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A Book of Hours
Illuminated by Maître François

Priscilla Bain-Smith

Books of Hours according to L. M. J. Delaissé were the "late medieval best-seller[s]" and the rare book room of the King Library is fortunate in owning an exquisite example of such a book, *Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII*. The manuscript is noteworthy for two reasons: it contains all the elements identified with a complete Book of Hours and it has the distinction of being illuminated, not by assistants in a workshop, but by a master himself, Maître François.

Books of Hours were essentially prayer books bought by the laity so they could follow in the privacy of their homes the daily canonical prayers repeated by the clergy. During the fourteenth century the Psalter was the favored book of the laity; slowly, during the century, various prayers were added to the Psalter. These accretions soon rendered the volume too cumbersome, and the new portions eventually detached themselves, forming the corpus of verses known as the Book of Hours. It was this newly detached ensemble which became the most popular prayer book of the laity during the fifteenth century.

Because of the popularity of Books of Hours, it was not unusual for a family to own two or more copies. One would function as the family heirloom, while the others would be used daily. Eventually the everyday books wore out and were discarded, but the family treasure was passed on from generation to generation. Precise directions concerning Books of Hours often appeared in wills, such as Ralph Avirley's bequeathal in 1429 of "his 'red Primer' to Thomas Stone" or Henry Market of York's request in 1443 that "his 'second best prymer' [be given] to his second son Henry."

Everyone, man or woman, rich or poor, wanted to own a Book of Hours. This diversified demand prompted the production of thousands of copies varying in quality from sumptuous to shoddy. As would be expected, the wealthy patrons tended to own exquisite books, but thousands of volumes of lower quality were commissioned by less wealthy people and the workshops themselves
mass-produced editions for the open market. Many of the expensive works have survived the centuries, but lack of interest in conserving the books of lower quality has resulted in thousands of them being lost, discarded, or mutilated—most recently through the nineteenth-century pastime of cutting out illuminated initials and miniatures in order to sell them individually or keep them as personal mementos.

Since Books of Hours were *objets de piété* of the laity, the Church exercised no control over them. Consequently the prayers differed from book to book. Despite these variations, Books of Hours are identifiable primarily by their content. Abbé Leroquais in his 1927 study of Books of Hours in the *Bibliotheque nationale* in Paris concluded that their prayers could be classified as “essential,” “secondary,” and “accessory.” To be regarded as a Book of Hours a manuscript must contain a Calendar, Office of the Virgin, Penitential Psalms, Litany, Office of the Dead, and Suffrages. These essential prayers provided the core around which any secondary and accessory prayers gathered. The secondary group included such items as the Gospel Pericopes, Passion according to St. John, and prayers to the Virgin (*Obsecro te* and *O Intemerata*). The accessory elements, the most personal of all the categories, consisted of any prayers specifically requested by the owner. An excellent example of this personalized invocation is the prayer for a widow in Ms. *Lat. Kentuckiansis VII* (fol. 48). The Kentucky manuscript contains, in addition to the accessory prayers, all the essential and many of the secondary elements; it therefore constitutes a complete example of a medieval Book of Hours.

*Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII*, erroneously labeled a Missal, is a small book (10.5 x 7.5 cm) with 268 vellum pages ruled with an average of fourteen lines per page and bound in a seventeenth-century full red morocco with gilt edges. There are five full-page miniatures: the *Annunciation* (fol. 49), the *Crucifixion* (fol. 92), the *Pentecost* (fol. 94), *David and Goliath* (fol. 145), and *St. Claude* (fol. 227). Ten floriated borders designate other important sections of the text such as *Obsecro te* and *O Intemerata*, the beginning of each canonical hour, and the Office of the Dead. These borders are consistently illuminated by one hand and match the borders of the miniatures in style.

While the majority of the text is in Latin, a few French rubrics are included in the indulgences inserted with the suffrages. At least four different hands can be distinguished in the text, all of which
employ the formal Gothic textual script. This might suggest that the manuscript itself was well used and that, as parts were worn or perhaps torn, new pages were inserted by successive owners. It could also suggest that more than one scribe was employed in transcribing the text. In any case, the suffrages which begin and end the manuscript are of the same hand, whereas the main textual content has been executed by another. Interspersed throughout the body are random pages by still other scribes. The unity of the calendar for example was disrupted by the October page (fol. 12) which is in an entirely different style from the other eleven months. The prayer to a widow is not only of an entirely different hand, but also deviates from the text by having seventeen lines instead of the usual fourteen.

The original provenance of the Kentucky manuscript is not known, but several clues exist concerning prior ownerships. In 1961 Philip Sang donated it to the King Library; he, in turn, had purchased the manuscript from the David Kirschenbaum Book Store in New York City. Kirschenbaum unfortunately kept no records of the transactions concerning this particular Book of Hours. The only prior mention of the manuscript occurs in Eleanor Spencer’s 1931 dissertation on Maître François in which she listed in her catalog raisonné a manuscript offered for sale in Sotheby’s Catalog of 17 March 1930, Lot 50. Although Spencer had not personally looked at the manuscript in question, she included it in her list on the advice of her colleague Mr. Cockerell who had seen it and had attributed it to Maître François. Since the description of this manuscript matched exactly that of the Kentucky Book of Hours, I concluded and Spencer agreed, that they are indeed the same. Little can be ascertained about the location of the manuscript prior to 1930 other than what may be gleaned from the inscription penned on the first folio, “A Clifford, Don. Dona Ford de Deptford, May 14, 1783.”

Although the original owner cannot yet be identified, it may be possible to formulate some information about him by analyzing the prayers included in the manuscript. Two topics—the plague and lameness—appear frequently throughout the text; this suggests they were of particular interest to the owner. Invocations against the plague are understandable as it had been ravaging Europe intermittently, wiping out thousands of people. No one was assured safety from its harm. Therefore, for protection this Book of Hours included several prayers to plague saints, the most famous being St.
Sebastian. Pagans had relentlessly pursued Sebastian, a converted Christian, and after capturing him, tied him to a tree and shot him full of arrows. Medieval people were aware that the Romans thought the plague was carried by Apollo’s arrows, and they correlated Sebastian’s arrows with those of Apollo. Also noteworthy are the invocations to several saints connected with crippled and lame people. St. Giles, patron saint of cripples, was included in the list of Suffrages along with Anthony whose attribute was a tau-shaped (T) stick, the traditional emblem of the medieval monk whose duty was to help the crippled and infirm. Most notable, however, was St. Claude, the only saint in the book to be allotted his own miniature. Besides being associated with posthumous miracles and with saving voyagers from drowning in rivers, he was also a patron saint of crippled people. Even his name, Claude, is a French word meaning “lame.” Moreover, the miniature stresses this association with crippled people by showing him surrounded by lame men (fig. 1).

Maître François who executed the miniatures in Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII, including that of St. Claude, was an illuminator active in the Paris region from 1459 to 1488. From the multitude of work surviving by him and his workshop and from the commissions he received from such prominent people as Charles II d’Anjou and Charles II de Bourbon (while he was cardinal), it is apparent that Maître François’s work was highly regarded and much sought after. Once observed, his style is easily recognized. Spencer was the first to enumerate the several obvious characteristics which can be called his trademarks. The Annunciation miniature (fig. 2) showcases several of these. It exemplifies his penchant for framing his interior scenes with colored, marble columns which support very elaborate lintels or architraves, and also displays his favored female and male types. His typical female, like Mary, has an oval head and sloping shoulders to which are attached tubular arms; his typical male, like Gabriel, carries an ugly, bulbous-nosed face atop a swarthy frame. The colors also indicate the taste of François: Gabriel wears the artist’s favorite violet-grey gown characteristically highlighted in gold. Lastly, the interior, designed as a complex, recessive space shows François’s constant concern for perspective. In general, his pictorial style epitomizes the trend of manuscript illumination during the late fifteenth century in that it avoids the flat, patterned elegance offered by earlier illuminators such as the Boucicaut.
Fig. 1 St. Claude
Fig. 4 David Slaying Goliath
Master (c. 1410) and advances the new interests in perspective and naturalism.

Two of the illuminations in *Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII* contain compositional schemes which appear to be at marked variance with the arrangements commonly found in Books of Hours. These are the *Pentecost* illumination (fig. 3) which introduces the Matins of the Holy Spirit (fol. 94) and the illustration of *David Slaying Goliath* (fig. 4) which introduces the Penitential Psalms (fol. 145). The Pentecost was popularly composed with Mary in the center surrounded on both sides by the apostles. François, instead, uses a format similar to his *Annunciation*: Mary and St. John kneel facing each other, separated by a *prie-dieu*, with the remaining apostles arranged in a semi-circle in the background (fig. 3). Examples of this specific composition are quite rare, and seem to be distinctive to Maître François.14 *David Slaying Goliath* represents a similar variation from the traditional composition. Although Leroquais lists the subject of David and Goliath as popular in the fifteenth century,15 his assertion is difficult to support. Spencer states that the subject is not common in the fifteenth century,16 and Delaisse omits it entirely in his discussion on Books of Hours.17 The more popular subjects were David Harping or David in Prayer.

With its variations from the usual compositional schemes found in Books of Hours, *Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII* is a valuable tool for both students and scholars of book illumination in fifteenth-century France. The fact that it is of high quality and in an unusually complete form makes it one of the treasures of King Library.

**NOTES**


3Harthan, p. 34.

4An identification card inserted inside *Ms. Lat. Kentuckiansis VII* labeled it a Missal. My research has properly identified it as a Book of Hours. For further information on this matter, as well as for a detailed discussion of the manuscript and of Maître François, see my thesis, "An Analysis of *Manuscriptus Latinus Kentuckiansis VII,*" University of Kentucky 1978.
The pages have been numbered in pencil up to 268. However, errors in pagination occurred. The correct number is 270. Page numbers in this essay correlate to penciled numbers.

Textual hierarchy is visually demarcated in Books of Hours: the most important sections are introduced by miniatures; the next, by borders, and lesser, by illuminated initials.


Any thorough analysis of a manuscript begins with a chart of gathering maps. Unfortunately, *Ms. Lat. Kentuckyansis VII* was rebound too tightly to pursue this without damaging the manuscript. If it had been done, a more finite explanation about the many scribes could have been offered.


Postcard received from Eleanor Spencer, 26 April 1978.

This inscription has yet to be fully investigated.

The identity of Maître François was recently clarified in Eleanor P. Spencer’s “Don Louis de Busco’s Psalter,” in *Gatherings for Dorothy E. Miner*, ed. Ursula McCracken (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1974), p. 234. The activity of François from 1459 to 1488 is attested by a series of manuscripts beginning with his first major commission for the *Miroir historial* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. fr. 50-51 and Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 722). He was in Paris around 1471, and one of his last commissions was a Greek and Latin Lectionary (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms. gr. 55) for Charles de Bourbon as cardinal (1476-1488).

The only other compositions which I have found that resemble the Kentucky miniature have been attributed to Maître François (London, British Library, *Ms. Egerton 2045*, fol. 138 and Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Ms. Liturg.*, 41, fol. 126).

Leroquais, I, xlvii.

Letter received from Eleanor Spencer, 12 March 1978.

L. M. J. Delaissé, “The Importance of Books of Hours for the History of the Medieval Book,” in *Gatherings for Dorothy E.*