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Psalter

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Southern Netherlands (Bruges), c. 1450-1460

iv (paper) + 224 + iv (paper) folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, 1-224, complete (collation i⁶ ii-xxviii⁸ xxix²), no catchwords or signatures, ruled in red ink (justification 73 x 50 mm.), written in black ink in gothic textualis bookhand on 17 lines, 1-line verse initials alternating in red and blue, 2-line gold initials infilled in blue or red with white highlights on contrasting grounds, EIGHT ILLUMINATED INITIALS WITH FULL BORDERS including seven 5-line and one 6-line (the opening "Beatus vir") initials in blue or pink highlighted in white, in-filled with vine scrolls on burnished gold grounds from which spring three-quarter-bar borders in gold and pink/blue, and surrounded by full acanthus borders with flowers and birds, dotted with leaves in gold, some minor stains and a few 1-line initials have been erased, otherwise in excellent condition. Bound in the early seventeenth century in brown morocco, gold-tooled with geometric panels, catch-pins in metal on the back board, catches lacking, gilt edges, minor bumps and wear, otherwise in very good condition. Dimensions 132 x 95 mm.

This is a deluxe illuminated manuscript from a skilled workshop in Bruges, second only to Paris as a center for illumination in the fifteenth century. In excellent clean condition, it displays wide margins, eight of which are decorated with bright acanthus borders embellished with liquid and burnished gold. The volume (which probably never had full-page illumination) offers significant evidence that the Psalter as a book for private, lay devotion had not been entirely eclipsed by the Book of Hours, even in the fifteenth century.

PROVENANCE

1. Written and illuminated in Bruges in the middle of the fifteenth century, c. 1450-1460, as indicated by the evidence of the calendar, litany, and style of the decoration. The inclusion of St. Donatian, the patron saint of Bruges in red on 14 October confirms the localization of the manuscript in Bruges. The litanies include St. Basil of Bruges, as well as other saints venerated in the Low Countries including St. Amand of Maastricht, St. Amalberga, probably of Temse, especially venerated in Ghent (although other possibilities include St. Amalberga of Maubeuge or St. Amalberga of Susteren), and St. Juliana of Nicomedia (venerated especially in the Netherlands).
2. Front flyleaves, prayers in French written by a seventeenth-century hand.
3. Fourth front flyleaf (f. iv verso) in a nineteenth-century hand, "L. Colcombet, 15 quai Tilsitt, Lyon."
4. Front pastedown, armorial bookplate of the Gaudemaris family from Hautes-Alpes and Provence, likely indicating this is from the library of the noted early photographer, Count Victor de Gaudemaris (1835-1918).

TEXT

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ff. ii-iv verso (front flyleaves), added in the seventeenth century, "oraison qui fau [sic] dire au com[mencement] de la messe / o mon dieu et mon createur...";

ff. 1-6, Calendar, sparse, and with many of the feasts assigned to an alternative or wrong date. The inclusion of St. Donatian, the patron saint of Bruges in red on 14 October confirms the localization of the manuscript in Bruges. Other local feast days in the calendar, celebrated in northern France, Brittany, England and Flanders are those of St. Amand of Maastricht (in red, 6 Feb, considered the founder of the Church in Belgium), St. David of Wales (1 Mar), St. Adrian of Scotland (4 Mar), St. Walric, founder of the Abbey of Leuconay in Saint-Valery-sur-Somme (1 Apr), St. Brendan of Brittany (17 May, normally 16 May), the Dispersion of the Apostles (15 Jul), the Seven Sleepers (27 Jul, normally 27 Jun), St. Bertin of St. Omer (5 Sep), St. Bavo of Ghent (1 Oct), St. Crispin and St. Crispinian of Soissons (25 Oct), St. Quentin of Amiens (31 Oct), St. Livinus of Ghent (12 Nov), St. Malo of Brittany (22 Nov, normally 15 Nov). A contemporary, fifteenth-century hand personalized the calendar further with the addition of two saints: the Carthusian confessor, St. Bruno (at 5 Oct, normally the feast on 6 Oct), and St. Hugh of Lincoln (at 17 Nov, normally celebrated on 18 Nov);

ff. 7-200v, Psalter, complete with the 150 psalms (see below "Illustration" for the divisions);

ff. 200v-219v, Liturgical canticles for Lauds on each weekday: *Benedicite omnia opera* (Daniel 3: 57-88, 56) for Sunday, *Confitebor tibi domine* (Isaiah 12: 1-6) for Monday, *Ego dixi in dimidio* (Isaiah 38: 10-21) for Tuesday, *Exultavit cor meum* (1 Samuel 2: 1-10) for Wednesday, *Cantemus domino* (Exodus 15: 1-19) for Thursday, *Domine audivi* (Habakkuk 3: 1-19) for Friday, *Audite celi que loquar* (Deut. 32: 1-43) for Saturday, followed by *Magnificat* sung at Vespers, *Benedictus dominus deus* sung at Lauds, *Nunc dimittis* sung at Compline, *Te Deum laudamus* sung at Matins, and the Athanasian Creed *Quicumque Vult*;

The eight verses, which the scribe missed in psalm 148, due to his eye jumping from "quia ipse" (148:5) to "quia exaltatum" (148:13), were added in the margin in a contemporary cursive hand (f. 199v).

ff. 220-224v, Litanies, including St. Basil of Bruges and St. Amand of Maastricht among the martyrs, as well as St. Amalberga, probably of Temse, especially venerated in Ghent (although other possibilities include St. Amalberga of Maubeuge or St. Amalberga of Susteren), St. Juliana of Nicomedia (venerated especially in the Netherlands) and St. Ursula of Cologne among the virgins, followed by prayers.

ILLUSTRATION

The decorated initials and margins mark major divisions of the psalms according to the common 8-fold division, singling out the first psalm at Matins for each day of the week according to secular use and the first psalm at Sunday Vespers: psalms 1 (f. 7), 26 (f. 36), 38 (f. 55v), 52 (f. 73v), 68 (f. 91v), 80 (f. 114), 97 (f. 134v) and 109 (f. 157). The fact that the Psalter text is continuous and each verse does not start at a new line is a Flemish and German characteristic.

Flower stems with multicolored acanthus leaves dominate the margins, inhabited with a bird or two, often a peacock. Liquid gold is generously used among the red, blue, pink and green, for the acanthus, the stylized carrot flowers, and the occasional rosehip-shaped flower. The

enclosed areas between the interlacing stems are filled with burnished gold. Burnished gold is also used for the small leaves that decorate the short hairline stems drawn in black, which by this date in the second half of the century take a secondary role in the decorative scheme, leaving the center stage for the dance of the curling acanthus and interlocking stems. The black hairline stems are also decorated with small flowers with petals tipped in red or blue (common in Bruges manuscripts), and notably, each of them terminates in a small blue dot.

Stylistically the margins resemble those painted around 1450-1460 in the transitional style between the Gold Scrolls group and Willem Vrelant, two of the most successful Bruges illuminators of the mid-fifteenth century. The details in the marginal decoration indicate when our manuscript was produced. The hairline tendrils, for instance, no longer swirl in long vines as they did in the earlier decades, but now form short individual stems. The interlocking acanthus leaves are still quite airily spaced, whereas in later manuscripts they are gradually organized into more rigid and dense candelabra formations.

The psalms have always played an important role in both personal and liturgical prayer in the Christian tradition. This manuscript includes the text of the 150 psalms, copied in biblical order, followed by the Canticles (texts from different parts of the Bible that were also read and chanted as prayers). The weekly recital of the 150 psalms was at the heart of the Divine Office, the daily cycle of liturgical prayers sung in by the professed religious, but since this manuscript does not include any additional texts for the Office apart from the psalms, it is likely that the original owner was a lay person reading the psalms for private devotion. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Psalters were the primary book for private, lay prayer. By the fifteenth century, however, the dominant prayer book for the laity was the Book of Hours. (Bruges, where this was made, was famous for its production of illuminated Books of Hours.) The manuscript is thus of special interest, in part because it confirms the continued use of the Psalter for lay devotion in the fifteenth century.

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Bibliothèque nationale de France/Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Miniatures flamandes:
<http://expositions.bnf.fr/flamands/index.htm>

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