

Les Petites Heures of the Duke of Berry



A Royal Illuminated Manuscript

DA "Small Prayer Book" - A Great Work of Art

It was on behalf of Jean de France, Duke of Berry, that the most renowned illuminators of the late 14th century created a work of art which, because of its rich and delicate painting, is considered one of the most magnificent artefacts of the Late Middle Ages by scientists and art historians alike.

Both text and miniature pages of this lavish Book of Hours are decorated throughout with the most exquisite scrollwork or rinceaux, with birds and butterflies. Only few works of this genre exhibit such a wealth of ornament and decoration.

Jean de France, Duke of Berry - a Collector and Great Patron of the Arts

Berry was born in 1340, as son, brother and uncle of three different kings of France. These family relations, and also his position as duke ruling over a large part of the French heartland, put him next to the great princes of his times.

Berry's world was a world of war, of major upheaval and social unrest: at war against England and concerned by the great Schism of the Church, France also had to face cruel civil wars with bloodshed and murder. The duke himself was often involved in political events although his interests lay elsewhere.

As a young man, Berry fostered gifted artists by inspiring them, by contracting works of art, by providing financial means and last but not least as a passionate collector of paintings and one of the greatest bibliophiles of the Middle Ages. The artistic value of his own manuscript collection outdid by far the possessions of other princely courts of his time. The duke died on June 15, 1416 at the age of 75.

A Masterpiece for Many Generations

Around 1372, the duc de Berry commissioned the Petites Heures. All in all, five illuminators were responsible for its decoration. The co-operation between artists was nothing extraordinary at the time; however, these five miniaturists achieved results unequalled by embellished manuscripts of the same era.

First of all, the great Jean Le Noir was entrusted with the execution of the decoration, a painter who since 1340 dominated French book illumination and, most unusual for this time, still produced artistic masterpieces even after 40 years of activity.

Following the famous painting tradition of Jean Pucelle, he created the Passion of Christ, the introductory picture to the Penitential Psalms and scenes from the Office of John the Baptist, all illustrations which,

although completed by his successors, betray his unique art of composition. After Jean Le Noir's death, the work on the manuscript was interrupted for a few years.

In a second campaign, the famous master Jacquemart from the little French town of Hesdin and some of his colleagues, among them the Master of the Trinity and the so-called pseudo-Jacquemart, were asked to complete the work, probably between 1385 and 1390. Around 1400, a long time after the completion of the manuscript, the duke had a miniature added by one of the Limburg brothers.

It is exactly the diversity of these different work campaigns that places the Petites Heures among the most essential works of late medieval book illumination, at the change from the art of the French court around the end of the 14th century to the beginning of what later became known as the International Gothic style.

Illustrations of Perfect Beauty in Record Numbers

Each leaf was decorated with great care and respect for even the finest details. The book thus offers a true gallery of pictures which would do credit to any museum, all in all 119 miniatures ornate this outstanding work. The fine illustrations were conceived as artful visual elements underlining the significance of the devotional texts.

The pictures deal with important subjects of the Christian faith. Depictions range from the miniatures of the calendar to the life of the Virgin and the Passion of Christ right through to scenes from the lives of saints particularly venerated by the duke.

Lavish Decoration in Silver and Gold

The great number of pictures showing the art patron himself make this lavish manuscript a very personal work of art. Today we know of the duke's habit to carry this Book of Hours with him on his numerous journeys.

The expensive book decoration called for a great number of motives: lavish verse initials on almost every page, magnificent scrollwork and countless birds and butterflies.

The 119 miniature pages of the manuscript are profusely ornate with gold and silver, as only the best seemed to be good enough for the decoration of the duke's most beloved Book of Hours.

The Fine Art Facsimile Edition - An Art Treasure Reborn

All 586 pages of the illuminated manuscript, including 119 richly gold and silver leaf miniature pages as well as over 300 lavishly decorated pages, have been reproduced in their original format of 21 x 14.5 cm in a strictly limited edition of only 980 copies world-wide. The de luxe black full leather binding, sewn on four cords, exhibits fine gold embossing. The trimmed double leaves are gilt-edged on three sides. The headband is sewn by hand.

The Commentary Volume

The commentary volume describes the most recent scientific studies of the manuscript on 460 pages. François Avril, Conservator at the Department of Manuscripts of the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris, was responsible for the work. Further contributions were made by Louisa Dunlop and Brundson Yapp.

The facsimile and the commentary volume are available in a protective case made of acrylic glass.

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.