

Psalter

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Italy, Florence, c. 1523-30

i (parchment endleaf from an earlier binding) + 194 folios on parchment, paginated in ink in the seventeenth-century (?), top outer corner recto, with many errors: with pp. 3 bis, 164 bis, 171 bis, 190 bis, 217 bis, 218 bis, 255 bis, and 258 bis, and with p. 314 followed by 316, modern foliation in pencil, 1-194, top outer corner recto [cited in this description], now missing two folios following f. 24v (pp. 48-51), one folio following f. 49v (pp. 102-103), and one folio following f. 133 (collation, i⁴ ii-iii¹⁰ iv¹⁰ [-1 and 2, pp. 48-51, following f. 24v] v¹⁰ vi¹⁰ [-8, pp. 102-3, following f. 49v] vii-viii¹⁰ ix⁸ x-xi¹⁰ xii⁸ xiii¹⁰ xiv⁸ xv¹⁰ [-9, following f. 133] xvi¹⁰ xvii⁸ xviii-xxi¹⁰ [+1, f. 194, possibly an endleaf from an earlier binding]), vertical catchwords, no leaf or quire signatures, ruled very lightly in ink, full-length vertical bounding lines (justification, 107 x 16-45 mm.), written below the top line a rounded gothic bookhand in twenty long lines by three scribes: the main scribe copied the Psalms, ff. 5-187, and two additional scribes, possibly working later, copied the prayer on ff. 1-4v and f. 187, and the litany, ff. 187v-194, decorative cadels in text ink with yellow wash following two-line initials, one-line alternately red and blue initials, undecorated within the line of text, at the beginning of a new line with simple pen decoration in violet or red respectively, similar two-line alternately red and blue initials with pen decoration, SEVEN-LINE ILLUMINATED INITIAL, f. 5, of David playing his psaltery or harp, initial is dark pink with lush green acanthus on a rectangular polished gold ground, extending into a delicate border with green, blue and red flowers with small gold discs and black dots, overall in very good condition, trimmed with loss of some pen decoration in the bottom margin, a few folios now rubbed and faint, but clearly legible, thirteen leaves with parts of bottom and/or outer margins cut out, a few with some loss of text (ff. 8, 31, 32, 40 [with loss], 47, 50-54 [with loss], 120, 135, and 185), f. 45, loose, and partially detached. Bound in Italy or possibly in France in SIXTEENTH-CENTURY MOROCCO over pasteboard, ELABORATELY GOLD-TOOLED with leaves and volutes, boards cut close to the bookblock, holes in the lower board from catches or clasps, corresponding marks on upper board, now repaired, gold-tooled spine with four raised bands, light green and yellow linen head and tail bands, gilt edges, paper pastedowns, in good condition, covers bowed, spine slightly concave, split along front cover, with broken bands. Dimensions 137 x 80 mm.

This is an elegant manuscript from Renaissance Florence, illuminated a style similar to that of Gherardo and Monte de Giovanni del Fora. Its unusually restricted contents include only the Psalms, a prayer to be said before communion or penance, and a litany. These contents, together with its small size, and distinctive small, narrow format, suggest that it was for private devotional use. Psalters continued to be more common than Books of Hours in Renaissance Italy and were often illuminated by the same workshops and produced for wealthy lay patrons.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in Florence in the opening decades of the sixteenth century, probably c.1523-1530, as indicated by the text, script and style of the illumination. The litany can be dated after 1523, since it includes the Dominican Saint Antoninus (1389-1459), who was Archbishop of Florence from 1446 until his death, and who was canonized in 1523; other Florentine

saints in the litany include Zenobius, bishop of Florence (feast 25 May), and Romulus (feast 6 July).

2. The prayer at the beginning (continuing imperfectly at the end of the Psalms on f. 187), is certainly in a different script, and may have been added to the manuscript slightly later. It has been suggested in an earlier catalogue (Sotheby's, June 22, 2004) that the manuscript dates from the end of the fifteenth century, with this prayer and the litany, ff. 187v-194, added a few decades later, possibly by the same scribe in old age. Although this remains a possibility, it seems an overly complicated explanation (see further discussion below, illumination).
3. Text was in use into the seventeenth century, when the manuscript was paginated in ink, and a few cross references were added.
4. Front flyleaf, f. 1, in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, written vertically in ink, "Thoma," and horizontally, "Moliere."
5. Inside back cover, in pencil, dealer's note: "573/ 411003036."
6. Belonged to the Earl of Macclesfield; his sale, London, Sotheby's, June 22, 2004, lot 79.

TEXT

ff. 1-4v, and f. 187, *Oratio ad dominum nostrum iesu christum et que dicenda sunt ante sacratissima confessione et ante communione et qui disserit eam merebitur a spiritu sancto illuminari oculis mentis et corde*, *Oratio*, incipit, "Iesu creator iesu redemptor iesu saluator humanum generis parce mihi, O inobedienti de tuis preceptis et ingratis de tuis donis que mihi ... vita mee in fine"; [continuing on f. 187], incipit, "quam sicut te nil facere ... ego laua me et peccata mea ablue me///" [ending imperfectly];

Also found in a sixteenth-century Beneventan manuscript from Naples, London-Oslo, Schøyen Collection MS 1981, ff. 1-9v; edited by Virginia Brown, pp. 109-111 (see Literature, below), although the prayer is attributed to Thomas Aquinas in the Schøyen manuscript, Brown found no validity for this attribution, and indeed found no other copies of the prayer; although clearly the same prayer, in the Schøyen Collection manuscript the text begins, "O iesu creator, O iesu redemptor"

The scribe in our manuscript began the text on ff. 1-4v, and continued it in on the blank space on f. 187, found at the end of the last Psalm; there he ran out of space, and the text ends imperfectly in our manuscript (p. 110 of the edition, lacking the last fourteen lines).

ff. 5-187, *Incipit liber hymnorum uel soliloquiorum Psalmus dauid*, incipit, "Beatus uir qui non abiit in consilio ...";

Psalms 1-150 in biblical order; now lacking four folios, so that f. 24v (p. 47), ends, "... omne consilium confirmet. Letabimur///", Psalm 19:6; and f. 25 (p. 52), begins "[ven]tre spes mea ab uberibus ...", Psalm 21:10; f. 49v (p. 101), ends "pedes meos et dire///" Psalm 39:3, and f. 50 (p.

104), begins, “//mee et non potui ...,” Psalm 39:13, and f. 133v ends “... constituit eum domini dominium//” Psalm 104:21, and f. 134, begins, “//et auro ...” Psalm 104:37.

ff. 187v-194, Litany followed by the usual prayers [ends mid f. 194; remainder and f. 194v, blank].

Litany includes Augustine, Jerome, Nicholas, Louis, Zenobius, and Antoninus of Florence among the bishops and doctors, Francis, Anthony, Dominic, Romulus, and Bernard among the monks and priests, and Cecilia, Agatha, Scholastica and Elizabeth among the virgins and widows.

ILLUMINATION

The Psalms begin with a beautiful initial of David, author of the Psalms, who is depicted three-quarter length, dressed in a red robe with gold highlights, playing a harp or psaltery, which he holds clasped in front of his chest. He is depicted with a long gray beard, and with a halo. Behind the saint there is a blue background with a few clouds sketched lightly in white.

This image has been attributed to the Florentine painter, Gherardo del Fora (c. 1444-1497), who worked for numerous illustrious patrons, including Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary (Sotheby's Catalogue, June 22, 2004, lot 79), and there are certainly strong resemblances between this initial and work attributed to Gherardo (see Garzelli, 1985, vol. 2, figs. 924 and 1077, cited in the Sotheby catalogue; cf. also figs. 979 and 989).

This suggestion does, however, pose a problem in dating the manuscript, and the Sotheby description therefore suggested that main text of the manuscript, i.e. the Psalms, was copied and illuminated at the end of the fifteenth century. Subsequently, a few decades later, and certainly after 1523 when Antoninus of Florence was canonized, the prayer at the beginning and the litany were added. This hypothesis made it possible to attribute the initial to Gherardo, and also accounts for the fact that the prayer and the litany were certainly written by a different scribe (or at a different time; the Sotheby description suggests the litany was copied by the main scribe in old age) than the main text. Nonetheless, since the pen decoration is consistent throughout all three sections of the manuscript, this explanation requires us to assume that the pen decoration was also added at a later date. This is not impossible, and does perhaps explain the discrepancy between the fine quality of the illuminated initial, and the less than careful pen decoration. Still, it does seem to be an elaborate explanation for this Psalter's origins. Moreover, the litany is copied at the end of the last quire of the manuscript – not on added folios – which also seems to argue against the idea of this long gap in time before the manuscript was completed.

A simpler explanation is to date the whole manuscript after 1523. Gherardo worked closely with his brother, Monte di Giovanni del Fora (1448-1532/3), and together they received numerous important commissions. After Gherardo's death, Monte worked on an important series of Choir books for the Duomo in Florence from 1514-21. It is a reasonable possibility that the opening initial in the Psalter described here, although probably not attributable to Monte, could have been produced in his workshop.

The Psalms have always played an important role in Christian liturgy. Throughout the Middle Ages, the weekly recitation of the one hundred and fifty Psalms was the heart of the Divine Office

said by members of religious orders and by secular clerics. The Psalms were also the focus of private devotion among both the laity and the clergy. In the sixteenth century, the Psalms were central to the liturgical services of the new Protestant churches.

Copies of the Psalms, usually accompanied by a calendar, litany, and often the Office of the Dead and other prayers, were the primary book for private, lay devotion well into the thirteenth century. It is often stated that their popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was eclipsed by Books of Hours. While this was certainly true in parts of Europe, Psalters continued to be copied, and were especially popular in German-speaking countries and in Italy well into the sixteenth-century. The Psalms were the texts devout Christians prayed throughout their life. Psalters were commissioned to mark important occasions, such as marriages, and they were the texts used to teach children how to read.

All the features of this Renaissance Psalter suggest it was made for private, devotional use. It is a small volume, copied in a distinctive narrow format that would have made it easy to carry. Its contents are also unusual, since the Psalms are copied without any accompanying prayers, and without the initials marking the liturgical divisions of the Divine Office found in most Psalters. The two additional texts, the prayer added at the beginning of the manuscript to be said before Communion and Penance, and the litany complete its contents, and the absence of a calendar and other prayers is notable.

LITERATURE

Brown, Virginia. "Latin and Italian Prayers in a Sixteenth-Century Beneventan Manuscript from Naples," in *Ritual, Text, and Law: Studies in Medieval Canon Law and Liturgy Presented to Roger E. Reynolds*, eds. Kathleen G. Cushing and Richard F. Gyug, Aldershot, Hants, England, and Burlington, Vermont, Ashgate, 2004, pp. 95-131.

Van Deusen, Nancy, ed. *The Place of the Psalms in the Intellectual Culture in the Middle Ages*, Albany, State University of New York, 1999.

Garzelli, Annarosa. *Miniatura fiorentina del Rinascimento, 1440-1525: un Primo Censimento*, Florence, Giunta regionale Toscana, La Nuova Italia, 1985.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Diane Tillotson, "Medieval Writing: The Psalter":

<http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/word/psalter.htm>

Introduction to liturgical manuscripts:

"Celebrating the Liturgy's Books":

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/manuscripts/>

"Psalms," New Catholic Encyclopedia:

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12533a.htm>

E. Antetomaso, "Gherardo di Giovanni di Miniato, in Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani:
http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricerca/gherardo-di-giovanni/Dizionario_Biografico

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