

Medieval Mastery

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

BREPOLS

Dauidsfonds/Leuven



Domine ne in *ps*
 furore tuo argu
 as me neq; in ira
 tua corripas me
Miserere mei dñe quom

90 Book of Hours

Simon Marmion, Valenciennes, ca. 1480-1485.—
Tournai, Bibliothèque de la Ville, Ms. 15 (conservé n°
11).

MANUSCRIPT Parchment; 193 fol.; 230 x 160 mm; 12
half-page miniatures; *Bâtarde* script.

CONTENT Book of hours for the Use of Rome.

BINDING Sixteenth-century binding; inscription (*ora
pro nobis sancta dei genitrix*).

PROVENANCE No provenance marking. The tradition
according to which this manuscript belonged to Henry
VIII, King of England, should be considered legendary.

BIBLIOGRAPHY Faider and Van Sint Jan 1950: 45-47;
Malibu 1991: 177, 197-198, 200, 206 n. 1 and 3, 207 n.
17, 208 n. 38 and 41; Vanwijnsberghe 2001a: 28-29.

fol. 131r:

David in prayer

In books of hours the image of David in prayer marks
the beginning of the Penitential Psalms, a series of
seven songs attributed to the King of Judah and Israel.
David is said to have composed them to expiate the
adultery committed with Bathsheba and the murder
of her husband Uriah, sent to his death during the
siege of Rabba (2 Samuel 11-12). These were recited to
obtain pardon and, as a preventive measure, to avoid
falling into one of the principal vices, of which there
are also seven.

From a strictly artistic point of view, the *David in
prayer* is often used by the illuminator as an
opportunity to show off all his skill in the mastery of
the landscape, and hereby compensating for the lean
narrative content in the scene: a man in adoration
before the Divinity appearing in the clouds; strewn
on the ground around him the hat and harp, attributes
of the musician and the poet. Of course this is the
repentant David, who after having been thoroughly
rebuked by the Prophet Nathan, pleads to Jahweh in
an isolated place, removed from the world, here rep-
resented by the castle and the city, which can be seen
in the distance.

The illumination of the Tournai book of hours is
attributed to Simon Marmion, one of the most
famous illuminators of his time. He lived in Valenci-
ennes where he died in 1489. Marmion came from an
important Hainaut family which was influential until
well into the sixteenth century. In addition to the reg-
ular orders for the Dukes of Burgundy, Marmion and
his assistants also worked for certain courtiers and a
local clientele. On his death, the chronicler Jean
Molinet, also a resident of Valenciennes, paid homage

to the painter in an epitaph, which has remained
famous: he particularly celebrated the master's land-
scapes:

Ciel, soleil, feu, ayr, mer, terre visible [...]

Bois, bledz, camps, pretz et toute rien pingible

Par art fabrille ay attainct le possible.

The miniature exhibited here is one of the most beau-
tiful examples of this exceptional skill. The huge com-
position unfolds on many levels: a remarkably detailed
grove of trees and rock formation on both sides of
David depict a *repoussoir* which draws the eye to the
distance; in the centre, a body of water that forms the
gigantic moat to the castle; at the back, steeples and a
rounded top of a dome, which may symbolize the
church of Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Depth is sug-
gested through the reduction in size of the elements
of the landscape in relation to their distance. An aerial
perspective is added to this, which noticeably dilutes
the outlines insofar as the eye disappears into the
depths of the atmospheric layer: the trees and rocks in
the foreground are emphasized by black lines which
clearly define the forms; on the other hand the back-
ground of the composition is covered in a slight fog.
The quality of this landscape prefigures the most
beautiful creations of the great illuminator from
Bruges, Simon Bening (d. 1561), celebrated for his rep-
resentations of nature.

If this composition shows some courage, this is also
because it is painted in shades of grey, a technique
particularly liked by Simon Marmion. Starting from a
grey background, the artist shapes his forms using
fine white strokes, delicately emphasizing the black
hollows. Subtle golden highlights complete the small
picture and give it delicate vibrancy. The grisaille
technique, often used in painting in a penitential con-
text, of Lent or ordinary days—while colour was
reserved for festive occasions—is particularly well
adapted to the theme of repentance, common to the
seven psalms.

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