The Berlin Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Emperor Maximilian

Burgundian-Flemish Book Painting at its best

A perfect medieval couple

The long planned liaison of the houses of Habsburg and Burgundy was finally concluded, although under most difficult circumstances, in 1477 by the marriage of Mary of Burgundy, the only daughter and heiress of Charles the Bald, and Maximilian, son of Emperor Frederick III. They had a happy family and love life, although their marriage was initially based purely on political reflections, regardless of their feelings for each other. It was a rare romantic and idyllic intermezzo in the tough political ongoings of late medieval Europe.

Overwhelming imagination and mastery

One of the most beautifully painted manuscripts of the princely Burgundian household bears a moving testimony to this royal relationship, a de luxe manuscript kept in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin, one of the most fascinating art works in history. With its dainty format of little more than seven by ten centimetres, the Berlin Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Emperor Maximilian comprises 362 leaves and no less than 90 pages richly decorated with magnificent paintings and ornaments.

Book illumination in unbelievable luxury

These are surrounded by colourful ornamental borders in which a highly imaginative combination of ornament and natural studies form a truly luxurious frame of acanthus and flowers, fruits and butterflies as well as of Mary's and Maximilian's initials. These initials, dispersed in the ornamental borders and in the inserted coat of arms, confirm beyond any doubt that the royal pair owned the little volume.

This hypothesis is further supported by Maximilian's personal autograph which dedicates the book of hours after Mary's early death to their common daughter Margaret.

First testimony to a new style

The codex probably dates back to the time of the marriage of Mary to Maximilian somewhere between 1477 and 1482. This makes it one of the earliest examples of a new style which was to mark late Burgundian book painting until the late 16th century.

The three-dimensional flowered luxury of its ornamental borders lend form to detailed pictorial fields showing precise depictions of Bible scenes and the lives of saints. Here the views exposed by the painter are just as unusual as the borders themselves. Presenting both interiors and wide landscapes, he competes with the best panel painters of his time, a competition in which book painting often triumphs. All

the more so as the miniatures kept in manuscripts are often much better preserved than paintings.

The idol of Simon Bening

The painter thus set new standards, not only in panel painting but also in book illumination. More than a generation later, the great Simon Bening was still to rely on more than one idea from the Berlin Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy. The perspective from which book painters regarded and repeated the familiar episodes had changed tremendously. The scenes are now described with suspense and drama, when dealing with passion and martyrdom, with poetry, when commemorating the childhood of Jesus and the Holy Virgin.

The miniatures in the Berlin Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy are among the most extraordinary examples of the art of book painting which knows to delicately capture the world even in the smallest format. Since the ancient stories were transposed into the real world of the artist, they today offer a great reservoir of knowledge about the late days of the Duchy of Burgundy which, after Mary's early death, passed into Maximilian's hands only to fall apart in the wars of succession.

We do not know the name of the painter who created the great majority of the miniatures single-handedly. Although this excellent artist appears only in a very small number of manuscripts, he has long been known as the "Berlin Master of Mary of Burgundy" among art lovers and bibliophiles alike.

An enigmatic miniature

However, the most famous miniature of all is undoubtedly the full picture of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" which has long posed an enigma to researchers in this field. Mary of Burgundy is easily identified here as the main figure. Could the miniature have been inserted after Mary's death, at the request of her husband Maximilian to pay homage to his wife? Or was the picture to demonstrate the great virtue of fearlessness, even in the face of death, in the best late medieval tradition as tribute to the duchess' flawless qualities? These questions will be treated in detail and partially resolved in the expert commentary.

The facsimile edition

The Flowers Book of Hours of Mary of Burgundy and Emperor Maximilian is kept today at the Kupferstichkabinett of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz under the shelf mark 78 B 12. The facsimile edition is strictly limited to 980 copies world-wide. All 724 pages in the format 10.3 x 7 cm are reproduced with 27 full page miniatures, 16 ornament pages, 11 large and 36 small miniatures completely faithful to the original. The contents binding is gilt-edged on three sides.

The binding is made of red velvet and closed with a partially gilded sterling silver clasp. The facsimile volume is kept, like the original, in a leather case.

The expert commentary annexed to this facsimile edition presents articles from a number of authors dealing with the manuscript, its artistic make-up as well as with its historic and art historic background. Professor Dr. Eberhard König writes on the relationship between the picture and the word.

Dr. Bodo Brinkmann follows the footsteps of the Master of Mary of Burgundy to capture the character of the master of the Berlin manuscript; and Prof. Dr. Fedja Anzelewsky investigates its relation to Mary of Burgundy and Maximilian as well as the story of their marriage; Dr. Frauke Steenbock studies the complex traditional history of the codex.

Documentation Kit

A documentation folder containing two full-sized leaves from the facsimile edition and an illustrated 12-page information brochure is available for information upon request.