

Processional (use of the Dominican Nuns of Poissy)
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment with musical notation
Northern France (Poissy), c. 1500-1510

i (paper) + 123 folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, 1-123, collation impossible due to tight binding, mainly in regular quires of eight leaves, includes all main contents (see below), but with leaves missing after ff. 3, 4, and probably one leaf at the end, after f. 123, containing the very end of the Offertory for the Plague Mass, ruled in red ink, with the top and bottom horizontal rules full across, full-length vertical bounding lines (justification 105 x 58 mm.), written in black ink in a gothic bookhand on 21 lines of text or with 7 lines of text and music, square musical notation on red 4-line staves, red rubrics, majuscules filled with pale yellow, bar line fillers in red, blue, or red and blue with gold, 2-line ivy-leaf initials for prayers within an office, ivy-leaf initials or calligraphic ink-and-wash initials for chants, eight large (4-line to the equivalent of 2-lines of text and music) ivy-leaf initials with bar borders extending the full-length of the page and into the top and bottom margins for major feasts, in very good condition. Bound c. 1580 in brown morocco with double fillets on front and black covers, one gilt, one silver (oxidized), defining a central rectangle and surrounding border, the central panel filled with alternating gilt flame and silver (oxidized) tear drop motifs, and the border filled with two repeating monograms, SMAIS and BFD, surrounded by the same penitential flame and tear drop motifs and an "s fermé" (a diagonally-crossed 's'), smooth spine decorated with the same tooled motifs and the inscription: "IUS . ET . VITA . AEQVE . VTRAQVE . CHARIOR . HVIVS . AMORE . QVID . ILLIVS . VERO . CVNCTA ." (difficult to parse, but it can be understood as "Justice and life, equally and likewise, are made more dear by the love of him in whom the former are truly conjoined"), 19th- or early 20th-century additions to the binding include green/orange head- and tail bands, a front flyleaf and pastedowns on plain paper, and a generous amount of glue applied to the inside of the spine, now preventing the book from opening easily. Dimensions 150 x 100 mm.

A carefully written and illuminated book of plainchant music that contains the liturgical processions sung by a nun at the convent of St.-Louis at Poissy, home to the sisters of kings and to the author, Christine de Pizan. It was almost certainly written and illuminated by the nuns themselves. Its exquisite binding dates c. 1580. Unrecorded in the scholarly literature, this manuscript is a witness to the daily interaction of women with the written word in the Middle Ages.

PROVENANCE

1. Written and decorated by nuns at the Dominican convent of Saint-Louis de Poissy at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The text includes the three processions specific to worship at Poissy, those in honor of St. Louis, St. John the Baptist and the Birth of the Virgin (the last two introduced in the fifteenth century). Several rubrics mention the nuns (*sorores*). The archaizing script and ivy-leaf initials and borders are typical of the production at the convent at this date.

The altars listed in this manuscript for the Maundy Thursday cleansing ceremony are those that could be found in the church of Saint-Louis at Poissy c. 1500 to the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The text includes the altar dedicated to Sebastian and Ivo, which is not found in Poissy Processionals made at the end of the fifteenth century (Naughton, 1995, vol. II, p. 264). There is, however, no mention of the altar dedicated to the Crucifix at Poissy, indicating it was not yet built and consecrated at the time the

manuscript was made. This altar is listed in Poissy Processionals made in the second quarter of the sixteenth century and later (Naughton, 1995, vol. II, no. 11).

2. The current binding made around 1580 in Paris was decorated with the same tools as those of another Processional made at Poissy, now Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W.107. The inscription on the spine of the Baltimore Processional is similar to the inscription on our manuscript, but comes from Horace (Ep., i, 6, 15), "INSANI . SAPIENS . NOMEN . FERAT . AEQVVS . INIQVI . QVAM . SATIS . EST . VIRTVTEM . SI . PETAT . IPSAM ." ("Let the wise man bear the name of a madman, the just one of an unjust, if he seek wisdom more than is sufficient," or "The wise man is no longer wise, the just man no longer just, if he seek to carry his love for wisdom or virtue beyond that which is necessary"). Both bindings include the penitential flame and tear-drop motifs of the Holy Spirit, the monograms "SMAIS" and "BFD," and the "s fermé" (a diagonally-crossed 's') signifying *fermesse* or fidelity. These binding motifs were common during the reign of King Henry III of France (1573-1589). (For a description of the Baltimore binding, see Naughton, 1995, vol. II, pp. 285-288; for the "s fermé" bindings see Hobson, 1935, pp. 105-106; also see Nixon, 1971, pp. 213-218 and Needham, 1979, p. 289).
3. Late ownership inscriptions in Poissy Processionals show that these manuscripts continued to be used in the convent until the eighteenth century (cf. Naughton, 1995, vol. II, p. 288), and the private ownership of the current manuscript in recent times suggests that it was among the books that the nuns took from Poissy when they left the convent in 1790-1792, instead of relinquishing them to Revolutionary authorities.
4. Owners' and booksellers' notes include two descriptions in French (12 and 6 lines) and "140" (circled) and "2102" on the front pastedown; front flyleaf, "F.B.C. - M.I.M.?"; and "Processionale sororum ord. S. Dominici" on the verso of the front flyleaf (19-20th century).

TEXT

ff. 1-21v, *In die purificationis beate marie virginis Benedictio candellarum*, Benediction of candles and procession for the Purification of the Virgin (Candlemas); Benediction of palms and procession for Palm Sunday (f. 10); Kyries for Holy Week (f. 19v);

ff. 21v-80, Cleansing of the altars for Maundy Thursday, naming the altars at Poissy: Louis; Trinity; Assumption; Augustine and Thomas; Maurus and Anthony; Martin; Stephen; Angels; Denis; Peter and Paul; Blaise; Loup and Giles; Dominic and Peter Martyr; Sebastian and Ivo; Annunciation; John the Baptist; John and James; Katherine; Mary Magdalene and Martha; and Anne;

ff. 80-121, Processions for Easter Sunday (f. 80), Corpus Christi (f. 94), Ascension (f. 90v), John the Baptist (f. 97v), Dominic (f. 101), Assumption of the Virgin (f. 104), Louis (f. 108), Nativity of the Virgin (f. 111v), Dedication of a church (f. 115), Reception of a legate (f. 116), Reception of a secular prince (f. 117), Profession of a nun (f. 119v);

ff. 121-123v, Mass for the plague, ending imperfectly in the Offertory.

Dominican Processional, noted, for use at Poissy. The number of leaves, measurements and layout of the current Processional are essentially identical to another Processional made at Poissy at the beginning of the sixteenth century (current location unknown; Huglo, 1990, no. 2; Naughton, 1995, no. 5). In Huglo, no. 2, which includes historiated initials, the contents are in a slightly different order (possibly misbound).

ILLUSTRATION

Major feasts (Purification, Easter Sunday, Ascension, Corpus Christi, St. Dominic, Assumption, St. Louis, Nativity of the Virgin) open with large ivy-leaf initials accompanied in the margins by bar borders in blue that turn the corner and terminate in supple thick stems with ivy leaves in burnished gold; medial ivy leaf projections are on fine, black hairline stems. These ivy-leaf initials and borders are deliberately conservative in style using models from the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, and are found in a group of manuscripts, particularly Processionals, made at Poissy by the nuns themselves at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Naughton, 1995, vol. I, p. 139-).

Prayers and important chants begin with smaller ivy-leaf initials in blue and red with white penwork on rectangular grounds of burnished gold. Line endings are painted in the same manner, in blue and red with white penwork, with touches of burnished gold. Other chants begin with calligraphic initials on rectangular grounds decorated with flower and leaf motifs against a background of yellow wash. A human head in profile decorates one such initial beginning the antiphon, "Pueri hebreorum tollentes ramos olivarum" for the Palm Sunday procession (f. 11v). On one occasion the decorator forgot to draw the rectangular ground around the initial (f. 86v). Whereas the ivy-leaf initials and borders represent the archaizing decorative patterns painted in manuscripts at Poissy in this period, the calligraphic initials demonstrate that the nuns were also adopting contemporary inventions. The form of these letters and their reduced palette imitate printed woodcut initials.

The royal abbey of Poissy was founded by Philip IV in 1304 in honor of his grandfather, St. Louis, King of France on the Seine outside of Paris. It was a prestigious house, restricted by its foundation charter to women of noble blood, and it maintained close relationships to the royal family. Books of Hours from the abbey are extremely uncommon, and it is clear that the nuns of Poissy used Processionals as their main personal devotional book, guiding them through the liturgical processions and offices they collectively sung in the nun's choir in the central nave of the church there.

Many of the surviving Poissy Processionals have been well studied and recorded by scholars, but new examples, such as the present manuscript, continue to come to light. In her studies of Poissy Processionals from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, J. Naughton (1998 and 1999/2000) identified 27 Processionals; M. Huglo's catalogue of Processionals (1999 and 2004) added four additional manuscripts. Others have been catalogued here on this site: TM 323, TM 524, TM 626, TM 636, and TM 649, and another was sold by Christies, 19 November 2003, lot 27, now Reed College Library, M2149 .C38 1510* (Online Resources). The Poissy group merits a new study as the known manuscripts continue to grow.

The archaizing script and decoration of this Processional demonstrates that it was one of those manuscripts written and decorated by the nuns themselves at Poissy. The curious juxtaposition of the ivy-leaf initials that copy fourteenth-century models and the calligraphic initials that imitate those found in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century printed books illustrates to what degree the nuns relied exclusively on materials available within the convent as sources of inspiration. It is a striking example of "invention in isolation," a phenomenon also characteristic of early monastic manuscript production. The present manuscript also provides material for exploring the history of liturgy, women and music.

LITERATURE

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Needham, P. *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings 400-1600*, New York and London, 1979.

Nixon, H. M. *Sixteenth-Century Gold-Tooled Bookbindings in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, New York, 1971.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Joan Naughton's dissertation, "Manuscripts from the Dominican monastery of Saint-Louis de Poissy"

<https://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/39437>

Fully digitized Poissy Processional of c. 1510 at Reed College, Portland, Oregon

<https://rdc.reed.edu/c/poissy/home/>

Poissy processional at Bryn Mawr College, Pennsylvania, including recordings of the its chants and a transcription of the entire text

<http://poissyprocessional.brynmawr.edu/>

TM 925