Looking at Bonne of Luxembourg’s Prayer Book

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This precious manuscript of unparalleled artistic quality contains fourteen miniatures, never before published all together. Prior to its acquisition by The Cloisters in 1969, the book belonged to a private collector. Because it was carefully hidden and known only through poor photographs, nobody had actually been able to study it. When it appeared for sale, the painter of the miniatures was thought to be Jean Pucelle. No other artist seemed to have been capable of this high standard, and the delightful, small book was bought as a late work by him. Research done since then has shown that Pucelle was probably not the enlumineur. Nevertheless, the manuscript is one of the most outstanding productions of the royal workshops during the first half of the fourteenth century.

The miniature sequence reaches its artistic highpoint in the double-page painting that shows the Three Living and the Three Dead (cover, Figure 14). Although there are other northern representations of the “moult merveilleuse et horrible exemplaire,” the one in Bonne’s prayer book is by far the most impressive and recalls the fresco in the Campo Santo by Francesco Traini (Figure 15), generally dated in the early 1340s.

The manuscript was obviously written and illustrated for Bonne, daughter of Jean of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia. Her arms appear thirteen times in its pages. She married Jean, Duke of Normandy, son and heir of King Philip VI. Parenthetically, we might add that Bonne was the mother of Charles V and those famous patrons of art the dukes of Anjou, Burgundy, and Berry.

Since Pucelle died in 1334, it is possible that he illustrated the book at the very end of his life, after Bonne’s marriage in 1332. However, the more advanced narrative—that is, the more detailed and more carefully assembled presentation of the protagonists (as clearly seen in the bas-de-page illustrations of the calendar, Figures 1, 2)—as well as the meticulously articulated and brittle draperies, points to a later date, possibly in the 1340s. This mannered phase, derived from the earlier “Pucelle style” (see Frontispiece; Figures 1 and 2, page 254; Figure 10, page 264), and the obvious reference to the Traini fresco, make the manuscript appear to be a work of a follower of Pucelle, perhaps the Master of the Breviary of Charles V. This enlumineur is, according
to a suggestion by François Avril, responsible for the illustration heading Psalm 52 (Figure 6) and for the Three Living and the Three Dead (cover, Figure 14). Although this later date has justifications, Millard Meiss has claimed both miniatures to be works by Pucelle. On the other hand, he calls the Arrest scene (back cover, Figure 10) “Pucelle Workshop.” This difference of opinion exemplifies how difficult stylistic definitions are, how little we really know, and how much this field holds in store for future research.

This manuscript contains all the necessary elements for a lady’s book of private devotion. Books like this were used throughout the calendar year, and they usually opened with a month-by-month account of the dates of important feasts and the days on which particular saints are venerated.

Looking at the calendar, one is immediately attracted by the bas-de-page illustrations; the imagination with which they are treated is a true artistic contribution of the painter. While the miniatures depicting the month’s occupation on the left and the zodiac sign on the right are rooted in a long tradition, the illuminator of our book expands the conventional iconographic material in a quite personal and unusual way. He reveals himself as a gifted raconteur who cannot resist developing the scenes

1. The month of February, Calendar pages from the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg. French, mid-1340s. Paint on parchment, each page 4¾ x 3½ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 69.86, fol. 2v, 3r
into lively anecdotes. The *bas-de-page* for the first February page is usually interpreted as a rustic interior. In earlier times, February was symbolized only by a seated man warming his feet in front of a fireplace. The painter of the “Evreux Hours” (Figure 2) follows the older iconography, but he adds a complicated architectural structure that overpowers the season’s symbol, the poor man in need of warmth. The miniaturist in Bonne’s calendar forgets this Italianate staging and supplements the traditional figure with many new details inspired by daily experience. The console on the left shows a still life that provides the domestic atmosphere. This motif appears in the earlier “Evreux” calendar, and it may be one of the constantly reused patterns from a single workshop. Bonne’s miniaturist is also anxious to keep the burnt-down fire alive and the kettle hot. This function is served by a man busy with the bellows; another is bringing in the wood necessary to survive the long winter night. A cat, too, finds comfort beside the hearth, and is amused by its crackles and sparks.

On the second page for February an outdoor scene is pictured. The traditional fishes – Pisces of the zodiac, as given in the “Evreux Hours” – are transformed from their usual heraldic isolation on the page into a natural environment. A man tries to catch them. Both the indoor and outdoor scenes, while on separate pages, may perhaps be read as one: the gentlemen on the left may eventually be supplied with their sustenance by the man on the right!

2. The month of February. Calendar pages, several of which have been damaged during the manuscript’s long history, from the so-called Hours of Jeanne d’Evreux. French, possibly 1325-1328. Ink on vellum, each page 3½ x 2½ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.2, fol. 2v, 3r
The Psalter, in Latin, occupies the largest part of the manuscript (fol. 15r-217v). For illustrations, it contains only seven illuminations, four of which show scenes from David’s life. All of them have well-known sources and antecedents. The sections following the Psalter and preceding the Passion — canticles of the Old and New Testaments, the Te Deum, the creed, litany, and prayers to the Virgin — belong to the standard elements of such a book of private devotion; they are not illustrated in ours.

3. Following a common practice, our artist introduces the Psalter with a reference to the psalms’ author, David. Two moments of his life are depicted: his victorious confrontation with Goliath during his youth as a shepherd, and his kingship, when, as an inspired poet and musician, he supposedly wrote down the psalms. Note the arms of Jean and Bonne, carried separately by two lions. Fol. 15r
4. Psalm 27 ("Dominus illuminatio mea," "The Lord is my light and my salvation") is illustrated with a portrayal of David being anointed by Samuel. Thanks to the unction, God raises kings above other men and exacts from them the highest virtues. Note the united arms of Jean and Bonne. Fol. 45r

5. David, kneeling and pointing to his mouth, is inspired by the text of Psalm 38: "I said, I will take heed to my ways that I sin not with my tongue: I will keep my mouth with a bridle, while the wicked is before me." Fol. 65r
6. “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God,” is the beginning of Psalm 52 (Psalm 53 in the King James version). As we might expect from the text, in the related miniature we meet two fools. One is holding a rod and drinks from a goblet; the other tugs at the first fool’s cowl and strikes at him with a broom. Fol. 83v

7. David in the deep water illustrates Psalm 69: “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.” Fol. 102v
8. “O sing unto the Lord a new song: sing unto the Lord all the earth.” Psalm 97 could not be better represented pictorially than with singers. In most similar illustrations, as here, these are clerics in front of a lectern. Fol. 146v

9. The familiar image of the Trinity occurs here as an illustration for Psalm 110, interpreting the beginning of the text and relating it to God the Father and Christ: “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool.” Fol. 170r
The Passion narrative and related prayers and texts bring us nearer to the personality of the owner, Bonne. The major change is that the text switches from Latin to vernacular French, the queen's daily language. The Passion text (fol. 246v-294v) opens explicitly with the remark *mise du latin en français*. Unlike the embellished text in the previous sections, these prayers in the vernacular are completely without decorative initials and ornamental line endings.

10. The opening dramatic *mise-en-scène* of Christ's Arrest (see also the back cover) is worth comparison with the analogous scene in the "Evreux Hours" (Figure 11), in which the impact is enlarged by the omission of the framing border. Although the painter of the Luxembourg manuscript carefully concentrates within the practically square format, he uses the upper frame as a supplementary stage. In addition to the meaning discussed by Charles Vaurie on page 281, the owl on the right symbolizes both night and entrapment. During the Middle Ages, the nocturnal owl was thought to trick other birds, causing them to fall into the snares set by hunters. The cock alludes to Peter's betrayal early next morning, and the phantom-like figure on the left, a kind of stagehand, impaled on the vertical border element, seems to provide light for the main scene. Fol. 246v

11. The Arrest of Christ. The first scene in the cycle of illustrations of the Passion of Christ from the so-called Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.2, fol. 15v
12. The Throne of Charity. The ballad-like interlude (fol. 315r-320v) between the Arrest and the Three Living and the Three Dead tells about the seven steps leading to perfect love of God (parfaite amour de Dieu). Each of these steps is carefully described in the text. Fol. 315r

13. The prayers related to the Passion include a miniature showing a kneeling abbot-saint, possibly St. Bernard, in front of an altar. Fol. 295r
The human parallel of “dying in Christ” is strongly evoked in the text and the accompanying double-page illustration of the Three Living and the Three Dead (see also cover).

This story enjoyed widespread popularity all over Europe from the middle of the thirteenth century. To most people the subject is familiar from Traini’s fresco in the Campo Santo in Pisa, dated in the early 1340s (Figure 15). The form in which the legend was known was inspired by thirteenth-century French poems, especially one written by Baudouin de Condé, minstrel at the court of Margaret II, Countess of Flanders (reigned 1244-1280).

The poem – “une moult merveilleuse et horrible exemplaire” – describes an encounter between three young men and three dead, whom they see coming toward them. The youths speak to the grim visitors, which in the miniature are in different stages of decomposition, and the first dead man replies in words that are the keynote of the whole morality: “What you are, we were, and what we are, you will be.” The second recalls that death treats rich and poor alike, while the third emphasizes that there is no escape from his dread summons.

In the poem the three living are not described as kings: in Bonne’s book the first wears a crown and his richly dressed companions are obviously nobles, nor does Baudouin make any mention of hunting, suggested by the third youth holding a falcon on his wrist. This may be interpreted as a warning against excessive indulgence in the pleasures of the chase, as a secondary lesson of the morality. Fol. 321v, 322r
15. Detail (left half) of the Triumph of Death, by Francesco Traini (active from 1321, died after 1363), Italian (Pisa). Early 1340s. Fresco. Campo Santo, Pisa. Photograph: Alinari – Art Reference Bureau

16, 17. The picture cycle related to the Passion is drawn to a close – as is the book itself – by two miniatures, with accompanying text, that venerate Christ’s wound. The illumination of Christ on the cross pointing to his wound is, as far as we can see, unique. Christ’s wound, flanked by the arma Christi (weapons of Christ), is given in “natural size,” since, according to a medieval tradition, one knew how big the wound was (it is 2\(\frac{3}{16}\) inches high in this depiction). Fol. 329r, 331r
Note
I am indebted to Françoise Baron of the Louvre for telling me of her discovery concerning Pucelle’s death. She will publish the relevant document in an article entitled “Les Artistes parisiens du moyen âge, sculpteurs, peintres et enlumineurs, d’après les comptes de l’Hôpital Saint-Jacques” in Bulletin archéologique du Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques, n. s. no. 5 (1970), which will appear in 1971.

The realism of the Bonne painters is not limited to the sensitive and intelligent observations of birds found in the margins (and discussed in the following article by Charles Vaurie). In fact, one is intrigued by the sporadic appearance of an unusually distinctive and extraordinarily powerful image of a man, whose features are no less carefully rendered than those of the birds. We meet him first on the opening page of the calendar as the two-headed figure Janus: he looks back on the old year and ahead to the new. His long nose, full beard, balding head, and thick neck easily distinguish him from the less picturesque faces within the book. When we find him again as a fool and as a bishop – slightly disguised – he is like the portrait of an old acquaintance, a versatile actor who assumes new roles in the changing scenes of the manuscript.