

MADE FOR AN URBAN ELITE COUPLE IN ROUEN, THE CENTER SECOND ONLY TO PARIS IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

Book of Hours (Use of Rouen)

In Latin and French, illuminated manuscript, on parchment

France, Rouen, c. 1480-1490 (dated 1490)

14 miniatures by Robert Boyvin, with borders probably by Jean Serpin

126 leaves, complete, written in black or brown ink in bastarda script, the calendar in blue, red, and gold ink, ruled in red ink, on single columns of 17 lines, 12 three- or four-line initials in blue with white tracery and scrolled vine infilling with red and/ or green leaves on burnished gold grounds, four three-line initials in red with white modeling filled with floral sprays on liquid gold grounds, numerous 2-line initials in deep red on blue or blue on red with liquid gold modeling and tracery, 1-line initials and line fillers in liquid gold on deep red or blue grounds, secondary initials touched with yellow, rubricated, 14 FULL-PAGE ILLUMINATIONS BY ROBERT BOYVIN, each with borders on three sides containing sprays of fruits and flowers interspersed with vining hairline stem bearing black dots and burnished gold leaves, and with foliate arabesques in blue, white, red, and/ or liquid gold, some also incorporating birds or grotesques, 4 borders (ff. 25, 52, 77, and 93) on full liquid gold grounds, ten borders on geometrically paneled liquid gold and natural grounds, all other folios with bracket borders in outer margins with similar motifs often growing out of gold flower pots, on natural grounds, PROBABLY BY JEAN SERPIN. Bound in modern full dark red morocco by James Brockman, edges gilt, original mend in lower margin of f. 61, extending into border, smudges to text and/ or borders on ff. 53v, 54, 65, 77, and 121, a few slight smudges or stains elsewhere, in a quarter red morocco clamshell case. In exceptionally fine condition. Dimensions 168 x 115 mm. (6 5/8 x 4 1/2 inches)

Fresh and clean, this richly illuminated Book of Hours literally sparkles with gold leaf and azurite. Colorful borders on every page complement the extensive cycle of full-page pictures, confirming that this no ordinary production. Rather it was a special order for the man (a judge?) and woman portrayed kneeling before the Virgin and Child. The style of the illuminations and the lively borders fit well within the formative work of the well-documented artist Robert Boyvin and his frequent collaborator Jean Serpin. Dated Books of Hours are rare and provide important indices of changing artistic styles

PROVENANCE

1. Surely written and painted in Rouen, based on the calendar with Rouen saints singled out (May 4, Translation of St. Ouen, in gold; July 26, St. Anne, in gold; 23 October, St. Romanus, patron saint of Rouenain), the liturgical use, the litanies (Romanus, patron saint of Rouen, Mellon, Audoen, Ausbert, etc.), and the artistic style. The original owners, who commissioned the manuscript and who appear on f. 121 with their arms and the date, have not yet been identified.
2. Private Collection of James and Elizabeth Ferrell, Kansas City, USA, their ex-libris on the recto of the front flyleaf.

TEXT

ff. 1-12v, Calendar, in French, with saints in red, blue, and gold leaf, with Rouen feasts, including Saint Romanus, patron of Rouen, in gold (October 23), and many others;

ff. 13-18, Gospel Sequences;

ff. 18-21, *Obsecro te* (for male use);

ff. 21-24v, *O intemerata*;

ff. 25-76v, Hours of the Virgin, use of Rouen, with the mixed Hours of the Cross and the Holy Spirit;

ff. 77-92v, Penitential Psalms and litany with Rouen saints;

ff. 93-120, Office of the Dead;

ff. 121-126v, Fifteen Joys of the Virgin and other prayers, in French.

ILLUSTRATION

f. 13, Four Evangelists;

f. 25, Annunciation;

f. 34v, Visitation;

f. 49, Crucifixion;

f. 50v, Pentecost;

f. 52, Nativity;

f. 57v, Annunciation to the Shepherds;

f. 61v, Adoration of the Magi;

f. 65, Presentation in the Temple;

f. 68v, Flight into Egypt;

f. 72, Coronation of the Virgin;

f. 77, David in Prayer;

f. 93, Funeral in a Churchyard;

f. 121, Virgin and Child, with a male and female in the margin, underneath an unidentified coat-of-arms in the lower border, including in the lower margin the date 1490.

This lovely manuscript was very probably created in the atelier of Robert Boyvin in Rouen at a

time when that city was producing some of the most sumptuous manuscripts in Europe. It is fine in every respect – from the aesthetic achievement of the scribes and artists involved, to its fine condition.

The illumination strongly suggests that the manuscript was the product of Robert Boyvin, documented in Rouen between 1480 and 1536. Boyvin was part of the circle around the Master of the Échevinage de Rouen (once known as the Master of the Geneva Latini), who is generally recognized as the most successful Norman illuminator of the period. Boyvin was active in Rouen for over half a century and over fifty manuscripts are attributed to him, spanning a long career. Among these is an illuminated copy of Seneca's Epistles made for cardinal Georges d'Amboise (d. 1510), for which he was documented in 1503 alongside Jean Serpin (now Paris, BnF, MS Lat. 8551). Like the Master of the Échevinage de Rouen, Boyvin's work in the last decades of the fifteenth century is characterized by detailed and richly colored miniatures occupied by figures with expressive eyes and carefully individualized skin tones (the women's faces are alabaster, and the men's tend toward stucco). The compositions here have distinct similarities to the workshop of the Master of the Échevinage de Rouen (see, for example, Christopher de Hamel's comparison of several key details of four of the master's Nativity scenes in his *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, cited below).

The fourteen miniatures constitute a complete cycle for a Book of Hours, and the presence of the donor confirms that the manuscript was executed as a made-to-order commission not an off-the-shelf item. Each of the miniatures is a considerable achievement, with vibrant paint deftly applied in scenes composed in such a way as to bring about the optimal emotional response. All have richly detailed architecture, costumes, and backgrounds, and in the faces, our artist particularly shines, producing a wide range of features and expressions that manifest character as well as emotions. The manuscript was commissioned by the couple who are pictured kneeling before the Virgin and Child in the miniature which precedes the French prayer to Our Lady of Mercy. Their (unidentified) arms are shown in the lower border, where the date "1490" appears in small, faded numbers written by an early hand, suggesting the manuscript was either completed or presented. The quality and richness of the illumination and the lavish use of gold suggests that this manuscript could only have been commissioned by persons of considerable means.

The artist's career is itself a snapshot of many artist's responses to the evolving tastes for illuminated manuscripts from the late fifteenth century into the first third of the sixteenth. Although his formative style seen here is close to the Master of the Échevinage de Rouen, and is often conflated (Avril/ Reynaud, *Manuscrits à peintures*, 1993, pp. 412-14), Boyvin's later work follows the rapid adoption of compositions influenced by prints. Among his notable illuminated codices is the Breviary of Charles de Neufchâtel, c. 1485-1490 (Besançon, Bibl. mun. MS 69), an illuminated *Antiquitates Judaicae*, c. 1503-1508 (Paris, Bibl. Mazarine, MS 1581), and numerous Books of Hours, including Paris, Bibl. de l'Arsenal MS 416 and Rouen, Bibl. mun. MS P-222.

Dated Books of Hours are rare and provide important indices of changing artistic styles in fifteenth-century illumination.

LITERATURE

Unpublished, see for comparisons:

Avril, Francois and Nicole Reynaud. *Les Manuscrits à Peintures en France 1440-1520*, Paris, Flammarion, 1993.

Rabel, Claudia. "Artiste et clientèle à la fin du Moyen Âge: les manuscrits profanes du Maître de l'échevinage de Rouen," *Revue de l'Art* 84 (1989), 48-60.

(http://www.persee.fr/showPage.do?urn=rvar_0035-1326_1989_num_84_1_347775)

Adam, Elliot. "Retour sur l'œuvre de Robert Boyvin, enlumineur à Rouen vers 1500," in *Peindre à Rouen au XVIe siècle*, dir. Frédéric Elsig, Milan, 2017, pp. 101-119.

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