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John Neal Bookseller: www.johnnealbooks.com
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Paper & Ink Arts: www.paperinkarts.com
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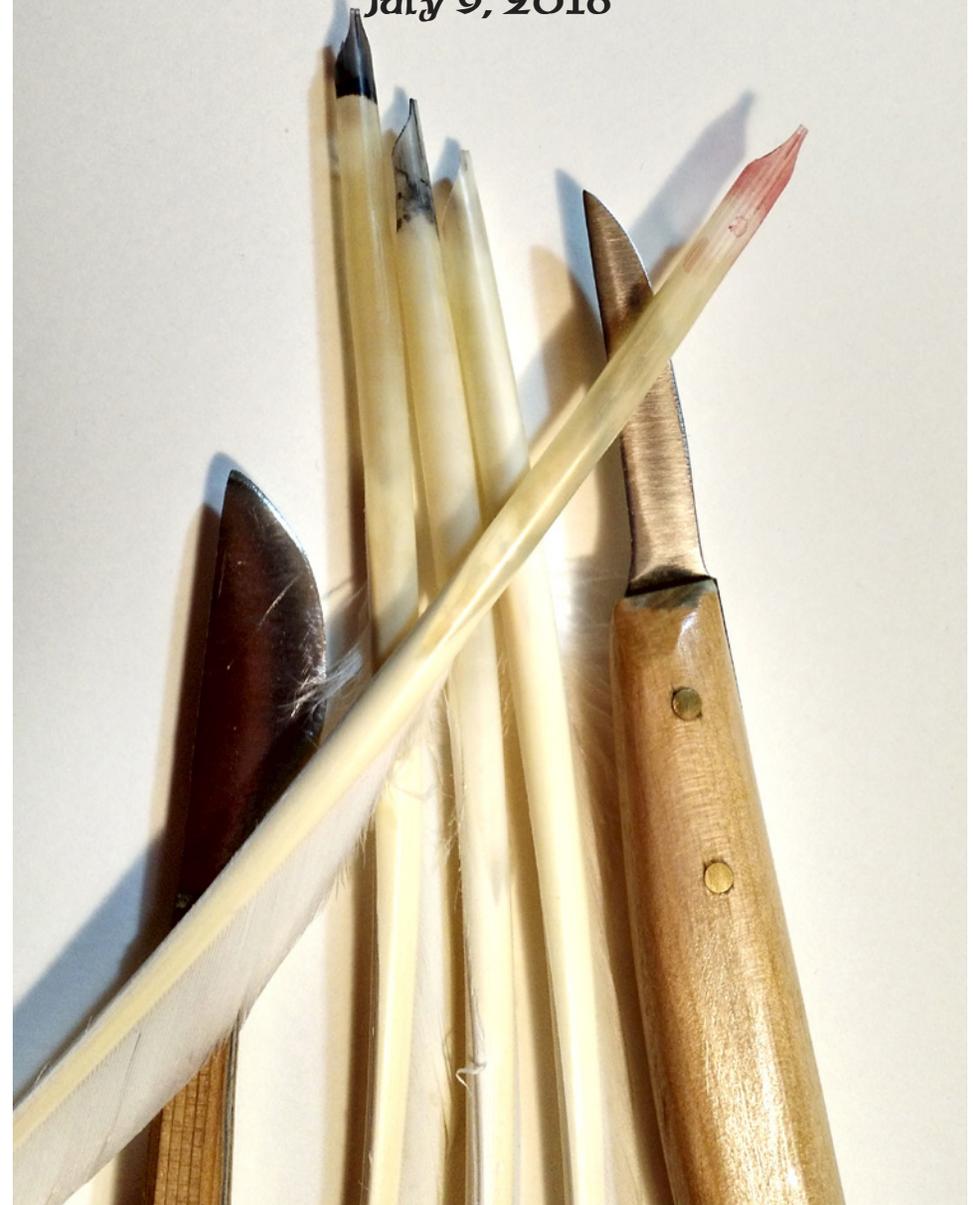
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To make Quills for Calligraphy

As presented by
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at Bellwether Arts Collegium II
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Materials:

- Goose or turkey wing feather
- Quill knife or exacto knife with a fresh blade
- A small crochet hook
- Extremely fine sand
- Small dedicated crock pot or container to heat sand
- Water
- Aluminum can (optional)

Quills are the standard tool for the medieval calligrapher. Not all feathers are suitable for quills. Goose, swan, and turkey feathers work best as the shafts have thick walls. Chicken feathers from a craft store will do in a pinch, but the walls are thinner.

The outer wing-feathers work best. The curve of the feather determines if it is suitable for a left-handed or right-handed quill. When grasping the feather like a pen, note which direction the feather curves. If it curves away from you, then it is intended for the opposite hand. If the feather curves towards you and sits comfortably on your thumb, you have the correct feather.

Quills must be hardened or they won't cut well or hold up for long. The feather can be allowed to cure naturally, but this can take one to three years of aging before the feather is ready for use. Most of us haven't planned ahead that well!

Feathers can be hardened in a short amount of time by a process of soaking in cool water, and then plunging the quill into hot sand.

Illustrations show scribes with quills that are bare of feathery barbs. The quill is a working tool and feather fluff can get in the way. After selecting my feather, I peel the feather away from the shaft on the side that will touch my thumb. The lower end of the feather then gets soaked in cool water for at least 2 hours. Some people suggest soaking the feather overnight.

Now we need hot sand to harden and temper the quill. Feathers, including the shaft, are made of the same material as your hair. If the sand gets too hot, the feather can scorch and be ruined.

I use a 1.5qt crock pot to heat my sand. The pot I have holds steady at about 300°F, though it takes a couple of hours to reach temperature. If you do not have a crock pot to dedicate to sand, you can also use a

cleaned soup can to heat your sand in the oven. Whatever your heating method, use a food thermometer to test the temperature of your sand. Do not exceed 350°F.

The tips of your feathers will be soft after soaking in water. Blot the water off your pre-soaked quill, then plunge the quill end into your hot sand. After a moment or so, pull the feather out and carefully test the stiffness of the end. Caution: The tip will be hot. If not firm, return the quill to the hot sand for further curing. You may have to repeat this process several times to get a firm quill.

Using a quill knife or sharp exacto, trim off the first 1/2 to 1 inch of the feather. This section is usually too thin to be useful. Remove any pith from the shaft using a small crochet hook.

Make a sweeping angular cut as shown in the diagram (b). You can refine the shape and width of the tip by using your blade to shave the feather. Make a second shallow cut, cutting away from you, as shown in the 4th drawing (c).

Square the tip of your quill by laying it on a flat surface and pressing your blade across the tip (d). The red line indicates your blade position. You'll hear a click when the tip is cut off.

Next you need to cut a groove to carry your ink to the tip of your quill. Again with your quill resting on a flat surface and belly facing up (e) center your blade vertically along the tip and press down. Again you'll hear a click as the knife cuts through. Practice is required to get this cut centered.

You should now be able to use your quill. If you use a slanted writing surface, you probably don't need to add a reservoir. Otherwise, cut a thin strip of metal from a soda can, crinkle it, and slide it inside the shaft to help feed ink to the tip.

