

Still Life of an Illuminated Manuscript

Oil on panel
70.5 x 65.5 cm.

Provenance:

France, private collection since the nineteenth century

Literature:

Unpublished

Other versions:

Oil on panel, 66.7 x 66.7 cm., Poughkeepsie (NY), Vassar College, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

Oil on panel, 70.2 x 65 cm., Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

Against a completely black background a monumental, illuminated book opens up, its leaves fanning open. It leaves no shadow, there is no desk, no lectern; just this large, impressive book, a timeless entity of itself, as if it had always been there and will be there for eternity. Its loose leather straps remind us that the book can be closed off, emphasising its precious content. As the pages are flicking open, we are granted a peep inside. We see beautiful calligraphy in black and red ink, handwritten in fictive Latin, with ornamented capitals and graceful descenders. Looking further, we recognise a music score. The last opened page shows us a fine illumination. Although partly obscured, a skull and a foot emerging from a red cloak readily identify the illumination as the Crucifixion of Christ with John the Evangelist standing beside the cross (fig. 1). The margin around it is decorated with gold leaf upon which exquisite strewn flowers

and insects cast their shadows, some of which refer to the crucifixion, such as the columbine, which symbolises the Holy Spirit and the Passion, whereas the daisy was associated with the Virgin Mary, and the butterfly is an emblem for redemption and the human soul.¹ The book is thus a liturgical manuscript, most probably a missal, and from the specific style of the illuminations and margin decorations it becomes clear that it was produced in Ghent or Bruges around 1500-1520.² Containing prayers, texts and hymns required for the celebration of Mass throughout the year, the missal was essential to Roman Catholic liturgical practice.

The singular depiction of open liturgical books boasts a long pictorial tradition in Flemish art, with its roots in the early fifteenth century. Whereas previously books had been the steady attributes of scholars and



saints – exuding wisdom and authority – we come across an open prayer book as the central motif in the middle panel of the famous Merode Altar Piece of around 1427, now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York (fig. 2). Attributed to the Doornik workshop of Robert Campin (c. 1375–1444), the altarpiece, celebrated for its detailed observation and rich imagery, depicts the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, who is seated at an oval table, reading the open book in her hands. Placed exactly in between the Archangel Gabriel and Mary another book, its pages fanning open, is prominently displayed on the table, representing the word of God and the promise of redemption, embodied by the Annunciation of Christ



Fig. 1 Detail of cat. no. 16, crucifixion

(fig. 3). Further steps in emancipating books from larger compositions soon followed. In around 1445, Barthélemy d'Eyck (c. 1420–1470), also from the Southern Netherlands, depicted two separate book still lifes in the lunettes of the left and right wing panels to his *Aix Annunciation*, above the portraits of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (fig. 4). And in around 1470–1480, an artist from the immediate circle of Rogier van der Weyden (c. 1400–1464) – himself a pupil of Robert Campin – painted a remarkable *Still Life with Books, Water Jug and Basin* on the reverse of a panel depicting the Virgin and Child in a landscape (fig. 5).³



Fig. 3 Detail of fig. 2, book with flipping pages on the table



Fig. 2 Workshop of Robert Campin, *Merode Altar Piece*, c. 1427, oil on panel, 64.5 x 117.8 cm., New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 4 Barthélemy d'Eyck, *Still Life with Open Book*, c. 1445, oil on panel, 30 x 56 cm., Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum (originally part of the left wing panel, now in the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam)

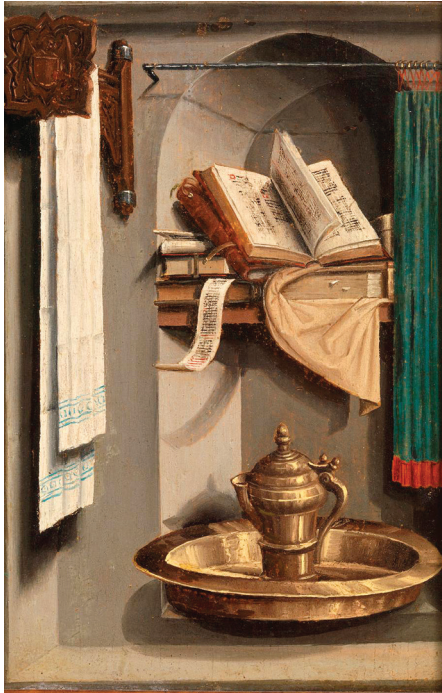


Fig. 5 Circle of Rogier van der Weyden, *Still Life with Books, water Jug and Basin*, c. 1470/80, oil on panel, 21 x 14 cm., Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen

In Renaissance Italy a similar emancipation of still life elements, with a prominent place for books, is seen in the art of *intarsia*, or wood inlaying. Possibly the most magnificent example of *intarsia* is the famous *Studiolo* from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio, ordered by *condottiere* and humanist Federico de Montefeltro in 1478 and displayed in its entirety in the Metropolitan Museum.⁴ In the context of a pre-eminently intellectual, learned surrounding, the *intarsia* of the *studiolo* creates the illusion of a library packed with books and instruments. It features numerous outstanding book still lifes, with some books seemingly piled up in feigned cabinets, others singled out on a lectern (figs. 6, 7). Most of all, the *intarsia* of the Gubbio *studiolo* shares with the Lilian work its *trompe l'oeil* effect, the optical illusion created to deceive and entertain the viewer. This specific quality, which evolves around the artist's special abilities to fool the eye, has been central to the art of painting since antiquity. Doubtlessly the most famous anecdote in this respect is Pliny's (AD 23/24-79) account of the painting contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius. When Zeuxis unveiled his work – a painted bunch of grapes – the fruit looked so lifelike that birds flocked to it. Overconfident following his success, Zeuxis then asked Parrhasius to push aside the curtain in front of his (i.e. Parrhasius') painting. However, this curtain turned out to have been painted. Zeuxis admitted that he had been

outdone, because he had only deceived the birds, but Parrhasius had deceived him, a human being and a painter to boot.

The Lilian painting is a synthesis of these developments and concepts: it reflects both the intellectual, scholarly and religious revaluation of knowledge so essential to the Renaissance, and simultaneously fits in with the artistic developments of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century when the meticulous rendering of reality led to the rebirth of *trompe-l'oeil*, and the singling out of motifs that had previously been part of larger compositions and themes led to the birth of new genres. In painting, the Flemish masters of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were the first to adopt the still life as a subject for their works, thus paving the way for the popularity and spread of a genre that was to reach new heights in the seventeenth century.

Judging the style of the flower strewn border and the fanciful descenders on some of the letters, the manuscript depicted in the Lilian work can, as mentioned above, be identified as a product of the Ghent-Bruges school, a movement in manuscript illumination that developed in the Southern Netherlands during the later fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century led by a group of manuscript illuminators and scribes who were principally active in the Flemish cities of Ghent and Bruges. Among the best known of these illuminators are masters such as Lieven van Lathem (1430-1493), Gerard Horenbout (c. 1465-1540/41) Alexander Bening (d. 1518/19), his son Simon Bening (1483/84-1561) and the latter's



Fig. 6, 7 Giuliano and Benedetto da Maiano, Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio*, c. 1478, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 8 Simon Bening, *Crucifixion*, c. 1520, illumination, in: Manuscript MS M.307, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library

daughter Levina Teerlinc (c. 1515-1576). In fact, the illuminations seen in our manuscript show clear parallels to the work of Simon Bening. A manuscript illuminated by him, containing a similar crucifixion with comparable floral motifs and insects in its margin, is kept at the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York (fig. 8).

The previously unrecorded Lilian work now joins two other versions of the same composition and similar size that were already known, one in the Uffizi in Florence, the other in the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie (NY) (fig. 9).⁵ In the past, these two versions have sometimes been attributed to either the German painter Ludger tom Ring the Elder (1496-1547), or his son, Ludger tom Ring the Younger (1522-1584), due to a small detail in the fictive text supposedly reading 'Ludevi Rinki'. The attributions to both Ring generations have, however, rightly met with scholarly scepticism.⁶ To the rejection on formal and stylistic grounds one might add that neither father nor son Ring ever signed in this way; moreover, the Latin translation of 'Ring' is 'circulum', not 'Rinki'. Rather, the anonymous painter of these works should – in line with the book's Flemish origin – be sought in the Southern Netherlands, around the mid sixteenth century.

In addition to the painting's aesthetic qualities, the present work contains a deeper spiritual, religious dimension. In order to clarify this, it is useful to take a closer look at the skull lying underneath the cross, a common motif in crucifixion scenes. We might understand the skull to be an allusion to the fact that Christ was killed on Golgotha, which

means the Place of the Skull, or regard it as a *vanitas* allusion to the phrase 'Memento mori', 'remember that you have to die', and Christ's subsequent resurrection. Surely these associations are valid and correct, yet the skull that we see is – quite literally – that of Adam, the first man. Ancient Jewish traditions assume that Adam was buried just outside of where the city Jerusalem was to be founded, and that Calvary (Golgotha) is near that place. St. Jerome, in 386 A.D., wrote in a letter that Adam was buried near Christ. Legend holds that the skull of Adam was lifted up in the earthquake that erupted after the crucifixion. Tellingly, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem has a chapel for Adam exactly one floor below the altar of the crucifixion.

Whereas Adam committed the original sin, which affected mankind ever since, Christ – as a second Adam in the typological sense – redeems his forefather. His blood washes us all clean from Original Sin and we

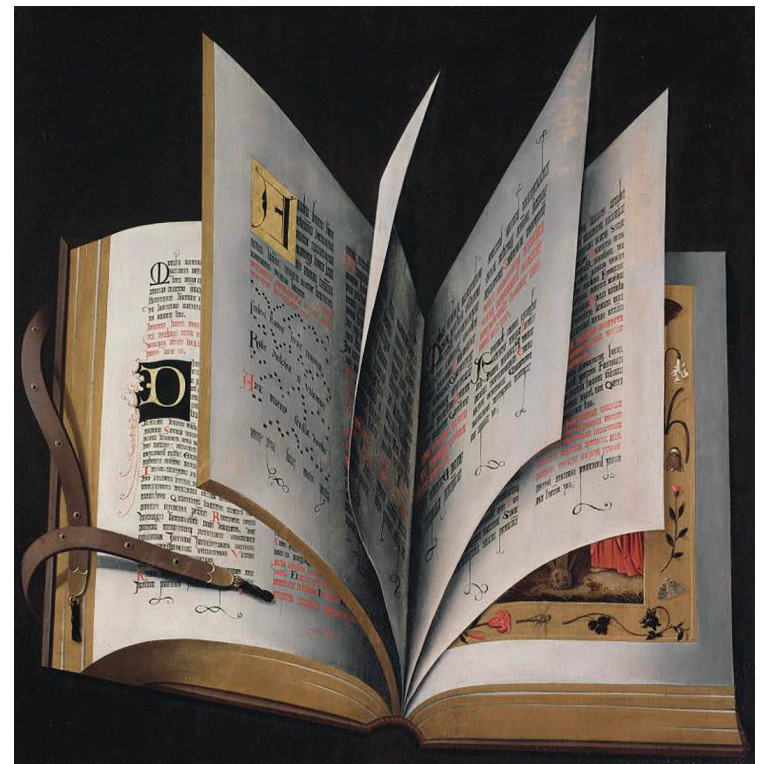


Fig. 9 Southern Netherlandish, c. 1550, *Still Life of an Illuminated Manuscript*, oil on panel, 66.7 x 66.7 cm., Poughkeepsie (NY), Vassar College, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

are free to be with God in Paradise once more. The skull at Christ's feet is thus an extra reminder that we are redeemed and that our sins are washed clean, through Jesus' sacrifice. The key to understanding the present painting is the movement we sense in the work. While the painting appears to be an early version of a 'snap-shot' it is really quite fluid. Not only does the composition make one's eyes dart about, taking in each element of the colourful missal, but it is rendered as if someone has just tapped the front cover of the book, causing some of the pages to gracefully fan out from right to left. It is significant that the pages we can see on the left are covered with illuminated handwriting while the page on the farthest right is the aforementioned crucifixion scene. The idea that Christ had been prophesied in text and then manifested in flesh is thus symbolically rendered by the movement of pages in this seemingly straightforward painting of a liturgical text, as words become flesh. Thus, while the present work is an immensely beautiful painting, it is also a meaningful historical, cultural, and personal artefact, a true treasure.

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Notes

- 1 See J.O. Hand, in: Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Deceptions and illusions : five centuries of trompe l'oeil painting*, exh. cat. Washington, National Gallery of art 2002-2003, pp. 184-185, cat. no. 33.
- 2 I thank Till-Holger Borchert Director, Musea Brugge in Brugge (Bruges), Belgium, and Professor Sandra Hindman, president and founder of Les Enlumineurs, for confirming the book's origin from the Ghent-Bruges School, c. 1510.
- 3 See J. Giltaij, in: F. Lammertse et al., *Van Eyck to Bruegel 1400-1550 : Dutch and Flemish painting in the collection of the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen*, Rotterdam 1994, pp. 48-51, cat. no. 6.
- 4 See O. Raggio, *The Gubbio studiolo and its conservation*, 2 vols., New York 1999.
- 5 A composition showing an (unilluminated) book against a black background is found in another group of paintings, often said to be produced in Southern Germany during the first half of the sixteenth century. See A. Schneckenburger-Brosheck, *Altdeutsche Malerei : die Tafelbilder und Altäre des 14. bis 16. Jahrhunderts in der Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister und im Hessischen Landesmuseum Kassel*, Kassel 1997, pp. 269-284.
- 6 See A. Lorenz, *Die Maler tom Ring*, 2 vols., exh. cat. Münster, Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte 1996, 1, cat. no. 89 (Poughkeepsie version), 'Beide Zuschreibungen sind unwahrscheinlich'. See also S. Segal, 'Blumen, Tiere und Stilleben von Ludger tom Ring d.J.', in: Münster 1996, 2, pp. 109-149, pp. 144, 149, note 192.