
**SPLENDOUR OF
THE BURGUNDIAN
NETHERLANDS**
Southern Netherlandish
Illuminated Manuscripts
in Dutch Collections

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26 **BOOK OF HOURS**
 In Latin (use of Rome)
 Bruges, c. 1450
Illumination: transitional
style between the Gold Scrolls
group and Willem Vrelant
 The Hague, Koninklijke
 Bibliotheek, Ms. BPH 42

Although born near Utrecht and a burgher of that city, Willem Vrelant is one of the illuminators from the northern Netherlands who emigrated to Bruges, where he built his career in a thriving international metropolis with countless commercial opportunities.¹ By residing in Flanders, he was able to obtain prestigious commissions from the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, and several members of his circle.²

Admittedly, the style and compositions of this Dutch artist have little affinity with those of his native region, which raises the fascinating question of where he learned his trade. Pächt and Jenni³ stressed certain relationships between Vrelant and the Master of Catherine of Cleves, an older illuminator probably active in Utrecht, who seems to have collaborated with him on the Montfoort Hours in Vienna.⁴ Bousmanne went even further by suggesting that



Fig. II.3.8
 Visitation, with wild men in the margins,
 armed with lances, shields and clubs, motifs
 inspired by playing cards (fols. 28v-29r)

Vrelant might have been trained in the master's entourage.⁵ But as several specialists have suggested after close study of the codicology and liturgy of the Viennese book, it is far more likely that this manuscript was begun in Bruges and finished in Utrecht around 1449, the year when Vrelant achieved the status of burgher.⁶ With a foot in both cities, Vrelant was well placed to coordinate the complicated making of a book that mixed Flemish and Dutch elements.⁷

And if this pivotal book is not an exclusively Dutch product, nothing prevents its main illuminator, Willem Vrelant, from an apprenticeship in Flanders in the 1440s.⁸ His important stylistic debt to the Gold Scrolls group, active in Bruges c. 1415-1450, seems to support that probability. A group of manuscripts, which includes the book of hours in The Hague introduced here, presents a hybrid manner, a synthesis between the Gold Scrolls style and the mature work of Vrelant.⁹ Some scholars consider these miniatures to be *juvenilia*, products of the moment when Vrelant shed the stylistic cloak of the Gold Scrolls, which dominated Bruges. But I wonder, in the present case whether the compositions painted in the traditional style were not touched up by Vrelant,¹⁰ a practice he would frequently repeat in the future in order to harmonize the illustration of books produced under his supervision.¹¹ Whatever the answer, and before more research can be done, it seems more prudent to speak provisionally of a 'transitional style'.

The book of hours in The Hague is a showy manuscript, a perfect status symbol. Its iconographic programme is no longer complete, but it was particularly elaborate in its original form. Two complete cycles of the life of Christ structure the principal texts: eight episodes of the Infancy for the Hours of the Virgin, and seven episodes of the Passion for the Hours of the Cross. Six of the fifteen miniatures have disappeared. In the background of the *Carrying of the Cross* (fig. II.3.3) one can make out the openwork tower of St Martin's Cathedral in Utrecht, possibly a discreet allusion to

Vrelant's home town or a homage to a monument that was then considered one of the marvels of the ancient Low Countries because of its height and architectural audacity.¹² The motif also appears in the landscape of the miniature of David in prayer in the Montfoort Hours¹³ and in a psalter made in Bruges, today in Glasgow.¹⁴

In the margin the artist makes repeated use of motifs borrowed from Rhenish playing cards, which were used as models by illuminators from the 1440s onwards.¹⁵ Some of the wild men and women, armed with lances, bows, clubs, distaffs and shields, or playing a trumpet or lute (figs. II.3.8, II.3.3), are also found in the first volume of the Grammont Breviary, transcribed before December 1449 and probably illuminated in Ghent.¹⁶ These models were apparently already well known in the southern Netherlands by the mid-fifteenth century. Vrelant uses them in at least seven other manuscripts.¹⁷

¹ On Vrelant see Bousmanne 1997 and, more recently, the synthesis by Dubois 2011.

² Bousmanne 1997, p. 68.

³ Pächt & Jenni 1975, pp. 24-36.

⁴ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. S.n. 12878. On this manuscript see the critical assessment in Clark 2009.

⁵ Bousmanne 1997, p. 46.

⁶ See, for example, Van Buren 1999, pp. 12-17; Korteweg 2009, pp. 54-55; Clark 2009, p. 129. The main argument, stressed by Anne van Buren, is that the three miniatures in the Cleves style are painted on isolated folios inserted into the manuscript, whereas Vrelant works in the body of the book. Anne Korteweg emphasized the 'southern' character of the script. Gregory Clark established that the Montfoort Hours follow Sarum use, which is widespread in books of hours made in Bruges for export to England.

⁷ Clark 2009, p. 133.

⁸ Clark 2009, p. 129.

⁹ Zie Bousmanne 1997, p. 76.

¹⁰ See, for example, in the miniature of *Christ before Pilate* (fol. 131v), the clear

opposition between the conventional face of Christ and the more nuanced face of Pilate. The eyebrows, eyes, nose and beard appear to have been remodelled.

¹¹ Caswell 1993, *passim*; Van Buren 1999, p. 24.

¹² The tower also appears in the background of two eminent works by Van Eyck, *The Virgin and Chancellor Rolin* (Paris, Musée du Louvre) and the *Ghent Altarpiece* (Ghent, St Bavo Cathedral). It inspired a pamphlet by Geert Groote, who spearheaded the *Devotio moderna*, entitled *Contra turrim Trajectensem* (between 1374 and 1382).

¹³ Delaissé 1968, p. 75.

¹⁴ Glasgow, University Library, Ms. General 188, fol. 144v. Noted by Smeyers & Cardon 1991, pp. 102-103, fig. 10.

¹⁵ Van Buren & Edmunds 1974 (pp. 16-17 for the dating); Wolff 1982. For an assessment see Bousmanne 1997, pp. 141-148. On the Master of the Playing Cards, the creator of these models, and his followers, see Lehrs 1908, pp. 63-148, pl. 1-23; Geisberg 1973.

¹⁶ Vanwijnsberghe 2013, pp. 38-39.

¹⁷ Bousmanne 1997, p. 143.