

Medieval Mastery

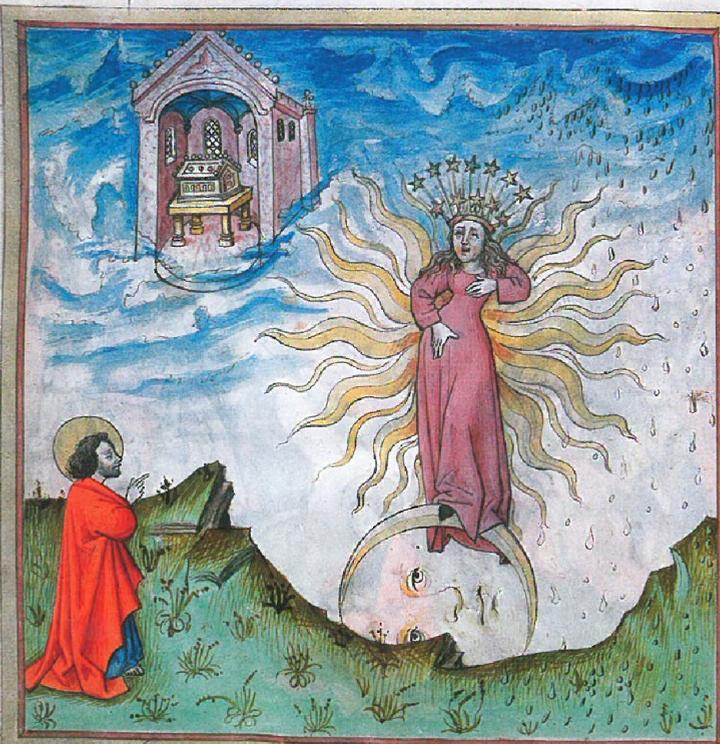
Book Illumination from Charlemagne
to Charles the Bold | 800-1475

BREPOLS

Dauidsfonds/Leuven

Sensus

ost hec archa testamenti vult est tectus sole.
Mulier solem sibi nimis affectans parere.



Sensus

Huius paranti statuit ecclesia. que postmodum
contra Cosroe petiit sibi tutorem validum.

This illumination depicts a woman in a pink robe standing on a crescent moon, surrounded by golden rays of light. She wears a crown of stars. In the background, a church with a golden altar is visible in a blue sky. In the foreground, a man in a red robe kneels on a green hill, looking up at the woman. The scene is framed by a gold border.

Sensus

vid et fecit expectante diademe ad deuorandum.
eius fructum sed repente de ad se traxit illum.



Sensus

Ville de l'Ince
Grandes Batailles
Quem habuit herachum. scilicet qui deo duci.
Christianum Imperium cepit inuito Cosroe.

This illumination shows a woman in a pink robe standing on a crescent moon, surrounded by golden rays of light. She wears a crown of stars. In the background, a church with a golden altar is visible in a blue sky. In the foreground, a man in a red robe kneels on a green hill, looking up at the woman. The scene is framed by a gold border.

77 Apocalypse en images “Apocalypse in Images”

Master of the Missal of Paul Beye (Jean de Namps?), Arras or Cambrai, around 1450.—Lyon, Bibliothèque Municipale, Ms. 439.

MANUSCRIPT Parchment; 26 fol. 295 x 240 mm; 48 miniatures; cursive script.

CONTENT Apocalypse en images (fol. 1r-25v).

BINDING Binding in embossed calfskin on wooden boards, fifteenth century.

PROVENANCE Alexandre Le Blancq, lord of Meurchin, sixteenth century; Maximilien-Charles de Coupigny, Baron du Saint-Empire, owned in Artois; Abbot Louis de Valençon, apostolic protonotary.

BIBLIOGRAPHY Paris 1993: 102-103, no. 51; Arras 2000: 60-61.

fol. 13v-14r:

Apparition of the Apocalyptic Woman and the Dragon who tries to steal her son away.

The originality of the *Apocalypse en images* from Lyon was only recently made prominent. However, it combines a unique text with what François Avril has called “one of the last medieval attempts to illustrate the text of the Apocalypse.” The poetic text contains two couplets placed at the top and the bottom of the page: the *textus* is a paraphrase of John’s Apocalypse; the *sensus* is an interpretation of it in relation to a chronological history of the Church. Michèle Lefebvre has demonstrated that the illuminator did not seek to illustrate the poem as such but that he was directly inspired by the biblical text. This fact clearly raises the issue of the relations between the painter and the poet, as well as the function of the image and its use. According to Marc Gil, the author of the text and its illustrator must be the same person. As for the image, like the text, it may have had a mnemonic function, allowing the reader to remember the complex content of St John’s vision by means of a visualization.

How is it possible to paint a vision? The Spanish illuminators of the famous commentaries of Beatus on the Apocalypse (ninth-tenth centuries) achieve it by ‘disembodying’ their representations: the figures are reduced to expressive silhouettes that stand out against abstract backgrounds, painted in very bold, almost aggressive, colours. Any depth or three-dimensional effects are banished. Forced to distance himself from reality, the viewer enters the world of the imagination, of emotion in its purest state: he becomes receptive to the vision.

Six centuries later, when the Lyon manuscript is

painted, the context has changed considerably. The rise of ‘realism’ during the 1400s forces other methods of expression. Firstly, there is a witness present in each miniature: St John, a discreet spectator who gives a written account of his mystical experience. The Evangelist is an intermediary with the world beyond but he belongs to our world and it is undoubtedly for this reason that he is one of the few figures dressed in bright colours. He witnesses the different episodes of the Revelation from his observation post. A grassy slope, sometimes crossed by a stream of water, a scant reminder of the landscape, serves as a backdrop to the vision, which appears as if projected on the big screen formed by the celestial arch.

The two scenes facing each other here depict the appearance of the Apocalyptic Woman and the Dragon, which tries to steal her son from her (Revelation 12). It is a very faithful visual translation of St John’s text. The Woman, for example, is “clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.” As for the Dragon, it has “seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth.” The different constituents of the vision are simply juxtaposed without any great concern for positioning them realistically in space. This is because these are signs, ethereal visualizations of metaphysical realities. The vision is painted in dull tones, which become almost evanescent in some miniatures in the book. On the other hand, the storm clouds are depicted in the conventional manner by alternating blue and white sinuous ribbons, an abstract technique reminiscent of the Romanesque tradition.

The Lyon *Apocalypse* is a beautiful example of the level of quality and inventiveness of illuminators working within the margins of the great Flemish and French trends, in Artois or Picardy. The often striking characteristic of these artists is the spontaneity with which they reinvent the art of illumination, with regard to both working techniques and the themes represented.