

# Bruges Book of Hours

Holkham Ms. 48, 15th century

Notes written by Dr. W.O. Hassall

Publication no. C00503

MICROFORM ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS

Main Street

East Ardsley

Wakefield WF3 2AP

United Kingdom

[MAP@microform.co.uk](mailto:MAP@microform.co.uk)

[microform.co.uk/academic](http://microform.co.uk/academic)

## BRUGES BOOK OF HOURS

Holkham MS. 48

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Notes by W. O. Hassall, M.A., D.Phil., F.S.A.

### INTRODUCTION

This attractive little prayer book is an example of one of the styles used by Willem Vrelant. It was identified as such by M. Jean Delaisse of the Bibliotheque Royale, Brussels.

Vrelant was a friend of Memling and was active as a miniature painter at Bruges about 1454. He died there in 1481 or 1482 after producing many small devotional books, though his output was not limited to these. There are examples of his work in the Hague, Copenhagen, the British Museum, Madrid, Munich, Naples and Vienna. He was a competent landscape painter and preferred the use of monochrome. Dated examples of his work are known from 1455 (Miroir Historial, Paris, Bibl. nat. ms. fr. 308), 1461, 1462 and 1467.

F. Winkler (D.flam. Buchmalerei d. 15 u. 16 Jh., 1925) has commented on his habit of using deep blue decorative tendrils with white spots in the centres of the stalks.

There is a detailed note on the considerable bibliography of Vrelant in Allgemeines Lexikon der Bildenden Künstler von der antike bis zur gegenwart begründet von Ulrich Thieme und Felix Becker unter Mitwirkung von etwa 400 fachgelehrten bearbeitet und registriert von H. Vollmer, B.C. Krelin, H. Wolff, O. Kellner herausgegeben von Hans Vollmer, vol. 34, Leipzig 1940, p. 570.

## BRUGES BOOK OF HOURS

This fifteenth century Book of Hours is wrongly described by Sir F. Madden in his catalogue of Holkham Manuscripts as a Breviary, as written in France, and as executed early in the century.

There are no miniatures, only blue and gold illuminated initials in the twelve pages of Calendar with which the volume begins. The saints include St. Bavon, associated with Ghent, and 'Saint Thumas de Cantartic'.

Frame 1 fol. 6v. The head and shoulders of Christ. His right hand is raised in blessing and His left hand rests on a blue globe surmounted by a golden cross. Three margins are decorated with a calligraphic floral scroll in black and gold with a touch of red and blue. Such portraits of Christ have sometimes been called 'Veronicas' after St. Veronica. The Golden Legend tells how St. Veronica is traditionally identified with the woman healed of the issue of blood and a handkerchief on which Christ imprinted a portrait of His face. With this she healed the Emperor Tiberius. The accompanying text reads G

'Salutacion a la face de nostre segnur.

*Salve sancta facies nostri redemptoris  
In qua nitet species diuini splendoris  
Impressa panniculo nyuei candoris  
Dataque Veronice signum ob amoris.*

Salve decus seculi speculum sanctorum  
Quod videre cupiunt spiritus celorum,  
Nos ab omnimacula purga viciorum  
Atque nos consortio iunge beatorum.

Salve nostra gloria in hac vita dura  
Labili et fragili cito transitura  
Nos perduc ad patriam O felix figura  
Ad videndum faciem que est Christi pura.

Esto nobis quesumus tutum adiudicem  
Dulce refrigerium atque consolamen  
Vt nobis non noceat hostile grauamen:  
Sed fruamur requie cum beatis, Amen.

Frame 2 fol. 8. St. John the Evangelist seated on the Island of Patmos writing the Book of Revelation.

He is here represented, as often, as young and beardless. His hair is yellow. On the rock behind him is the Eagle which often accompanies him in pictures of the four Evangelists. It is one of beasts described in Ezekiel and Revelation and was thought to symbolize St. John, because, as St. Jerome says, St. John's nature is to rise aloft contemplating God (as an eagle rises and looks at the sun). Beside John there is also a chalice. This alludes to the tradition that a priest of Diana offered him a poisoned cup which was made harmless when John made the sign of the cross upon it. Elsewhere a serpent or dragon is often seen issuing from it like the poison. The accompanying text is the opening passage of St. John's Gospel.

Frame 3 fol. 10. St. John the Baptist, standing in front of a landscape with trees, rocks and water.

In his left hand is a book. With his right hand he points to a lamb as if saying 'behold the Lamb of God'. Often he is holding the lamb and often it has a halo and a cross with a banner to show its divine nature, but here it is shown just as an ordinary lamb. The Baptist wears the traditional camel's hair, but here he is wearing a grey cloak over it. This illustrates the 'Commemoration de saint iehan baptiste'.

Frame 4 fol. 10v. 'Commemoration de saint sebastien'.

An archer in a black peaked cap, watched by the Emperor Diocletian, is about to shoot a fifth arrow into Sebastian, who is standing bound to a tree. This greatest of the Roman martyrs was eventually shot as full of arrows as a hedgehog is full of prickles, according to the Golden Legend. The text includes a prayer that anyone who reads the prayer daily or carries it with him may be delivered from plague and sudden death. Sebastian's arrows were a symbol of attack by plague. Sebastian died in 287, stoned to death after being miraculously healed of his arrow wounds.

Frame 5 fol. 11. 'Commemoracion de saint nicholas'.

St. Nicholas is here shown wearing his mitre as Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. He has just healed three boys who had

been cast into a pickling tub by an inn-keeper to supply meat in time of famine. An accompanying prayer alludes to the saint's numerous miracles and prays for delivery from the flames of Hell. St. Nicholas was alive in 325 and is often symbolized by three golden balls, since adopted by pawnbrokers as he was their patron.

Frame 6 fol. 11v. 'Commemoracion de saint anthonne'.

St. Anthony is standing in a Flemish landscape which should resemble the desert. Water in the distance should be the Red Sea or the Nile. In his left hand is a book and in his right hand an abbot's crozier, not as is often shown the crutch with which he is often shown as patron of an order devoted to the sick. Beside him is a pig with a bell. This pig is said to have been his only companion, but it in fact alludes to the pigs which the Hospitallers of St. Anthony were alone privileged to have foraging in the streets of the towns where, like London, they had their establishments. Anthony lived about 251-356. He is, as in most pictures of him, shown as an old man with a white beard. Flames under his feet are alluded to in the accompanying collect which alludes to the extinction of the flames of disease and the cooling of sick limbs at Anthon's intercession with God. By his intercessions and merits may we be delivered from the flames of Hell in mind and body.

Frame 7 fol. 12. St. Mary Magdalene stands holding an ointment pot.

She is generally thus shown in allusion to Mary of Bethany (with whom she has been traditionally identified) who 'kissed His feet and anointed them with ointment' when He sat at meat in the house of a Pharisee. As the perfect penitent she is represented, as tradition requires, with flowing hair. It is golden. The ointment pot here, as often, has concave sides like the jars used by druggists called alborollo jars, because they were made out of sections of wooden can. Magdalene is here standing in a chamber. She is often shown in the garden in which she mistook Christ for the gardener. The text says that when she had anointed His feet and wiped them with her hair the room was filled with the smell of ointment. Actually it was the water of her tears, not the ointment, which, according to St. Luke, she wiped with her hair. The accompanying prayer is for forgiveness of sins.

Frame 8 fol. 13. 'Commemoracionede sainte catherine'.

St. Catherine of Alexandria, daughter of the King of Cyprus, rejected the proposals of the Emperor Maximin and confounded the arguments of his scholars. Maximin had her bound to spiked wheels and executed the scholars. The wheels were miraculously broken so the Emperor beheaded her. In art she is shown either with a wheel or a sword. Here

she has both. Behind her, on the ground, is Maximin. The text gives the name of her father, Costus. In her legend angels transported her body to Mount Sinai. A prayer on this page asks that by her merits we may be able to attain that mountain which is Christ.

Frame 9 fol. 13v. 'Commemoracion de sancte Barbe'.

St. Barbara, represented here with fair hair, because of her beauty, is here shown standing by her usual emblem, the tower in which her father enclosed her on account of the persistence of her suitors. She holds in her hand the palm of martyrdom, having enraged her father by the rejection even of desirable suitors. The accompanying text makes no allusion to her protection against fire, storm and sudden death, but asks that through her forgiveness of sins may be granted to those who rejoice in eternal charity in humble devotion.

Frame 10 fol. 14. Six figures with haloes, a bishop in the centre, represent All Saints. An accompanying prayer asks for the forgiveness of all sins for the sake of All Saints.

(fol. 16. There is no miniature on the opening page of the Hours of the Holy Spirit, but an ornamental border with acanthus scrolls, flowers and grapes, in black and gold with some green leaves, surrounds the page. - Not reproduced).

(fol. 22. A similarly bordered page, but with thistles instead of grapes, introduces the Hours of the Cross. The page which faced this is missing. Not reproduced).

Frame 11 fol. 25v - 26. Similar borders on both sides of the opening introduce the Hours of the Virgin.

fol. 25v. The Annunciation.

The Virgin in blue, with a very faint halo is reading, with her book on a green cloth. The angel, in pale blue with wings of red and pale blue holds a sceptre and wears a crossed stole. Behind, is a window, through which the Holy Dove has flown. There is a high wooden arm chair with carved back and green cushion and a large bed with red hangings and bolster and a white pillow. This faces the beginning of Matins.

fol. 34v - 35. The opening of Lauds has similar borders.

Frame 12 fol. 34v. The Visitation.

The Virgin wears blue. Elizabeth has a turban over her headcloth. Both have faint haloes. Behind there is a large house partly concealed by a tree, approached by a winding path near a **crag**. The border on the right-hand side of the opening contains a peacock, strawberries and peas.

(fol. 43. Similar border containing two birds adorns the opening page of

prime. There is no miniature on fol. 42v. to face this. Not reproduced).

fol. 47v - 48. Similar border for the opening of Tierce.

Frame 13 fol. 47v. The Annunciation by a scarlet angel to three shepherds in bright rustic clothes with their sheep and dog, outside the walls of Bethlehem. The shepherd on the left has a spudder instead of a crook. Black marks on trees in the background are caused by an offset from the opposite page.

fol. 48. The marginal decoration includes a cock.

fol. 51v - 52. Similar borders 'a midi' (Sexte). Not reproduced.

Frame 14 fol. 51v. The Adoration **by** the Magi. The blue dress of the Virgin has been smudged somewhat and the face of the kneeling king has been subjected to restoration. Behind stands Joseph with raised hands.

fol. 55v - 56. Similar borders 'a nonne' (Nones). Not reproduced.

Frame 15 fol. 55v. The Presentation of the child Christ by His parents in the temple. Joseph holds a candle.

fol. 59. Similar border. The page which faced this has been removed. This is the opening of Vespers. Not reproduced.

fol. 64v - 65. Similar borders for opening of Compline.

Frame 16 fol. 64v. The flight into Egypt. Joseph carries the luggage on a staff on his shoulder and leads the ass on which the Virgin sits sidesaddle, in blue, carrying the baby. There is a city in the distance.

fol. 65. Marginal decoration includes a bird.

fol. 68. 'Oroison de nostre dame'. The Virgin, in blue, holds the dead figure of Christ. Beside her is St. John. Behind, on the summit of a hill, are seen the basis of the three crosses. In the distance is Jerusalem. Not reproduced.

Frame 17 fol. 72v - 73. Similar border for the opening of the Penitential Psalms. 'Ci commancent les vij psaumes'.

fol. 72v. David kneels, with crowned cap and harp on the grass with eyes raised to God, who appears in the sky. In the background towers can be seen behind trees. Note the plant silhouetted against the path which runs across the page behind David.

Frame 18 fol. 86v - 87. Similar border for the opening of Office of the Dead, 'Sensieut vigile des trespassez'.

fol. 86v. Mourners stand behind a grave in a cloister. Lazarus sits up in a grave. On the left stand six figures with faint haloes. Among them stands a Christ with one hand slightly raised to bid Lazarus arise.