Birds in the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg

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The miniatures of the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg incorporate many birds among the leaves and tendrils of their margins, and occasionally another small animal, such as a rabbit or a butterfly.

The birds are surprisingly numerous—there are almost two hundred, all very small, usually three-eighths of an inch or less in size. Despite their tiny dimensions, well over half these birds are painted with remarkable fidelity to color, pattern, and attitude, and are easily identifiable. Other birds can be identified only as sparrows, larks, finches, and so on, but not as individual species. A few are too fanciful, or too poorly executed, to permit any identification. My estimate is that about forty species are shown, excluding the more dubious identifications or fanciful figures.

This high level of realism accords with that of other illustrations in the manuscript and represents an advanced stage in the evolution of the art of the Middle Ages, which became increasingly realistic during the thirteenth century. Speaking of birds alone, their first truly realistic representations can probably be credited to Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), who wrote a famous treatise on falconry, De Arte Venandi cum Avibus, which he probably completed between 1244 and 1250, or about one hundred years before our book. Frederick was much ahead of his times in many respects; the parts of his work devoted to the biology and behavior of birds in general incorporate his own critical observations and experiments, both startlingly modern. He himself may have been responsible for some of the illustrations, or he may have guided the illustrators, as he is known to have been a very competent draughtsman. It is said that in copies of his treatise made after his death, the birds are depicted with increasing variety and accuracy. One copy made in France around 1300, and now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (ms Fr. 12400), may have had some influence on the painters of the Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg.

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I believe, however, that at least one of this manuscript’s illustrators had no need to copy anyone, because the treatment of many birds and their fidelity suggests they were painted by one hand, a man who knew birds well in life and observed them with sympathy. This man was probably responsible for the bulk of the figures, but the variation in skill and accuracy implies that he had assistants, less expert and less familiar with birds than he.

Those birds whose species or kind can be identified are, as expected, ordinary birds of the French countryside and gardens, with the exception of one exotic bird mentioned below. It is clear that the birds were selected for their appropriateness to a book of devotion such as this, since the emphasis is on species with symbolic significance or propitious attributes. Variety was increased, however, by the inclusion of birds chosen for their decorative value only, such as the handsome but thieving Magpie (Figure 2); the fanciful creatures also seem to fall in this last category.

The only birds that appear to have been excluded deliberately are “evil” birds, such as the Raven, birds of prey, and birds that are completely black. It is interesting to note, nevertheless, that the artist pictured a Rook (Figure 3) and a small falcon (see back cover) on one occasion each. The Rook is wholly black, of course, but the artist probably could not resist including it, because the Rook is a very sociable, “friendly” bird, closely associated with farms and country homes—a household bird, so to speak. The individual shown is perched on what appears to be the top of a gable, and the problem of its funereal color was amusingly solved by painting it light brown, rather than black. The small falcon, which is probably a Kestrel, is not normally considered fierce by man, but a beneficial auxiliary, as it feeds almost entirely on mice or other small rodents and on large, injurious insects.

Religious symbolism is most evident in the choice of the Goldfinch (Carduelis carduelis), which has the place of honor throughout: of all the birds included, it appears most frequently, is displayed most prominently, and is drawn in greatest detail (Figure 1). Not only does the Goldfinch have a very bright and varied plumage (see back cover), which appeals to any artist, but it also leads all other birds in symbolic meaning (especially in France of the Middle Ages). It played a part in the themes of Resurrection, Redemption, and fertility, warded off the plague, and so on, but its most important devotional and iconographic significance is its close association with the childhood and death of Christ. In the paintings and, especially, the statues of the Madonna and Child that originated in France about the middle of the thirteenth century, the Child often holds a Goldfinch in his hands.
In rural France, where I grew up, we were told as young boys not to molest it because it is sacred—shown by the bright red (bloody) face it acquired when it was wounded while trying to pull out the thorns from the crown of the dying Christ on the cross. Different versions of this tradition exist, but they are always associated with the Passion and Crucifixion. Occasionally, the European Robin with its red breast is substituted for the Goldfinch; this Robin also appears in our book, but much less often than the Goldfinch. The latter (and many of the other small birds in the illuminations as well) also represents the concept of the winged soul, as opposed to the body.

The bird that holds second rank after the Goldfinch is the Chaffinch (Fringilla coelebs), called Pinson in French (Figure 4). To the best of my knowledge, no religious symbolism is attached to the Chaffinch, but its repeated appearance in such a beautiful, personal book as this is easy to understand because the Chaffinch has always been the symbol of happiness in France. To this day, the old saying “heureux comme un Pinson” is as current as ever, and it is well earned because of the loud and very cheerful song, heard almost throughout the year. The Chaffinch is also one of the most handsome of all French birds, and, without a doubt, the most abundant and popular.

Space limitations prevent my discussing all the birds. Some others that should be named are the Mallard drake, Little Owl, Barn Swallow, Jay (these are all shown on the back cover), the large Gray Heron, elegant Lapwing, Turtle Dove, Kingfisher, Hoopoe, Starling, three species each of wagtails and titmice, the Nightingale, and familiar finches, such as the Linnet and Bullfinch; also one bird that is not French but from India, a parakeet.

The inclusion of the Little Owl (Athene noctua) may seem strange at first, because owls are birds of ill omen in French folklore, but its symbolic significance was and is far too great to omit it. It is figured no less than seven times (back cover, Figure 1). Because it is a survival from classical Greece, its prominence in a Christian prayer book is curious. It signifies wisdom, of course, and it was the bird of Pallas Athene, the goddess of wisdom, who is normally represented with this owl perched on her shoulder. It was struck on the drachmas of Athens, which had an enormous currency, and coins with their Little Owl long survived Athens—in one country or another, very widespread, for a continuous period of at least two thousand years. No other bird has been portrayed for iconographic reasons as often as the Little Owl, at least on coins.

The faithfully drawn Roseringed Parakeet (Psittacula krameri), which appears four times, is the only exotic bird included (Figure 5). The presence of this bird in the France of the 1340s can be explained by its probable existence in contemporary aviaries. Aviaries date back to very early times in Europe: the Romans maintained them for small and brightly colored birds, some no doubt obtained from the East, with which they traded extensively, directly or indirectly. This parakeet is very common in India and in aviaries; it is hardy and easy to maintain. Because it is represented in our book in its characteristic attitudes, the model was probably a pet rather than a bird in an aviary, and it seems to have been included for decoration only.
**January**
Feasting. Double-headed figure (Janus) facing the past and the forthcoming year

**February**
Man warming his feet before a fire

**March**
Pruning

**April**
Branch bearers

**May**
Falconer

**June**
Cutting grass
Bonne of Luxembourg’s Prayer Book

July
- Reaping
- Leo

August
- Threshing
- Virgo

September
- Wine pressing
- Libra

October
- Sowing seed
- Scorpio

November
- Gathering acorns
- Sagittarius

December
- Slaughtering
- Capricorn