

Medieval Mastery

Book Illumination from Charlemagne
to Charles the Bold | 800-1475

BREPOLS

Dauidsfonds/Leuven



67 Pèlerinages “Pilgrimages”

Southern Netherlands (Artois?) ca. 1400.—Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium, Ms. 10176-78.

MANUSCRIPT Parchment; III + 302 + III fols.; 317 x 228 mm; 2 full-page miniatures; 48 smaller miniatures and 67 half-page miniatures (2 incomplete miniatures on fol. 23 v and 184); Gothic book script.

CONTENT Guillaume de Digulleville, *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine* (“Pilgrimage of Human Life”) (fol. 1r-113r); *Pèlerinage de l’âme* (“Pilgrimage of the Soul”) (fol. 113r-201r); *Pèlerinage de Jésus-Christ* (“Pilgrimage of Jesus Christ”) (fol. 201v-298v); Prayer to the Virgin Mary (fol. 299r-300v).

BINDING Modern tree calf binding, nineteenth century.

PROVENANCE Belonged to a Benedictine monk of the

Guines family (coat-of-arms on fol. 299r); mentioned in the inventory of the Library of Burgundy around 1467-69; removed in 1794 by the French, kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and restored in 1815.

BIBLIOGRAPHY Bousmanne and Van Hoorebeeck 2000: 197-204.

fol. 193r:

The pilgrim meeting Vanity riding Flattery

Another example of the 'pre-Eyckian' style, the Brussels *Pèlerinage* is far from having revealed all its secrets. This is a fascinating, hugely inventive manuscript, of unequalled profusion both with regard to the originality of the themes represented and their pictorial depiction. This manuscript remains a unique case in the history of Flemish illumination around 1400: it has no known antecedent, and as yet no other illuminated production has come close to it nor does it appear to have created a school around it.

A visionary illuminator—possibly helped by an assistant—created a repertory of images—one hundred and seventeen miniatures—with a dramatic intensity in complete harmony with the contents of the different "Pilgrimages": the hazardous initiatory journey of the human soul on earth and in the hereafter, until it has to appear for divine judgement.

The book is open at a scene from a battle, a melee that is at once reminiscent of the aesthetics of tapestry: interlaced like a knot of vipers, two sides clash in a merciless fight. The mounted 'Reds' launch a massive offensive from the right and inflict a shattering defeat on the 'Blues' who are on the point of collapse from the assault. The miniature is split into two vertical registers: on the right, in boldly coloured harness, the victors' camp, heads protected by golden helmets. The horseman at the front has kept his mantling and crown, frozen in an unstable balance while falling, a detail which singularly energizes the composition by evoking the force of the shock. The group advances in closed ranks, in an impeccable symmetry suggesting the organized strength and order of the scarlet troops. Opposite them, the vanquished, bareheaded, with haggard faces, distorted by pain. There are no more ranks here, but an indescribable chaos of horsemen

and defeated mounts. The atmosphere of war is present in the very spontaneous, dynamic and energetic strokes; it is also reflected in the contrasting play of tones, where the heraldic colours of the two camps, red and blue, predominate alternately with the 'silver' of the armour and some of the horses, and the gold of the helmets and shields.

An accomplished sense of balance and composition is concealed behind the chaos that seems to reign in this scene. To reconcile stability and dynamism, the artist has constructed a scene around a swirling movement, perfectly adapted to the theme of the battle. A subtle echo of this can be found in the spiral motifs painted in the background in liquid gold. In addition, the illuminator has not hesitated to invert the colours of the two horsemen in the central register in order visually to harmonize the whole, showing a Blue horseman bringing down one of his enemies with a thrust of a lance in the victors' ranks. Undoubtedly this substitution, which complicates the decoding of the scene, was dictated by aesthetic imperatives and the need to break an overly rigid symmetry. The result provides a perfect chromatic balance, which ensures the optimal circulation of the viewer's gaze.

Finally, it is not surprising that the visual analysis reveals a kind of rediscovered harmony behind the apparent chaos when taking the theme and its moral message into account. This relates to the "Battle between the Vices and Virtues" or *Psychomachia*, a theme that was popularized by a poem by Prudence, which ends in the magnificent triumph of Good over Evil.

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