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Pontifical [Ordo] from the Convent of St.-John the Evangelist in Florence
(Vallumbrosan Use)
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment
[Italy, Florence], dated 1518

84 folios, complete, mostly in gatherings of 10 (quires 1-7¹⁰, 8⁸, 9⁶), written in black and red ink in a round Italian gothic script, on 21 long lines, ruled in pale brown ink (justification c. 190 x 125 mm), colophon on folio 84v, 66 folios with up to four staves of music, staves of three or four lines in red with black square neumes, liturgical instructions in red, paragraph signs in blue, line endings of black pen-work tracery sometimes washed in green or yellow, one-line initials with black pen-work tracery often washed yellow or green, numerous two-line initials alternately red and blue with elaborate pen-flourishing in the opposite color often extending the height of the page and composed of delicate floral imagery, FIVE LARGE ILLUMINATED HISTORIATED INITIALS, and THREE ILLUMINATED INITIALS in colors or liquid gold or silver on burnished gold grounds or in burnished gold on colored grounds, TWO PORTRAIT ROUNDELS with burnished gold grounds, border on f. 1 consisting of blue foliage inhabited by grotesque faces and cherubim on a burnished gold ground surrounded by tiny burnished gold dots each with fine black pen-work tracery. Bound in a contemporary Italian goatskin over wooden boards (compare Marinis, CLXXXI, no. 1150, on a Breviary attributed to Monte del Fora), blind-tooled to a double frame pattern, the central compartment with gold-tooled arabesques and YHS (Jhesus) symbol, two clasps consisting of leather straps with chased and hinged brass strap-ends catching on pins on back cover, gilt edges, red and green silk endbands (minor wear to extremities, discreet restoration to leather straps, one strap separated but the detached piece with strap end present), modern drop-back cloth box. Dimensions 290 x 210 mm.

Unrecorded Ordo that survives as important evidence of the cultural heritage of a major Florentine foundation. Made for the famous Vallumbrosan convent in Florence, the monastery of St.-John the Evangelist, founded by Saint Umiltà (twice depicted in the manuscript), it includes accomplished illumination by Monte di Giovanni and a fine original binding of a type found also on another manuscript by illuminated by him.

PROVENANCE

1. Copied in 1518, when Dianora de Maclavellis was abbess, at the command of Sister Leonarda de Masis, for use by the nuns at the monastery of St.-John the Evangelist of the Vallumbrosan Order at the gate of Faenza in Florence. The colophon (f. 84v) reads: "Deo et genetrice gloriose virgini Marie et Beate Humilitati, librum istum scribere feci Soror Leonarda de masis devotione ducta, pro monasterio sancti Johannis evangeliste, ordinis Vallisumbrose ad portam Faventis anno domini M° CCCC° X° VIII° Domina Dianora de Maclavellis existente eiusdem monasterii abbatissa." Occasional marginal annotations include an additional prayer for the blessing of the ring (f. 16v). The fact that the original binding is very similar to one on another manuscript by Monte del Fora (Bibl. Vaticana, Barberini lat. 610, a Breviary for Mattias Corvinus; see Marinis, CLXXXI, no. 1150; and d'Ancona, II, no. 1426) helps circumscribe further the production.
2. W. A. Foyle, Beeleigh Abbey: bookplate (not in the Foyle sale, London, Christie's, 11 July 2000).

TEXT

ff. 1-6, Rite for the reception and clothing of a novice; rubric, *In Christi nomine Ordo ad induendam novitiam puellam secundum ordinem vallis umbrose*;

ff. 6v-43, Rite for the consecration of a virgin; rubric, *De benedictione et consecratione virginum secundum ordinem vallumbrose*;

ff. 44-60, Rite for the installation of an abbess; rubric, *Ordo ad eligendam confirmandam et benedicendam novam abbatissam*;

ff. 60v, Proper for the office of St. John the Evangelist; incipit, "Qui timet deum faciet bona";

ff. 61-83v, Ceremonial for a pontifical mass; rubric, *Pontifex in crastinum solemniter celebranturus ...*;

ff. 84-84v, Proper for a unidentified office; incipit, "Charissimi. Estote et vigiliate in orationibus...";

The name of the order is derived from the mother house, Vallombrosa, 20 miles from Florence, founded by St. John Gualbert (c. 985-1073). He founded his monastery c. 1038 as a house where postulants could experience the austerity of living a cenobitic life. The order grew rapidly and by the time of Pope Innocent III they numbered over sixty.

Nearly all were situated in Italy. The founder adopted the Rule of St. Benedict which he modified, attempting to unite the ascetic advantages of the eremitic life to life in community. They followed strictly the rules of silence, poverty, and enclosure.

One of the most famous Vallumbrosan houses and certainly the most famous nunnery of the Order, the convent of St-John the Evangelist in Florence, for which the present Ordo was composed, was founded by the celebrated Saint Umiltà.. Wife, mother, nun, anchoress, and abbess, St. Umiltà (blessed Humility; 1226-1310) became, in 1266, Abbess of the first Vallumbrosan convent for nuns, a convent at Faenza. In 1281, when the convent was sacked, she chose to go to Florence inspired by John the Evangelist, and she herself, gathering the stones and loading them onto a donkey, began to build her monastery dedicated to St. John the Evangelist. The convent was founded in 1281, constructed according to the design of Giovanni Pisano and consecrated in 1297, amidst the building of Santa Croce, begun 1295, Santa Maria del Fiore, begun 1296, and the Palazzo della Signoria, begun 1298. In 1534, the Medicis had the convent moved to San Salvi. In 1815, the authorities suppressed that convent, and its belongings were dispersed, and in 1972, the sisters took refuge with the body of St.Umiltà in Bagno a Ripoli.

ILLUSTRATION

The subjects of the portrait roundels are:

f. 1, St. John the Evangelist with pen, book and eagle ;

f. 6v, St. Umiltà;

The subjects of the historiated initials are :

f. 1, The rite of profession: a novice stands before a bishop, the community of nuns in the background;

f. 6v, St. John Gualbert;

f. 44, St. Umiltà;

f. 60, St. John the Evangelist, looking over his shoulder at his symbol, an eagle;

f. 60v, A bishop with miter and crozier accompanied by two clerics.

The decoration of this manuscript may be securely attributed to Monte di Giovanni del Fora (1448-1532/1533), one of the leading Florentine illuminators of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. From the 1460s Monte, together with his brother

Gherardo (ca. 1444-1497), received commissions from the most prestigious religious orders and the most eminent families. He illuminated liturgical books for Florentine churches, and in the 1480's they decorated several luxurious manuscripts for the library of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary. After Gherardo's death, Monte continued to work on similar commissions, including a series of Choir books illuminated between 1514 and 1521 for the Duomo of Florence.

The decorative vocabulary of the present manuscript corresponds closely to that of the Choir books. The motifs of the monochrome border of classicizing elements and cherubim on a burnished gold ground is repeated in the initials of the Choir books, as is the surround of tiny gold dots, each elaborately pen-flourished (see the initial *H* from Florence, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Codice C, reproduced in Garzelli, fig. 1016). The faces of the acolytes in the initial on f. 60 are echoed in the faces of young clerics and angels in the Choir books (see Garzelli, fig. 1017, 1019), and the face of St. John Gualbert on f. 6v occurs again as the face of St. Peter in a miniature of Pentecost (Garzelli, fig. 1025, from Codice F). Both Codice C and Codice F were illuminated between 1519 and 1521, according to the accounts of the Opera del Duomo, making them contemporary with the illumination of the pontifical of St. John the Evangelist.

Since much of Monte's work for the Duomo was destroyed or badly damaged in the Florence flood of 1966, this previously unrecorded example of his artistic production becomes a significant witness to his talent in this period of his career. According to Garzelli: "Monte's illumination is characterized by its exuberant imagery, rich invention, sophisticated intellectual play and extremely versatile brushwork."

Beginning only three years after the death of the saint from 1313 to 1348, a disciple of Pietro Lorenzetti, now known as the Master of the Beata Umiltà, painted an altarpiece for the convent with scenes of the life of the saint (now Florence, Uffizi), and Orgagna executed a sculpture of her (now Baptistery of the Church of San Michele at San Salvi). These deluxe commissions suggest a rich artistic culture within the convent, which must have been well-subsidized by wealthy patrons. The present manuscript joins this small group of extant works associated with the nuns of St.-John the Evangelist.

LITERATURE

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Garzelli, A., *Miniatura fiorentina del rinascimento*, 2 vols. Florence, 1985.

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"Life of St. Umiltà, Abbess of the Vallombrosan Order in Florence," in *Consolation of the Blessed*, trans. Elizabeth Petroff, New York, Alta Gaia Society, 1979, pp. 121-127.

Marinis, Tammaro de. *La Legatura artistica in Italia nel secoli XV & XVI*, Florence, Fratelli Alinari, 1960.

Online Resources:

Life of Saint Umiltà, Abbess of the Vallombrosan Order in Florence. (Digital text of Petroff's translation).

www.mw.mcmaster.ca/scriptorium/umilta.html

Life of Saint Umiltà, illustrated with the famous polyptych by the school of Pietro Lorenzetti

www.umilta.net/umilta.html