

Miniature Masterpiece

The Coëtivy Hours



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9. Virgin and Child in an enclosed garden, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.201v



10. Holy Family in an enclosed garden, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.228v

reads from a girdle book, the Christ child is handed violets by an angel. Violets were said to have populated the Garden of Eden but are also symbolic of the Virgin's sorrow.⁶ In another garden (10), the Holy family is enclosed in a wall of red and white rose bushes – symbols of Christ's Passion and Mary's purity respectively. While Joseph takes a nap in a chair, Mary holds up her teetering toddler as he plucks the cords on the angel's psalter. In his other hand, the child holds a piece of bread, a reference to the Eucharist. Another angel plays a portable organ (portative) in the foreground. The constant presence of angels is a sign of Christ's divine status.

Time and again, nature signifies the Passion and Resurrection. The goldfinch, held in the child's left hand (11), has been associated with the Passion since Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) wrote his etymological encyclopaedia (*Etymologiae*). In it, the goldfinch (*carduelis*) survived on a diet of thistles (*carduus*) and so came to be associated with the crown of thorns. The red markings on the bird's head were also likened to Christ's blood. An apocryphal story from both the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and Pseudo-Gospel of Matthew tell how the child Jesus made birds of clay and then brought them to life. The milk thistle, in the left border, was thought to increase breastmilk and even to engender a boy in the womb.⁷ The strawberry plant, in the lower margin, is also symbolic: the white flowers represent innocence, the trefoil leaves the trinity and the fruit the perfection.



11. Virgin and Child with a goldfinch, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.194v



12. Anne, Virgin and Child, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.300r

Books have an important symbolic function and are essential Marian attributes. In this generational portrait (12), Anne and Mary read to the baby Jesus. While the scene resembles one of familial intimacy, upon closer inspection it is the child that points to the words on the page, both showing the way to salvation and acknowledging that the book is a reflection of himself, because he is the word. His gesture is also a subtle reminder to the viewer of the importance of text: in other words, read the prayer below. The painting is teeming with symbolic objects, from the strawberries in the lower border to the bread (Eucharist) in the child's hand, and from the lion finials (the 'prince of all animals' is Christ) to the throne itself (Throne of Wisdom). Anne's presence is an allusion to Christ's royal ancestry and the appearance of Anne and Jacob at the Golden Gate in the lower margin refers to the Virgin's Immaculate Conception, which brings us full circle back to the Virgin's birth. As a grandmother and matron of a large family, Anne also presents an alternative to the typical female saintliness of virginity, persecution and early death.⁸



13. Michael slaying the demon, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.256r



14. Martyrdom of St Bartholomew, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.263r

Saints

While the Virgin shows the way to salvation, the devout must live a life worthy of redemption and saints are suitable examples of piety. As such, they are often called upon for protection and assistance. A collection of intercessory prayers addressed to a communion of saints is collectively known as the Suffrages. Each individual petition is addressed to a particular saint and introduced by a miniature of that saint. The prayers are arranged hierarchically, divided into four sections: apostles, martyrs, confessors and virgins. This is probably the most customisable section of any Book of Hours; a patron may request local saints, a patron saint or even a favourite. The Coëtivy Hours includes over forty miniatures and prayers dedicated to the saints, and many have links with France. The Suffrages open with *Michael slaying the demon* (13) (probably a favourite of Prigent de Coëtivy, see **The Patron**) and the *Beheading of John the Baptist*, sometimes known as the Forerunner.

The illustrations are generally one of three types: portrait with relevant attribute (instrument characteristic of life or death), martyrdom or miracle. The stories of the saint's lives are often a mix of tradition and legend. Sometimes different versions are combined, in other cases multiple accounts are accepted. The primary medieval source for saints' lives was the *Golden Legend* (*Legenda Aurea*), a collection of hagiographies (biographies) compiled by Jacob of Voragine (c. 1229-98) – an enormously popular text in the later Middle Ages.



15. St John, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.258r



16. Martyrdom of St Andrew, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.261r

Apostles

The apostles include the twelve disciples, those who helped to spread Christ's ministry in the first century after his death. The term is also used to describe other leading missionaries of early Christianity like Matthias (Judas' replacement), Paul, Barnabas and the Evangelists. They laid the foundation for the development of the Church and established the apostolic sees, such as Rome (Peter and Paul), Alexandria (Mark the Evangelist), Antioch (Peter), Jerusalem (James), and Constantinople (Andrew).

While spreading their message, the apostles often met resistance, violent retaliation and death. Although only the death of James the Great ('with a sword') is recorded in the New Testament, according to tradition all but John met a martyr's death and martyrdom has long been considered the ultimate testament of faith. Not just the means of their deaths, but the preceding tortures were often sadistically imaginative, indeed Bartholomew was flayed alive (14). Even John faced some impressively disturbing tests of faith (boiling in oil in the lower margin) (15). With few exceptions, the miniatures depict the apostles either during their martyrdom or holding the instrument of their death.

Peter and Andrew were crucified; Peter upside-down in Rome and Andrew on a saltire cross in Greece (16) – both allegedly at their own request. The proconsul of Patras, Aegus, ordered Andrew to be bound to the cross so



25. St Martin of Tours, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.287r



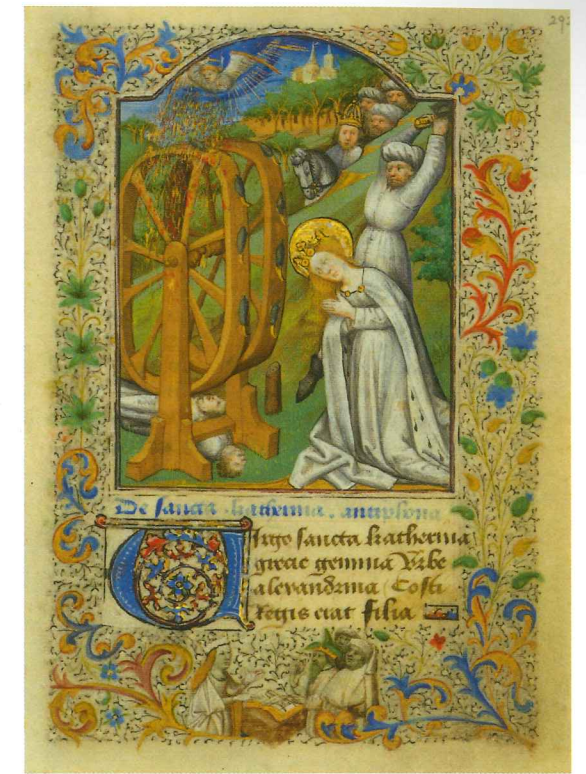
26. St Julien the Hospitaller, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.287r

Confessors

Confessor is a title given to male saints who were not martyred. Unsurprisingly, many of the saints in the Coëtivy Hours have a particular connection to France, like Peter of Luxembourg (f.288r) (1369-87), who was created cardinal by the Antipope Clement VII (1342-94) at the request of King Charles VI (1368-1422) and the Duke of Berry (1340-1416), the famous bibliophile. Ivo of Brittany (f.284r) studied canon law and theology in Paris then returned as a judge in the church courts. There he gained a reputation for impartiality and care for poor litigants. Leonard of Noblac (f.290r) was granted land and materials to build an abbey by King Clovis (c. 466-511) for his help in the safe delivery of the queen's baby. He later became the patron saint of prisoners following Bohemond I of Antioch's release from prison during the crusades. The legend of Martin of Tours (25) and his cloak was a popular subject in medieval illumination: at the gates of Amiens, this Roman soldier cut his cloak to share it with a poor man. The well-dressed soldier-saint uses his sword to slice his ermine-lined purple cloak in two. It already covers the shoulders of the poor and probably disabled man whose tattered clothes and bare feet contrast with those of the soldier and his well-equipped horse. The fact that the event takes place at a gate and that Martin's cloak is purple are probably references to the Immaculate Conception (meeting of Anne and Joachim at the Golden Gate) and Mary weaving the purple of the Veil of the Temple at the time of the Annunciation.



27. Martyrdom of St Apollonia, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.298r



28. Martyrdom of St Catherine, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.292r

Julien the Hospitaller (26) may have been conflated with Julien of Le Mans as the calendar lists a Julien only under the feast day of the latter (27 January). However, it is undoubtedly a story associated with the former – of the saint carrying a leper across a river – that is illustrated here. This Julien may be included with the confessors because of the confusion over names but the life of Julien the Hospitaller was a popular medieval narrative, illustrated in numerous media including stained-glass windows in Chartres and Rouen Cathedrals. Like Oedipus, a prediction in his youth led to him both running away from home and his fate ultimately catching up with him. Julien killed his parents in a jealous rage when he saw two people in his bed, assuming they were his wife and a lover. As an act of repentance, he and his forgiving wife founded a hospital or hostel and a ferry service to provide safe crossing. Like Christopher, Julien was visited by Jesus in disguise and transported him across a dangerous river. Julien and his wife row Jesus (holding a leper's bells or clappers) from one village-lined shore to the other. The miniature is an excellent example of the artist's use of white to create highlights, particularly as light reflecting off the waves. He also paints the reflections of boats and buildings in the water and uses aerial perspective to create a sense of depth and distance. Julien's unnamed wife faithfully followed her patricidal husband in caring for the needy, but she herself was never granted sainthood.

Virgins

Unlike Anne, many female saints fall into the catalogue of virgin martyr and often share a similar story: beautiful and betrothed to Jesus they receive the unwanted attentions of lecherous and powerful men. For an unwavering faith and chastity, the young women are imprisoned, often violently tortured and ultimately killed. Faced with the choice between marriage and martyrdom, Saints Barbara, Apollonia, Avia, Catherina and Margaret all remained faithful to their vow. Apollonia became the patron saint of dentists due to the nature of her torture. She is said to have had her teeth violently pulled out or shattered, a story which became a popular subject in medieval illumination (27). Apollonia is depicted being held down by one soldier as another uses his whole body to wrench her teeth from her jaw. The figure holding a wand indicates the pagan priest directing the cruelty. While wands were used in early Christian art as an attribute of Christ performing miracles, it disappeared in the fifth century and later became a symbol of paganism, superstitious beliefs and evil forces.

At a young age, Catherine of Alexandria (28) also promised herself as a bride of Christ. When the Emperor Maxentius (r. 306-12) desired her in marriage (or out) and she refused him, the incensed emperor had her imprisoned. In order to change her mind, he forced her to debate pagan philosophers (shown in the lower margin) but having the opposite effect, she was able not only to refute the learned men but convert several in turn. For her beauty and faith, she was condemned to death on a spiked wheel (two spiked wheels which were ground together). Two of her fellow converts lay beneath the wheel, already having received their torturous deaths. When Catherine touched the wheel, it was miraculously destroyed. The miniature shows heavenly fire raining down from above as an angel raises a hammer to strike the instrument, although this did not save her from death. Catherine's gesture of prayer is also one of acceptance, as the executioner raises his axe while the emperor watches from behind. She became a popular patron saint for women because of her courage and outspokenness but also for male students as a brilliant scholar and debater.¹⁰

Margaret of Antioch's tale is similar (29). Raised by her Christian nurse after her mother died, Margaret soon converted. As a result, her father disowned her so she moved to the countryside with her surrogate mother. The Roman Prefect, Olybrius, happened upon her while she was spinning wool and was immediately struck with desire (lower margin). Like the others, she rejected his proposal and was condemned to imprisonment and physical suffering. The painting depicts the legendary tale of the devil visiting her in jail in the guise of a dragon, seen through the barred-window of her cell.¹¹ The story relates that she was swallowed by the dragon but miraculously regurgitated after the cross she carried upset its stomach. A corner of her mantle still hangs from the monster's mouth. She became the patron saint of women in labour and, probably due to the high rate of infant mortality and death during childbirth, was a particularly popular saint in the later Middle Ages. Like Christopher (Christ-bearer) and Catherine (pure), Margaret's story may have originated as an allegory - even the medieval hagiographer Voragine called the dragon scene apocryphal.

29. Miracle of St Margaret, Coëtivy Hours, CBL W 082 f.294r



Etain, the page p. 48

De sancta margareta Antiochena

Margareta autem maritima
ta annorum quindecim
Cum ab impio olibrius
tradidit in carcere



Epilogue

The Coëvity Hours was first published in 1900 by the French bibliophile, scholar and administrateur général at the Bibliothèque nationale de France from 1874, Léopold Delisle (1826-92). He described the miniatures as among the most graceful productions of French art from the middle of the fifteenth century, and had the funds been available he would have acquired the book for his museum.¹ In 1972, under the direction of the eminent Irish scholar Françoise Henry, Donal Byrne (1943-88) completed his MA thesis on the Coëvity Hours, a version of which he published in *Scriptorium* that same year. Dr Byrne became a distinguished historian of medieval art, his output remembered by Jonathan Alexander as the product of 'thorough research and deep thought.'² We are indebted to both (among others) for their contribution to the scholarship of this magnificent manuscript.

On its many pages, the book is a frequently featured object. It is written and read, appearing in churches, scriptoria, private homes and on travels. It is in the possession of apostles, prophets, evangelists, saints, clergymen, ecclesiastics and devout lay persons. These books within the book offer a constant reminder of the most important element of a Book of Hours: the text itself. The miniatures are there to illuminate the text, to illustrate, to elucidate the story of Jesus' ancestry, life, death, resurrection and humanity's ultimate salvation. While executed with mastery, the paintings are incomplete without the accompanying texts.

Each miniature is both an individual painting and part of the whole, just as many of the prayers can be said separately or combined. While today most of the miniatures are separated from the manuscript – often resulting in the partition of prayers – the Coëvity Hours, like any Book of Hours, is a single devotional unit. A book missing a page is like a puzzle missing a piece – not complete unless it is whole. Just as digitisation can virtually reunite a disbound volume, so too can investigation and examination help recreate its story. My fellow authors and I offer this small catalogue as our own contribution to bringing together the marvels of this miniature masterpiece.

Jill Unkel
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Chester Beatty Library

St Mark, Coëvity Hours, CBL W 082 f.17

