

# Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry

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# 1. Introduction

The original Riches Heures manuscript is stored in the Chantilly museum, but is so degraded that it is no longer available to the public... except for WebMuseum visitors!

## 1.1 International Gothic Style

By the end of the 14th century, the fusion of Italian and Northern European art had led to the development of an International Gothic style. For the next quarter of a century, leading artists travelled from Italy to France, and vice versa, and all over Europe. As a consequence, ideas spread and merged, until eventually painters in this International Gothic style could be found in France, Italy, England, Germany, Austria and Bohemia.

## 1.2 Masters of illumination

The ancient art of book illumination was still the prevailing form of painting in France at the beginning of the 15th century. It reached new heights, however, in the work of the three Limbourg brothers, Pol, Herman, and Jean, exponents of the International Gothic style.

They came from Gelderland, a province of the Netherlands, but worked in France. They were the only other Gothic painters to take such orderly joy as that shown by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in the city and its environment, its people, and its rulers. The Limbourg brothers all died suddenly in 1416, probably of the plague.

The Limbourgs' joint masterpiece, Les Très Riches Heures, was commissioned by the wealthy and extravagant manuscript collector, the Duc de Berry. Les Très Riches Heures is one of a genre of 15th-century illustrated prayer books known as "book of hours". The "hours" were prayers to be said at one of seven hours of the day. A book of hours would naturally contain a calendar, and this became the opportunity for a display of the illuminator's talent. Sadly, this particular example was unfinished at the time of the Limbourgs' and the Duc de Berry's deaths.

Each month is marked by an enchanting scene, usually showing appropriate seasonal activities. In August, we see courtly lovers riding to hunt with their falcons, while the great white ducal castle gleams in the distance and the peasant swim happily in the winding stream. The blue upper part of the painting shows an astrological hemisphere. With its mixture of courtly refinement and everyday reality, this miniature is representative of many in the book.

The Garden of Eden was painted separately from the rest of Les Très Riches Heures and inserted into it later. It is a great enclosed circle showing the world as it was intended to remain before Adam and Eve's fall from grace. The whole story of the loss of Eden and human self-will is set graphically before us. Adam and Eve are finally ejected from the lush greenery of Eden unto a dangerous rocky shore. The Limbourgs' consciousness of tragedy is no less acute for being so chivalric in its manner. For all their elegance, they are as aware as all great artists that pain is our human lot.

# 2. Les très riches heures du Duc de Berry

## 2.1 January

The month of giving gifts (a custom which seems to have died out now). Jean de Berry himself can be seen on the right, wearing the brilliant blue robe.

## 2.2 February

Winter in a peasant village. The inhabitants of a farm are shown warming themselves by the fire, while in the background daily life - cutting wood, taking cattle to the market - goes on as normal.

## 2.3 March

The year's first farm work, sowing and ploughing and suchlike. The chateau in the background is that of Lusignan, one of the Duc's favourites.

## 2.4 April

The arrival of spring, hope and new life - the grass is green and a newly betrothed couple are exchanging rings in the foreground, accompanied by friends and family. The chateau is another one of the Duc's, that of Dourdan.

## **2.5 May**

The May jaunt, a pageant celebrating the "joli mois de Mai" in which one had to wear green garments known as livrée de mai. The riders are young noblemen and women, with princes and princesses being visible. In the background is a chateau thought to be the Palais de la Cité in Paris.

## **2.6 June**

Harvest time - the peasants are mowing the meadow in unison, with the Hotel de Nesle, the Duc's Parisian residence, in the background. The building on the right is the Chapelle Royale, which is unchanged to this day. (thanks to b.royan@stirling.ac.uk)

## **2.7 July**

More of the harvest; the sheep are being shorn and the hay is being reaped. The chateau behind them is that which formerly stood on the Clain at Poitiers.

## **2.8 August**

The month of hawking; the nobles, carrying falcons, are going hunting while in the background peasants are harvesting and swimming in the river. Behind them is the Chateau d'Etampes.

## **2.9 September**

Probably the most famous of the calendar images. The grapes are being harvested by the peasants and carried into the beautifully detailed Chateau de Saumur.

## **2.10 October**

Tilling and sowing are being carried out by the peasants, in the shadow of the Louvre - Charles V's royal palace in Paris.

## **2.11 November**

This is the only calendar image executed by Colombe; the Limbourgs painted only the zodiacal tympanum above it. The picture shows the autumn acorn harvest, with a peasant knocking down throwing sticks to knock down the acorns on which his pigs are feeding.

## **2.12 December**

In the forest of Vincennes, fabled for its game, a wild-boar hunt has caught a boar which is being torn apart by the boarhounds. In the background is the Chateau de Vincennes, long a residence of French royalty.

## **3. What is the Très Riches Heures?**

The Très Riches Heures is the classic example of a medieval book of hours. This was a collection of the text for each liturgical hour of the day - hence the name - which often included other, supplementary, texts. Calendars, prayers, psalms and masses for certain holy days were commonly included.

The pictures in this exhibition are from the calendar section of the Très Riches Heures. This was painted some time between 1412 and 1416 and is arguably the most beautiful part of the manuscript; it is certainly the best known, being one of the great art treasures of France. In terms of historical and cultural importance, it is certainly equal to more famous works such as the Mona Lisa, marking the pinnacle of the art of manuscript illumination.

(Text from Chris Owen)

## **4. Who painted the Très Riches Heures?**

The Très Riches Heures was painted by the Limbourg brothers, Paul (Pol), Hermann and Jean. They came from Nimwegen in what is now Flanders but were generally referred to as Germans. Very little is known about them; they are believed to have been born in the late 1370s or 1380s and were born into an artistic family, their father being a wood sculptor and their uncle being an artist working variously for the French Queen and for the Duc de Bourgogne.

They seem to have followed in their uncle's footsteps and by 1402 had entered into the service of the Duc de Bourgogne as artists. By 1408 they had entered the service of Jean, Duc de Berry, one of the most notable (and richest!) art lovers in France. They are known to have executed several other pieces of work apart from the Très Riches Heures but most of these, with the major exception of the Très Belles Heures, seem to have been lost. In around February 1416 all three Limbourg brothers died before the age of thirty, apparently killed by an epidemic.

## 5. Who was their Patron?

Jean de Berry was one of the highest nobles in 15th-century France - his brothers were King Charles V, the Duc d'Anjou and the Duc de Bourgogne, and his nephews were King Charles VI and the Duc d'Orleans. He was inevitably involved in politics as a result of his position and was identified with the Armagnac anti-Burgundian faction, as a result of which his property was attacked on several occasions by pro-Burgundian mobs. (On one such occasion, in 1411, his Chateau de Bicetre was burned to the ground, destroying many of the works of the Limbourgs). In 1416 he died, apparently broken-hearted at the destruction of the French monarchy at Agincourt the previous year.

He was the medieval world's greatest connoisseur of the visual arts, with a particular fondness for jewels, castles, works of art and exotic animals. He ordered the building of a number of castles and filled each with specially commissioned works of art, including tapestries, paintings, and jewels. He is reputed to have owned 1,500 dogs. Among his extraordinarily varied collection were chateaux such as Saumur and Bicetre, rubies weighing up to 240 carats, a collection of ostriches and camels and - most importantly from our point of view - a magnificent collection of books. He owned astronomical treatises, mappa mondes, and a large number of religious books: 14 Bibles, 16 psalters, 18 breviaries, 6 missals and no less than 15 Books of Hours, including of course the Très Riches Heures.

## 6. How did they paint the Très Riches Heures?

The Limbourgs used a wide variety of colours obtained from minerals, plants or chemicals and mixed with either arabic or tragacanth gum to provide a binder for the paint. Amongst the more unusual colours they used were vert de flambe, a green obtained from crushed flowers mixed with massicot, and azur d'outreme, an ultramarine made from crushed Middle Eastern lapis-lazuli, used to paint the brilliant blues. (This was, of course, extremely expensive!)

The extremely fine detail which was the characteristic feature of the Limbourgs needed extremely fine brushes and, almost certainly, lenses. Later additions to the Très Riches Heures carried out by the late 15th-century artist Jean Colombe were carried out in a rather less delicate way. The calendars, however, were mostly painted by the Limbourgs; only November includes a substantial amount of Colombe's work.

## 7. Medieval Glossary

### 7.1 Book of Hours

A prayer book used by laymen for private devotion, containing prayers or meditations appropriate to certain hours of the day, days of the week, months or seasons. They became so popular in the 15th century that the Book of Hours outnumbers all other categories of illuminated manuscripts; from the late 15th century there were also printed versions illustrated by woodcuts. The most famous Book of Hours and one of the most beautiful of all illuminated manuscripts is the Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry (Musée Condé, Chantilly), illuminated by the Limburg Brothers for Jean de Berry.

### 7.2 Enamel

A smooth, glossy material made by fusing glass to a prepared surface, usually of metal. The term is also applied to any object made with, or decorated by, this material. The study of enamelling belongs mainly to the history of jewellery and the decorative arts, but in the Middle Ages enamel was sometimes used for major works, notably Nicolas of Verdun's Klosterneuburg Altar.

Today the word 'enamel' is loosely used of any glossy protective covering such as durable paint or varnish applied to the surface of objects made from metal, wood, etc.

### 7.3 Genre

Term in art history and criticism for paintings depicting scenes from daily life. It may be applied to appropriate art of any place or period, but most commonly suggests the type of domestic subject-matter favored by Dutch 17th-century artists. In a broader sense, the term is used to mean a particular branch or category of art; landscape and portraiture, for example, are genres of painting, and the essay and the short story are genres or literature.

### 7.4 Illuminated manuscripts

Books written by hand, decorated with paintings and ornaments of different kinds. The word 'illuminated' comes from a usage of the Latin word illuminare in connection with oratory or prose style, where it means 'adorn'. The decorations are of three main types:

- miniatures or small pictures, not always illustrative, incorporated into the text or occupying the whole page or part of the border;
- initial letters either containing scenes (historiated initials) or with elaborate decoration;
- borders, which may consist of miniatures, occasionally illustrative, or more often are composed of decorative motifs. They may enclose the whole of the text space or occupy only a small part of the margin of the page.

Manuscripts are for the most part written on skin, parchment, or vellum. From the 14th century, paper was used for less sumptuous copies. Although a number of books have miniatures and ornaments executed in outline drawing only, the majority are fully coloured. By the 15th cent. illumination tended more and more to follow the lead given by painters, and with the invention of printing the illuminated book gradually went out of fashion. During the 15th and 16th centuries, illuminations were added to printed books.

## 7.5 Limburg Brothers

Limburg (or Limbourg) Brothers, Netherlandish manuscript illuminators, Herman, Jean (Jannequin), and Paul (Pol), all three of whom died in 1416, presumably victims of the plague or other epidemic. Pol was probably the head of the workshop, but it is not possible to distinguish his hand from those of his brothers.

They were born in Nijmegen, nephews of Jean Malouel, and Herman and Jean are first documented in the late 1390s apprenticed to a goldsmith in Paris. In 1402 Jean and Pol were working for Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, and after Philip's death all three Limburgs worked for his brother Jean, Duc de Berry, remaining in his service until their deaths and holding privileged positions at his court, which moved with him around France from one magnificent residence to the next. He was, indeed, one of the most extravagant patrons and collectors in the history of art, and the Limburgs illuminated two manuscripts for his celebrated library: the *Belles Heures* (Met. Museum, New York, c. 1408) and the *Très Riches Heures* (Musée Condé, Chantilly), which was begun c. 1413 and left unfinished at their deaths; it was completed by the French illuminator Jean Colombe (c. 1440-93?) about seventy years later.

The *Très Riches Heures* is by common consent one of the supreme masterpieces of manuscript illumination and the archetype of the International Gothic style. Its most original and beautiful feature is the series of twelve full-page illustrations of the months--the first time a calendar was so lavishly treated--full of exquisite ornamentation and beautifully observed naturalistic detail. The miniatures are remarkable, too, for their mastery in rendering space, strongly suggesting that one or more of the brothers had visited Italy, and they occupy an important place in the development of the northern traditions of landscape and genre painting.

## 7.6 miniature

A very small painting, particularly a portrait that can be held in the hand or worn as a piece of jewellery. The word is applied to manuscript illuminations as well as portraits and derives from the Latin *minium*, the red lead used to emphasize initial letters, decorated by the miniator.

Since the 17th century, the term has been applied to all types of manuscript illustration on account of a mistaken etymology: the word was connected with 'minute' (small). What we today call a 'miniature' was called *historia* in the Middle Ages and the portraits painted by Hilliard and others were named 'limnings' or 'pictures in little' by the Elizabethans. They were painted on vellum or occasionally on ivory or card, and in the 17th and 18th centuries there was a vogue for miniatures done in an enamelling technique. The portrait miniature developed from a fusion of the traditions of medieval illumination and the Renaissance medal and flourished from the early 16th century to the mid 19th century, when photography virtually killed it as a serious art form.

## 7.7 Paper

A tissue of vegetable fibres used for writing, drawing and printing on. It is an oriental invention carried from the Far to the Middle East by the Turks during the Dark Ages. In Europe, it is first traceable in the 12th century, among the Moors in Spain, where it was made as well as imported. It was known in Southern Italy at much the same time. France, southern Germany, and Switzerland had well-developed industries in paper by the end of the 14th century. White paper was first made in England in 1495, but not on a large scale until the 18th century. Until 1800, European paper was made entirely of rags pulped in water, and drawing-paper of the best quality is still made by hand in the traditional way. Writing-papers, less expensive drawing-papers, and some book papers are machine-made of a mixture of cotton, hemp, esparto, and wood, with a good deal of china clay added to make them smooth and opaque, size to make them non-absorbent, and starch to make them stiff. Cheaper papers are machine-made wholly of wood. Oriental papers made of bamboo, rice straw, and mulberry bark are imported for artists' use.

## **7.8 Parchment**

Writing material made from the skin of sheep or calf, less frequently pig, goat, and other animals; it has also been used for painting, and occasionally for printing and bookbinding.

Pliny says that it was invented in the second century BC in Pergamum; hence the term 'parchment' from the Latin *pergamena*, 'of Pergamum'. Skin had been used as a writing material before this, but the refined methods of cleaning and stretching involved in making parchment enabled both sides of a leaf to be used, leading eventually to the supplanting of the manuscript roll by the bound book. Vellum is a fine kind of parchment made from the delicate skins of young (sometimes stillborn) animals.

Paper began to replace parchment from about the 14th century, but parchment is still used for certain kinds of documents, and the name is often applied to high-quality writing paper.

## **7.9 Woodcut**

The technique of making a print from a block of wood sawn along the grain (the term is also applied to the print so made). It is the oldest technique for making prints and its principles are very simple. The design is drawn on a smooth block of wood (almost any wood of medium softness can be used) and the parts that are to be white in the print are cut away with knives and gouges, leaving the design standing up in relief. This is then inked and pressed against a sheet of paper.

The origins of woodcut are obscure (the principle was employed in fabric printing in the Middle East at least as early as the 5th century AD), but woodcut as we know it appeared in Europe in the early 15th century; the earliest dated print is perhaps the *St Christopher* (1423) by an unknown artist in the John Rylands Library, Manchester. It was much used as an illustrative technique in the early days of printed books, but in the 16th century it lost ground to line engraving, which could produce much subtler effects.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, however, there was a major revival of interest in the woodcut as a medium of original artistic expression, artists such as Munch, Gauguin and the German Expressionists realizing the potential of the rugged boldness that is characteristic of the technique. The coloured woodcut, using different blocks for each colour, was particularly popular in Japan.