Jean Pucelle—Facts and Fictions

This Bulletin is dedicated to one of the most outstanding Parisian illuminators of the early fourteenth century, whose name has been connected with two illuminated manuscripts kept at The Cloisters, the so-called Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux and the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg. We call him Jean Pucelle, although we do not know who he was, whether he worked as a chef d'atelier—the master of a workshop—or whether he was just an enlumineur we hear of by chance more often than we hear of his many colleagues working in Paris.

The artist's name, Jehan Pucelle (or Pucele), is recorded in Parisian documents between 1319 and 1334, the date of his death. It appears for the very first time in accounts for the years 1319-1324 of the Paris confraternity of St. Jacques-aux-Pèlerins; Pucelle was commissioned to design the institution's seal, which is known only through engravings of 1851, when the piece was discovered (it has since been lost again), and 1877. Both representations are too vague to give a precise idea of its style, and they provide no obvious links with the works discussed below. Pucelle is also mentioned in marginal notes in two manuscripts now in the Bibliothèque Nationale: first, with a Mahiet, an Anelet, and J. Chevrier, as the painters of the Belleville Breviary, dating from between 1323 and 1326. Nobody can say for sure which of the four artists made the miniature of St. Catherine (Figure 1), one of seventy-nine extant pictures. While it is wrong to call it a personal work by Pucelle, it is correct to label it "Pucelle style."

In 1327 Pucelle's name is mentioned with Anciau de Cens [Sens] and Jacquet Maci in the Bible written by Robert de Bilingly. The miniature reproduced here (Figure 2) is one of seventy-four historiated initials Pucelle is claimed to have painted. There is, however, no evidence for such an attribution. The style differs considerably from that of St. Catherine in the Belleville Breviary, although the two manuscripts are practically contemporary.

In addition, there is a third illuminated book belonging to the very same years: the "Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux" at The Cloisters, presumably made between 1325 and 1328. Looking at one of the miniatures from the St. Louis cycle in this manuscript (see Figure 10, page 264), we become aware of a third style, which differs substantially in quality from what we found in the contemporary Belleville Breviary and the Bilnyng Bible. It must be noted, however, that we are comparing illustrations from three different types and sizes of manuscripts. Which one, if any, is by Pucelle's hand?

The fundamental question is whether Pucelle's personal style can really be isolated. This may be feasible if we can link the Heures de Pucelle listed in 1410, 1413, and 1416 in the duke of Berry's inventories with the manuscript mentioned in the will of Jeanne d'Evreux. I, personally, am inclined to think that an identification of these two as the small volume now at The Cloisters seems to be a fiction. After Elizabeth Flinn's careful examination of the book, it is obvious that the so-called Heures de Pucelle is a Parisian manuscript of 1327-1328.

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ON THE COVER
The Three Living and the Three Dead (front) and The Arrest of Christ (back) from the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, discussed in the article that begins on page 267. Painted in the margins around each miniature in this beautiful manuscript are numerous birds and other animals, often extremely naturalistic. In the Arrest scene (reading clockwise from the top) a Rooster, Little Owl, rabbit, Goldfinch, Barn Swallow, falcon (probably a Kestrel), a bird of dubious identity, a butterfly, a Jay, and a Mallard drake can be seen. French, mid-1340s. Paint on parchment, each page 4⅞ x 3⅞ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 69.86, fol. 321v, 322r and fol. 246v

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The Visitation from the so-called Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux (The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.2, fol. 35r) and the Trinity from the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg (The Cloisters Collection, 69.86, fol. 170r). Traditionally these manuscripts have been connected with the same artist, Jean Pucelle, an attribution questioned in the pages of this Bulletin. A remarkable contrast can be observed between the monumental, shapely standing figures of the Visitation (dated about 1325-1328) and the sophisticated yet mannered seated figures of the Trinity (dated in the mid-1340s, the very last phase of the “Pucelle style” in Paris)
we hesitate to continue accepting the suggestion that the inventory entries were describing the Cloisters manuscript. Most art historians have, however, readily accepted that identification.

Indeed, because so few specific names are known to us, because most manuscripts of the period were painted by more than one man, and because there is so little documentary evidence available, it has been convenient to attach the label “Pucelle style” to many Parisian manuscripts datable to the second quarter of the fourteenth century. With each new discovery, however, we can hope

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The beautifully draped figure of this standing saint from the Belleville Breviary is characterized by the linear qualities of the outline drawing and the refinement of her face. The graphology is typical of tradition-minded Parisian book illumination.

2. Fall of Ahaziah. Initial from the Billyng Bible. 11⅝ x 7¾ inches overall. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, ms Lat. 11935, fol. 174r. Photograph: Foto Marburg

The figure of the falling king from the Billyng Bible is, in contrast to the saint in the Belleville Breviary, shaped with colors, rather than drawn. The rendering of the face is a painterly one: it is modeled with gradations of color. The perspective of the background architecture is due to the Italian influence discussed on page 256. It may be compared to the Throne of Charity in Bonne’s prayer book (Figure 12, page 275), where the spatial rendering is completely misunderstood.
3. The Crucifixion. Miniature from the so-called Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux. French, possibly 1325-1328. Ink on vellum, 3³/₈ x 2⁷/₈ inches overall. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.2, fol. 68v

The traditional date given to the "Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux," 1325-1328, makes it contemporary with the Belleville Breviary and the Billyng Bible. The "Pucelle style" here reaches its pinnacle: the miniaturist has telescoped the enormous vision of Duccio's version of the theme but neglected all confining frames.


There is, as a matter of fact, very little evidence, either historical or stylistic, for crediting "Jean Pucelle" with the many important royal commissions that have been attributed to him.

At present, "Pucelle" is no more than a label representing a whole group of
artists illuminating books in Paris; they were connected with the royal court, and they worked in a tradition that had, by around 1325, become comparatively impersonal and routine. “Paris, like Rome, was—and in a measure still is—a reservoir rather than a well: a place where many artists learn and live but few are born, which has the power to attract, to synthesize, and to refine but not to originate” (Erwin Panofsky).

With the appearance of Pucelle’s name, there was an exciting new departure in Parisian courtly book illumination, which, as a matter of fact, would not have been possible without the contribution of Italy—to be more specific, without the aid of Duccio. The “Pucelle style” shows solid trecento connections in its painterly skill and its familiarity with southern perspective as it existed in Sienese models.

The narrative miniatures of the so-called Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux bear witness to this very early and rather sudden impact of Italian art upon Parisian painting (see the illumination of the Annunciation, Figure 1, page 262). For the first time in the North, the figures are no longer arranged flatly on small stages but are placed in a coherent perspective setting. The painter concentrated on the effect of plastic forms. In Erwin Panofsky’s words, he modeled his actors “by light and shade alone, suppressing all linear contours except for such details as facial features, hands and hair.”

The Italian influence was, however, short-lived—it seems to diminish around 1335 (and Pucelle died in 1334)—leading us to conclude that it was due to the ascendancy of one artist and not to a general mood. Indeed, many of the Parisian enlumineurs—especially those outside the royal workshops—were not very deeply trecento-minded, and, as can be seen in numerous drolleries refined with all sorts of animals and flowers, they were inclined to accept recipes originating from the North rather than from the South of Europe.

In addition to the sudden, brief appearance of Italian influence in Paris, there is another intriguing detail. The name Jehan Pucelle sounds rather strange and unusual compared with those of his French colleagues, most of whose names were connected with a town of origin. It would be an entertaining idea, then, to make Pucelle arrive from outside France and to settle in Paris as a young Giovanni Pucelli from Italy. He could have introduced Italian elements and exposed his Duccio background (Figures 3, 4) to the other artists when he continued his training in the royal workshop, where he adopted the sophisticated French manièrè of telling his stories. The new layout of the pages—the carefully interwoven arrangement of text and illustrations—although northern looking, may also have sources in Italian manuscripts around 1300. Those and Duccio’s Maestà may be linked to impressions young Giovanni Pucelli gathered in Umbria and Tuscany before he took off for Paris.

This Italian theory could just as easily be explained by a Sienese model book brought to Paris and used in the royal workshops. Drawings after Duccio’s Maestà were reinterpreted by different artists, in the Belleville Breviary first, then in the “Evreux Hours,” and finally in the Bilyng Bible. These are solid facts; to attribute all the works to Pucelle is a solid fiction.

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