

# LES ENLUMINURES

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## Prayer Book

In Latin and Dutch, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Southern Netherlands (Ghent or Bruges), c. 1508-1519

4 illuminated pages with three-quarter borders; 112 naturalistic vignettes in the lower margins

*i (paper) + 108 + i (paper) folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, 1-108, complete (collation i<sup>2</sup> ii-xiii<sup>8</sup> xiv<sup>2</sup>), alphanumerical quire signatures, ruled in red ink (justification 83 x 53 mm.), ff. 3-56 written in Latin in cursive script on 16 long lines, ff. 3-56 decorated with 4 LARGE FOLIAGE INITIALS each accompanied by a 2 or 3-line foliage initial and a THREE-QUARTER BORDER with flowers, fruit, insects and birds on grounds in liquid gold and colors, a FULL-PAGE COAT OF ARMS on f. 2 in bright colors, gold and silver (oxidized), ff. 56v-106 written in Dutch in hybrid script on 16 long lines, rubrics in red, capitals touched in red, ff. 56v-106 decorated with 2-line initials in gold on parti-colored grounds and one 5-line tau cross in gold on blue ground with three nails in silver (oxidized, f. 106), 112 INDIVIDUAL VIGNETTES painted in the lower margins of ff. 3-58v representing a large collection of naturalistic flowers, insects, birds, animals, grotesques, jewels, and sacred objects, minor staining and loss of lower outer corners of ff. 22-30, minor losses of pigment on ff. 2 and 106, overall in excellent condition. CONTEMPORARY BINDING of calf gilt-tooled with elaborate center- and corner-pieces, leather worn but in overall good condition. Dimensions: 138 mm. x 92 mm.*

A diminutive, enchanting Prayer Book with illuminations in the Ghent-Bruges manner. In addition to the "typical" scatter borders, this manuscript includes 112 realistic images painted directly on the parchment without the usual colored ground – an amazing variety of flowers, animals, birds, jewels, and drolleries – joining a small distinct group of similarly painted manuscripts, mostly Books of Hours. Preserved in its original gold-tooled binding, our Prayer Book was made for a nobleman, probably a knight of the Holy Sepulcher, and possibly someone in the close circle of Emperor Maximilian.

## PROVENANCE

1. Written and illuminated in the early sixteenth century in the Southern Netherlands, likely in Ghent or Bruges, for an important Dutch-speaking nobleman. The illuminations are in the Ghent-Bruges style of the early sixteenth century. A prayer of Emperor Maximilian on ff. 100v-104 suggest that this dates within his reign, in 1508-1519, and it is possible that the original owner was someone in his close circle. A coat of arms, most likely of the original owner, was painted on f. 2: *De sable au lion d'argent, armé et couronné d'or et lambassé de gueules, au chef d'azure à une étoile d'or à six points, écu sommé d'une casque à cimier d'un lion issant d'argent, lambrequins d'argent et de sable*. While this coat of arms is still unidentified, the original owner was very probably a knight of the Holy Sepulchre, as the arms of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, used by the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, were painted on f. 50v.
2. A twentieth-century ownership inscription in pencil on the front flyleaf: "Elisa Josephine B..." (illegible).

## TEXT

[f. 1, blank]; f. 2, a coat of arms, *De sable au lion d'argent, armé et couronné d'or et lampassé de gueules; au chef d'azure à une étoile d'or à six points; écu sommé d'une casque à cimier d'un lion issant d'argent; lambrequins d'argent et de sable*; [f. 2v, blank];

ff. 3-18v, Passion according to St. Matthew, in Latin;

ff. 19-31v, Passion according to St. Mark, in Latin;

ff. 32-45, Passion according to St. Luke, in Latin;

ff. 45v-56, Passion according to St. John, in Latin;

ff. 56v-106, Fourteen prayers in Dutch [rubric on f. 56], *Een schoen gebet tot god den heer*, incipit, "Tot u heere verheffe ic(k) mijn siele ..."; [ff. 56v-59v], "O heer mijn god ende mijn schepper ..."; [ff. 59v-60v], "O God weest mij genadic ..."; [ff. 60v-65v], "Och God ick roep met mijnder stemmen tot u verhoert mij ..."; [ff. 60v-66v], "O heer onthoudt mij sonder smette ..."; [ff. 66v-74, prayer attributed to St. Augustine], "Ic(k) onwerdighe snoede sondaer belije u heer mijn god ..."; ff. 74-79, a prayer to be said always at Mass in preparation for the hour of death], "O rechtverdige god, hoe onbegrijpelijk sij u ordelen ..."; [ff. 79-83v, and ff. 83v-87v, two prayers to the Virgin Mary], "Weest gegruet o Maria dochter des vaders ...", and "O Gloriose coninginne der hemelen ..."; [ff. 87v-90v], "O heer van mijnen sonden ende heymelijke gebreken ..."; [ff. 90v-96], "O goedertieren heer die alle dingen bekenteer sij geschieden ende alle dingen laet geschieden ..."; [ff. 96-100v, a prayer of Emperor Maximilian], *Dat gebet vanden Keyser Maximilian*, "O Almoegende god gedantc geloeft en gebundijt ..."; [ff. 100v-104, Psalm to be said on Sundays], "O lieve heer ick beken uut gronde mijns herten ..."; [ff. 104-105v, a short text explaining the drawing of the Tau cross, f. 106, followed on ff. 105v-106, by the Trisagion hymn in Greek, Latin and Dutch], "(A)ios O theos, Ayos yschyros, Ayos Aathanathos, Eleyson ymas, Sancte deus, sancte fortis, sancte et immortalis, miserere nobis, (O) heilige god, o stercke god, O bermhertige god ...."; [ff. 106v-108v, blank].

## ILLUSTRATION

Four illuminated pages introduce the Passion texts from each Gospel, ff. 3, 19, 32, and 45v; the focal point of each page is a very large painted foliage initial in vibrant blue or gold on contrasting grounds, framed in three-quarter scatter-borders featuring realistic flowers, fruit, insects, and birds. In addition to these illuminated pages, we also find on almost every page realistic images painted in the lower margins directly on the white parchment, without the usual colored background or border. There are 112 such images. This manuscript is an important addition to a group of at least fifteen Books of Hours that must originate in Bruges and that, like it, all have flowers, birds, jewels, and figural imagery painted individually on the white vellum without the usual colored background. One particularly rich example can be studied online (The Hague, KB, MS 74 G2; see Online Resources). Manuscripts in this group are further discussed in the important publication by As-Vijvers, *Re-Making the Margin*, 2013. The types of birds and butterflies can be compared to those in the Van Hooft Prayer Book (Amsterdam, Universiteitsbibliotheek XV 5502), although the full borders are different, and without further study we are not suggesting the two manuscripts are by the same hands. The Van Hooft Prayer

Book dates from c. 1490 to 1500 and is attributed to Cornelia van Wulfschkercke, a nun housed at the Carmelite Abbey of Sion and the Master of the Dark Eyes. We are grateful to Dr. As-Vijvers for her expertise.

In our Prayer Book these plants, animals and objects painted in the margins were chosen for their symbolic value, and sometimes in reference to the text. One of the unique objects (evidently not found in any of the other "isolated border motif" manuscripts) is the coral branch (ff. 5 and 32v). Attached with a metal loop at the top, the coral is transformed into a piece of jewelry. The coral was thought to have protective properties. Associated with the blood of Christ, it is often worn by the baby Christ Child in fifteenth-century paintings, as a symbol of his sacrifice and the protection it ensures. Such coral amulets were often attached to belts or children's rattles to protect against the evil eye and against illnesses such as cramps, fever, and toothache. For similar coral amulets, cf. Hansmann and Kriss-Rettenbeck 1977, pp. 54-55 (Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, Munich); Alarcon Ramon 1987, pp. 97, 102, 104, 110 (Museo del Pueblo Español, Madrid); exh. cat., *Das Amulett* 1994, no. 67 (Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg).

The demon with bellows (ff. 24 and 42v) derives from a late-fourteenth-century Parisian iconography with the demon extinguishing a candle flame immediately relit by an angel. A parrot is a symbol of eloquence (f. 36v), a snake-eating stork represents Christ cleansing the world of sin/Satan (f. 39), and a siren, embodying temptation, is placed on a facing page from a peacock, symbolizing divine immortality (ff. 46v-47). An owl, depicted on f. 46, demonstrates how the decoration was contemplated in relation with the text. The owl is a harbinger of death, and here it is placed immediately beneath the mention of Judas, who would betray Jesus. The sophisticated sacred objects reproduced on the pages were probably possessions of the man who ordered the manuscript. They include a beautiful gold ring with an emerald (?) gemstone, to which is suspended a rosary ending in a golden cross (f. 55).

There are other unusual, sometimes unique motifs in the present Prayer Book, including the book with ties, bosses, and bookmarks in the form of tassles seen at the lower spine (f. 52). The columbine, (f. 15v), skeleton (f. 58v), grasshopper (f. 44), fly (f. 27v), peacock (f. 9v and f. 43), and jewelry (f. 18v) are images all worth noting. As-Wijvers provides an index of motifs in all the "isolated border motif" manuscripts known to her; consultation of her list shows a similarity between our borders and those in some of the manuscripts in which the main miniatures are by Simon Bening (the *Leber Hours*, for example, Rouen, Bib. Mun. 3028, as well as a *Book of Hours* now in a Private Collection). More research is certainly warranted.

The text in the first part of the manuscript contains the Passion sequences from the four Gospels. The second part provides a collection of prayers in Dutch, beginning with "Tot u heere verheffe ic mijn siele" (To you Lord I lift my soul). The second part was clearly planned from the beginning and intended to accompany the Passion sequences in Latin, as suggested by the homogeneity of the parchment and the regularity of the quire structures, as well as the original decoration, which continues in this second part of the book (on five pages).

On the last page of the manuscript is an image of the Tau cross with three nails, the symbol loved by St. Francis of Assisi. The Tau is surrounded on the page by the Trisagion hymn (*Agios O Theos*), a standard component in most services of the Byzantine Rite. In the Latin liturgy, it is

sung in Greek and Latin on Good Friday during the ceremony of the Adoration of the Cross. Our manuscript also provides the hymn in Dutch. The Tau cross became an essential element of the Franciscan way of life, symbolizing the commitment to follow the poor and the crucified Christ. Its inclusion in our manuscript indicates the original owner's sensibilities towards the Franciscan Order. In fact, the official Custody of the Holy Land was entrusted from 1291-1489 to the Franciscan Order; between 1342 and 1489, the Custodian was the head of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre (the office was later named Grand Master and vested to the papacy). At the end of the fifteenth century, it was frequent for a foreign knight to discharge the act of accolade, the solemn ceremony of conferring knighthood. The important Dutch-speaking nobleman, who ordered our manuscript, may have had it made in commemoration of his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where he was knighted.

## LITERATURE

As-Vijvers, Anne Margreet, *Re-making the Margin: The Master of the David Scenes and Flemish Manuscript Painting around 1500*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2013.

Kren, Thomas and Scot McKendrick, eds. *Illuminating the Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe*, Los Angeles, 2003, pp. 394-407.

Smeyers, M. and J. Van der Stock, eds. *Flemish Illuminated Manuscripts, 1475-1550* (exhibition catalogue), Saint Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum; Florence, Museo Bardini, Ghent and New York, 1996.

Winckler, Friedrich. *Die flämische Buchmalerei des XV. und XVI. Jahrhunderts. Künstler und Werke von den Brüdern van Eyck bis zu Simon Bening*, Munich, 1925.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

KB, National Library of the Netherlands, MS 74 G 2, ff. 91v-92, Book of Hours. Bruges, 1494  
<https://www.kb.nl/en/themes/middle-ages/more-from-the-middle-ages/book-of-hours-from-bruges>

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