crow-quill" nib, for all my outlining. I find that these create a lovely organic line, which may be made to vary in thickness by adjusting the pressure used. In my opinion, the completely consistent line made by a technical pen looks rather robotic, and distinctly un-medieval to my eye. I use sumi ink for charters, which is easy to buy, store and use, and is nice and black for copying.

Once the lines are all inked, I let it dry for several hours, erase the pencil lines, photograph or scan it, and send it off to the Scribe.

**Tips for Design:**

Consider the painters.

Tiny tiny areas are hard to paint, especially since photocopy toner resists the paint. Keep your spaces roomy enough for reasonable brush strokes.

Very large areas are also hard to paint well, as paper buckles and warps when large areas get wet. It can also be difficult to achieve even coverage on a large area, so keep the spaces small, or break up large areas.

Check that you did not leave undefined boundaries, or perplexing situations for color choice. For example, a knotwork panel made up of a single line looks nice in black & white, or carved on a stone, but when painting it on paper, the scribe will have to choose whether to make a monochrome panel, or pick a random place to change the color. A knot made of two or more lines may easily be painted in contrasting colors and will look more interesting.

Keep in mind that charters are great "entry-level" projects for beginning scribes, so while experienced painters may be able to come up with creative solutions to problems, you can be more kind to the new folks by keeping things simple.