

The Black Hours



A splendid jewel in black and silver, gold and blue

The Black Hours M. 493 today in the Pierpont Morgan Library New York were made around 1475 in Bruges, probably in the circle of Willem Vrelant, the leading illuminator of this time.

The Black Hours - a precious rarity

The Black Hours is a product of unequalled luxury. All 121 vellum folios are stained in black. To make the writing stand out against the dark background, only white lead and opaque paints were used for the miniatures, and gold and silver ink for the script. Only three of these black parchment manuscripts bound in codices survive to this day.

The production of a manuscript on black parchment was extremely costly and delicate. In a first step the parchment was immersed in an iron copper solution to obtain the black colouring, before it was painted. The immersion in black colour was, however, detrimental to the quality of the manuscript in the long run as the dye made the parchment fragile and brittle.

The decorative apparatus of the Black Hours is unique in the world: more than half of the folios are ornate with large borders grounded in a gleaming blue colour. The ornaments contained therein - acanthus leaves abounding with drolleries - are all executed in gold. Additionally, the chapter incipits were highlighted with rubrics written with gold ink. A particular feature are the more than thirty sumptuous initials in gold leaf on an emerald ground which extend over more than one line to divide the text.

The 14 full-page miniatures are embellished with glittering gold to amplify the effect of the black stained pages. Finely differentiated shades of grey and a delicate noble colouring allowed the painter to enhance the perspective of interiors and landscapes before the black background. His limitation to a small number of carefully selected colours lends the miniatures their very special charm.

The prayers are each introduced by a full-page picture. The Office of the Virgin alone contains eight of these miniatures, expressing the great veneration reserved for the Virgin Mary.

Bruges and the dukes of Burgundy

The Flemish city of Bruges was among the busiest trading communities in Europe and a celebrated centre of book illumination. This city, in which the rarest and most precious things abounded, also attracted many art lovers who contributed greatly to both the local culture and craftsmanship. The dukes of Burgundy ruling over Bruges at the time were well known as patrons of the arts and used to commission both manuscripts and tapestries for their residences. The well to do citizens eagerly tried to

emulate the court in their lifestyle having their portraits painted, dressed in sumptuous vestments. Besides Vrelant, painters like Jan van Eyck and Simon Bening were active in Bruges. This concentration of highly talented artists was the reason for the rise of Bruges and Gent, which became the heart of European book illumination in the second half of the 15th century.

The production of black manuscripts is closely associated with the ascent of the dukes of Burgundy. Out of the six surviving black parchment manuscripts, five were made in the Low Countries and one in Spain, which was strongly influenced by Flemish art in the 15th century. The realm of Burgundy was an unusual and very short-lived state which emerged in the late 14th century at the interface between the kingdom of France and the Holy Roman Empire. Through marriage, purchase, heritage and conquest, Philip the Bold, John the Fearless, Philip the Good and Charles the Bold, constructed a realm which extended from the North Sea down into the heart of France, comprising the homeland of Burgundy and other provinces such as Flanders, Limburg and Luxembourg. The extravagance and pomp of the Burgundian court soon outperformed anything ever known in Europe and became the model for royal households everywhere.

The colour black at the court of Philip the Good

When his father John the Fearless was stabbed to death on 10 September 1419 by servants of the French king, Philip was only 23 years old. Unable to revenge this murder, he decided to lend his mourning a visible expression. The mourners, who accompanied him during the celebrations and welcomed the French and the English kings on horseback, well befitted the splendour of the house of Burgundy. 2000 black pennants, with black standards and seven cubit long banners, their fringes in black silk, all embroidered or painted with golden coats of arms, adorned the funeral procession. Even the stately seats and coach of the duke were painted black for this occasion.

As Philip continued wearing black long after the mourning period was over, this began to "rub off" on the nobility and finally on the rich citizens of Flanders. From then on it was considered good form in Flanders to dress in black. This combination of religious thinking and fashionable splendour is the foundation of the Black Hours produced around 1475.

The production of the facsimile edition

Black manuscripts are extremely fragile due to their brittle parchment and it seems all the more important to preserve these very rare and unique items for posterity in the form of facsimile editions. Thus our prime interest in facsimile production has always been the protection of the original.

The Black Hours in the Pierpont Morgan Library are now reproduced by Faksimile Verlag Luzern in a limited edition of 980 copies world-wide. All 242 pages in the format of approx. 17 x 12 cm with 14 large sized miniatures, blue and golden borders, and golden decorated initials on emerald ground, are reproduced faithfully and true to the original colouring.

The binding of the facsimile edition is made of black velvet, ornate with gilded decorative buttons and a gilded clasp. Faksimile Verlag Luzern thus successfully restored to the manuscript a binding which perfectly befits its sumptuous splendour and replaces the current protective 20th century binding.

The scholarly commentary

The scholarly commentary was written by Bernard Bousmanne, Director of the Manuscript Department of the Bibliothèque Royale Albert 1er in Brussels, in co-operation with William Voelkle, Curator of the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Both the facsimile and the commentary volumes are available in a protective case of acrylic glass.