

Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry

The **Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry** or simply the **Très Riches Heures** (*The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry*) is a richly decorated Book of Hours (containing prayers to be said by the lay faithful at each of the canonical hours of the day) commissioned by John, Duke of Berry, around 1410. It is probably the most important illuminated manuscript of the 15th century, "*le roi des manuscrits enluminés*" ("the king of illuminated manuscripts"). The *Très Riches Heures* consists of 416 pages, including 131 with large miniatures and many more with border decorations or historiated initials, that are among the high points of International Gothic painting in spite of their small size. There are 300 decorated capital letters. The book was worked on, over a period of nearly a century, in three main campaigns, led by the Limbourg brothers, Barthélemy van Eyck, and Jean Colombe. The book is now Ms. 65 in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. The Limbourg brothers used very fine brushes, and expensive paints to make the paintings.

Calendar

A generalized calendar (not specific to any year) of church feasts and saints' days, often illuminated, is a usual part of a book of hours, but the illustrations of the months in the *Très Riches Heures* are exceptional and innovative in their scope, and the best known element of the decoration of the manuscript. Most of them show one of the duke's castles in the background, and are filled with details of the delights and labors of the months, from the Duke's court to his peasants, a counterpart to the prayers of the hours. Each illustration is surmounted with its appropriate hemisphere showing a solar chariot, the signs and degrees of the zodiac, and numbering the days of the month and the martyrological letters for the ecclesiastic lunar calendar.



Page from the calendar of the *Très Riches Heures* showing Jean, Duc de Berry's household exchanging New Year gifts. The Duke is seated at the right, in blue.

Gallery



Les Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry, Folio 37v - The Baptism of Saint Augustine the Musée Condé, Chantilly.



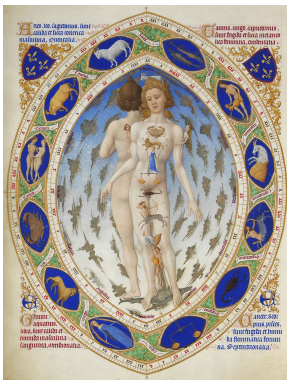
The Nativity



Pentecost



This shows purified souls in Purgatory showing souls trapped in water, fire, on rocky and grassy land where they are rescued by Angels. Beasts (probably Demons) surround a soul.



Anatomical Man

Artists

The main campaign of illumination was sometime between 1412 and 1416 by the Limbourg brothers. The text, border decorations, and gilding were most likely executed by assistants or specialists who remain mostly unknown. The Limbourg brothers left the book unfinished and unbound at their, and the Duke's, death in 1416. The work passed to the Duke's cousin, the royal art lover and amateur painter René d'Anjou, who had an unidentified artist, the so-called *Master of the Shadows*, who was probably Barthélemy van Eyck, work on the book in the 1440s. Forty years later Charles I, Duc de Savoie commissioned Jean Colombe to finish the paintings between 1485 and 1489.

The paintings of Colombe are easy to distinguish, as are those of the *Master of the Shadows* (Barthélemy d'Eyck). From the original campaign of illustration various hands have been identified, and Pognon gives the following breakdown of the main miniatures in the Calendar:^[1]

- January: the courtly painter
- February: the rustic painter
- March: the courtly painter (landscape) and the Master of the Shadows (figures)
- April: the courtly painter
- May: the courtly painter

- June: the rustic painter
- July: the rustic painter
- August: the courtly painter
- September: the rustic painter (landscape)? and the Master of the Shadows (figures)
- October: the Master of the Shadows
- November: Jean Colombe
- December: the Master of the Shadows

In addition Pognon identifies the "pious painter" who painted many of the religious scenes later in the book during the initial campaign. The "courtly", "rustic" and "pious" painters would probably equate to the three Limbourg brothers, or perhaps other artists in their workshop. There are alternative analyses and divisions proposed by other specialists.

Calendar Gallery

Fuller descriptions ^[2]



January: The Duke's household exchanges New Year gifts - the Duke at right in a blue robe.



February: A typical winter's day. Some peasants warm themselves by the fire, another peasant chops wood, and still another goes to market.



March: Sowing the field. In the background is the Château de Lusignan, a residence of Jean de Berry.



April: A young couple exchanging rings. In the background is the Château de Dourdan.



May: Young nobles riding in a procession. In the background is the Hôtel de Neslé, the Duke's Paris residence in Paris.



June: Harvest. In the background is the Palais de la Cité with the Sainte Chapelle clearly identifiable on the right.^[3]



July: The shearing of the sheep. In the background is the Château du Clain near Poitiers.



August: Falconry, with the Duc's Château d'Étampes in the background.



September: The harvest of the grapes. In the background is the Château de Saumur.



October: Tilling the field. In the background is the Louvre.



November: The autumn harvest of acorns, on which pigs are feeding.



December: A wild boar hunt. In the background is the Château de Vincennes.

Commentary on the Calendar scenes

- September: This miniature was almost certainly painted in two phases: first, the upper section with the sky and château was painted in the middle of the fifteenth century, around 1438-1442, in the time of René d'Anjou and Yolande d'Aragon; then the lower scene of grape-picking was completed by Jean Colombe from a sketch left by his predecessor. In general, artists started with the background, then painted in the characters before finishing with their faces.

In the foreground, it is grape-picking time. The woman in a white and red apron looks pregnant. Other young peasants are picking the purple bunches, while one of them is tasting the grapes. A further character holding a basket is walking towards a mule which is carrying two panniers. The grapes are being loaded either into the mules' panniers or into the vats on the cart pulled by two oxen.

In the background stands the Château de Saumur with its chimneys and weathervanes decorated with golden fleurs-de-lys. It was built by Louis II d'Anjou then given to his wife Yolande d'Aragon, the mother of King René and

mother-in-law of Charles VII, over whom she had a considerable sway. The presence of this château can be explained by the important role played by Yolande in the early years of the reign of Charles VII and by how much the king enjoyed staying there. On the left, behind the enceinte, stands a clock-tower, the chimneys of the kitchens and a gate leading to a drawbridge. A horse is coming out and a woman with a basket on her head is on her way in.

In front of the château, between the vines and the moat can be seen a tilting ground surrounded by palisades, where tournaments were held. The architectural design of the château draws the gaze up towards the dreamily poetic volutes. The towers conceal their protective nature beneath festive trappings, redolent of fabulous adventures in the forests of Arthurian legends and suggestive of the presence of God in His creation. As François Cali put it: "These extravagant towers are a dream landscape with constellations of canopies, pinnacles, gables and arrows, with their crockets fluttering against the light."

In the middle of the grape pickers, a character is showing his behind. This intentionally grotesque touch contrasts with the extraordinary elegance of the château. Jean Colombe's peasants lack the dignity they have in the other miniatures.

Further reading

- Michael Camille. "The Très Riches Heures: An Illuminated Manuscript in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Autumn 1990). 72-107.

References

- [1] Pognon, Edmond, *Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, pp12-13, Liber, Geneva, 1987.
- [2] <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/images/heures/heures.html>
- [3] University of Chicago (<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/images/heures/heures.html>)

External links

- Chateau Chantilly (<http://www.chateaudechantilly.com/>)
- WebMuseum online exhibit of the Calendar scenes (<http://webmuseum.poboxes.info/wm/rh/>)
- "Alexander: Labeur and Paresse" (http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/ARTH/arth214_folder/trh_alexander.html). Retrieved 2009-01-01.
- "Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry" (<http://www.christusrex.org/www2/berry/berry1.html>). Retrieved 2009-01-01.

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