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

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## II.3 THE TASTES OF THE UPPER CLASSES

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In the second quarter of the fifteenth century the standardized production of the Masters of the Gold Scrolls and especially the innumerable books of hours illuminated in Bruges in their style, seem to flood the local and international market (see Chapter II.2).

Nevertheless, these works satisfy only a segment – albeit a large one – of the clientele with a craving for luxury objects, namely those looking for flashy but affordable items. The techniques of serial production developed in Bruges allowed for a certain ‘customization’ of these modular books. But more discerning buyers, those who wanted fine books that were highly personalized and adapted as much to their social status as to their individual needs, those who were veritable bibliophiles and spared no expense, those buyers sought out less conventional texts and

Fig. II.3.1  
Trinity. Hours of Paul van Overtvelt. Petrus Christus, Bruges, c. 1450-1460. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. IV 95, fol. 155v



Fig. II.3.2  
**The Patron, Daneel Rijn,**  
**Praying before St Daniel**  
**in the Lions' Den.** Book of hours, Master of Guillebert  
 de Mets, Ghent, c. 1415-1425.  
 Baltimore, Walters Art  
 Museum, Ms. W. 166, fols.  
 168v-169r

illuminators known for the originality of their style and the high quality of their technical skills.

In Bruges, where Jan van Eyck had left his mark, talented painters and illuminators tried to emulate on parchment the detailed realism of the master.<sup>1</sup> They worked for important patrons like Jean Chevrot, Bishop of Tournai and ducal counsellor,<sup>2</sup> or Paul van Overtvelt, Bailiff of Bruges, secretary to Isabella of Portugal, and member of the Council of Flanders (fig. II.3.1).<sup>3</sup> Toward the middle of the century, Willem Vrelant, an illuminator from Utrecht, settled in Bruges and rapidly found his place in the ranks of the urban patriciate.<sup>4</sup> A neighbour and apparently close friend of Hans Memling, he numbered amongst his clients the eminent members of the Burgundian court and administration. His original style left an indelible mark on all book

production in Bruges in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and was to be widely imitated. A book of hours in The Hague (cat. no. 26) reflects the early developments of his style. Meant to dazzle the eyes, this manuscript, whose owner remains unknown, is abundantly decorated. Its margins are outstanding for their shimmering colours and the density of their design.

Ghent is equally important, even if its profile is less international than that of Bruges. It was an administrative seat and the site of a ducal residence, which attracted nobility and a well-heeled bourgeoisie and offered considerable employment opportunities. It is here that the Masters of Guillebert de Mets set up shop, working both for the court and the townspeople.<sup>5</sup> The earliest member of the group illustrated a superb book of hours for John the Fearless, Duke

of Burgundy.<sup>6</sup> The main painter in the group, who is probably identifiable as Johannes Ramont, also worked for the duke, and at the same time indulged a demanding urban clientele. One of his patrons was Daneel Rijm, a Ghent alderman and member of a leading family, who entrusted Ramont with the illumination of a remarkable book of hours made to measure, with prayers in Dutch and an iconography that reflects his personality and devotional preferences (fig. II.3.2).<sup>7</sup> An opulent decoration enhancing almost every page of the book makes it an object of great luxury, worthy of the high social status of its owner. The Mets style was imitated in the city and inspired followers who continued to work for the highest echelons of Burgundian society during the mid-fifteenth century, such as the painter of a charming book of hours made for the abbess of the noble chapter of Nivelles, Marguerite de Gavre d'Escornaix.<sup>8</sup> The same artist illuminated a book of hours now in Enschede (cat. no. 24), which has Dutch rubrics introducing the Latin texts and was probably made at the express request of someone living in or near Ghent, as far as one can judge from certain local saints in the calendar.

Other important centres in the southern Netherlands are still not well known, despite the fact that in the fifteenth century they fulfilled the necessary conditions for producing illuminated manuscripts: a demand that came from a wide social stratum and a supply of book artisans who either worked freelance or as members of a corporate structure.

In the first half of the fifteenth century, Tournai, a French city surrounded by Burgundian territories, was an important artistic foyer that could boast of such famous painters as Robert Campin (cat. no. 18) and his students Jacques Daret and Rogier van der Weyden.<sup>9</sup> The particularly rich documentation for Tournai has allowed for the reconstruction of the work of Jean Semont, an illuminator active around 1400.<sup>10</sup> Serving a local and regional clientele, Semont worked piecemeal and adapted his art to the tastes and desires of his patrons. Each of his works is unique. The same can be said of Marc Caussin, 'bon ouvrier' in illumination, working at Valenciennes in Hainaut.<sup>11</sup> Although a rather conventional artist, he can outdo himself when his clients are ready to pay the price, whereupon he creates engaging compositions of true visual and aesthetic interest. Such bravura characterizes a book of hours probably made for a canoness in Maubeuge,<sup>12</sup> or the *Histoires martiniennes* finished for Philippe de

Croÿ, Count of Chimay.<sup>13</sup> His little pictures even caught the eye of the Duke of Burgundy, who had two inserted in a prayer book inherited from his grandfather Philip the Bold.<sup>14</sup>

Another little-known region is the duchy of Brabant, which was apparently quite sensitive to ideas coming from the northern Netherlands. Here again, in a territory less dominated by the influence of the international market than the great Flemish cities, vintage productions crop up, adapted to the needs of a local elite. One such is an arresting book of hours in The Hague, reworked and updated stylistically by three generations of miniaturists. At least one of them appears to be a local illuminator (cat. no. 26). The taste of the upper classes evolves and manuscripts are the discreet witnesses to changes in fashion.

<sup>1</sup> Deneffe 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. 9015. Saint Augustine, *City of God*, vol. 1; see Brussels-Paris 2011, pp. 171-172, no. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. IV 95, fol. 155v. The *Trinity* is attributed to Petrus Christus, a painter from Brabant living in Bruges whose art owes a great deal to that of Jan van Eyck. Cf. Los Angeles-London 2003, pp. 93, 96-97, no. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Bousmanne 1997; Brussels-Paris 2011, pp. 238-255.

<sup>5</sup> Clark 2000; Vanwijnsberghe & Verroken 2011; Vanwijnsberghe & Verroken 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. n.a.l. 3055; see Brussels-Paris 2011, pp. 159-161, no. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Ms. W 166; see <http://www.thedigitalwalters.org/Data/WaltersManuscripts/html/W166/>.

<sup>8</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. IV 1113; see Brussels-Paris 2011, pp. 162-164, no. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Brine 2007; Vanwijnsberghe 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Vanwijnsberghe 2007a.

<sup>11</sup> Vanwijnsberghe 2013.

<sup>12</sup> France, private collection; see Vanwijnsberghe 2013, pp. 147-219, 429-432, no. VIII, *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Ms. 9069; see Vanwijnsberghe 2013, pp. 412-414, no. II, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Ms. 3-1954; see Cambridge 2016, pp. 154-157, no. 29.



Fig. II.3.3  
**Carrying of the Cross,**  
**with angels and wild men**  
**in the margins.** Book of  
 Hours, transitional style  
 between the Gold Scrolls  
 group and Willem Vrelant,  
 Bruges, c. 1450. The Hague,  
 Koninklijke Bibliotheek,  
 Ms. BPH 42, fols. 139v-140r