

A Courtly Vision: The *Très Riches Heures* of the duc de Berry

Background Notes

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Jean, duc de Berry

Jean, duc de Berry (1340-1416), was one of the greatest collectors and patrons of all time: 'art- and pleasure-mad', in the words of one scholar. He was the son, brother and uncle of kings of France, and the master of vast territories of land run from his headquarters at Bourges, at the eastern end of the Loire Valley. Despite the ongoing war with England, civil strife, plague and social unrest in



The Holy Thorn Reliquary, France, c. 1400 (British Museum)

France during Berry's lifetime, the French court was magnificent and luxurious. Its leading figures were enthusiastic patrons of the arts, including manuscript illumination, building, tapestry weaving and glorious examples of the goldsmith's art. The exquisite *Holy Thorn Reliquary*, pictured here, was commissioned by Berry as a shining, golden, enamelled and jewel-bedecked reliquary to contain one of the thorns from Christ's crown of thorns, a precious relic of great significance to the French royal family.

Berry was an eclectic collector. In his younger days he was known for his love of architecture and several of his building projects were commemorated in the pages of the *Très Riches Heures*. He also amassed tapestries, antique cameos and carved gemstones, medals and goldsmiths' work. In 1388 he owned 1500 dogs and eventually acquired a menagerie that included lions, bears, camels, leopards and an ostrich.



**The Limbourg Brothers,
 'The Temptation of Christ',
 showing the duke's château of
 Mehun-sur-Yevre,
 Très Riches Heures**

But he was particularly known as a bibliophile and the inventories made at the end of his life reveal that he owned about 300 manuscripts. Amongst these were nearly 120 religious books, including fifteen Books of Hours, and secular works including texts by Pliny, Suetonius and Ovid. Modern authors were represented by Boccaccio, Christine de Pisan and others, and the manuscripts also included chivalric romances, chronicles, travel books and astrological texts. His library has been described as 'an encyclopaedia summarising the knowledge of his time'.

Of the fifteen Books of Hours owned by Berry, six are known to have been commissioned by the duke. These range from the *Petites Heures*, begun in about 1375 and measuring just 19 x 11 cm, to the *Grandes Heures* of c.1407, measuring a more substantial 40 x 30 cm. Various artists were employed on these books but two of the greatest and most complete, the *Belles Heures* (from 1405) and *Très Riches Heures* (from c.1411/12), were the work of the Limbourg Brothers.



**The Limbourg Brothers,
'The Annunciation',
Belles Heures, 1405-08/9**

The artists of the *Très Riches Heures*

The main part of the *Très Riches Heures* was illustrated by the Limbourg Brothers, Hermann, Paul and Jehan, from Nijmegen, now in the Netherlands but then part of the Duchy of Guelders. The brothers came from a family of well-connected urban craftsmen, many of whom were involved in the creation of art for the ducal court. Their grandfather was a woodcarver, their mother an embroiderer, and their father and uncle were heraldic painters. Most significant, though, was their uncle

Johan Maelwael – the surname means good painter – who had worked as an artist for Queen Ysabeau of France and then became court painter to the Duke of Burgundy, Berry's younger brother and another great patron of the arts. Hermann and Jehan Limbourg were apprenticed to a goldsmith in Paris but Paul's professional training is not recorded. It was Paul, however, who was to take the lead in the brothers' work for Berry. Astonishingly, the Duke of Burgundy had employed Paul and Jean to illuminate a Bible for him when they were still in their teens. This work was unfinished at the duke's death and Berry made haste to employ the youths and their brother before any other patron could get his hands on them. Their new master was extremely generous to the young artists and there are records of gifts of money and jewellery to the brothers. Paul was given a substantial residence in Bourges and was, in slightly murky circumstances, assisted to a wife by the duke. The Limbourgs have been associated with a number of surviving manuscripts belonging to the duke but are not known to have worked elsewhere after the start of their employment by Berry. It is often conjectured that the brothers might have visited Italy at this time because of the similarity between some of their work and surviving pieces from that country, but there is no documentary evidence to support this. In 1416 all three of the Limbourg brothers died of plague, leaving the *Très Riches Heures* unfinished. The oldest of the brothers was at most thirty-one years old and it is tantalising to think what they might have achieved with more years.

In the middle of the fifteenth century another artist undertook more work on the manuscript but still did not complete it. He is sometimes known as The Master of the Shadows because, unlike the work of the Limbourgs, his figures cast shadows. Some scholars identify him with Barthélemy d'Eyck (c.1420-70), a possible relation of Jan van Eyck, but this is unproven.

In about 1485 a more significant quantity of work was done to the manuscript by Jean Colombe (c.1430-1493). At that time the manuscript was owned by the Duke of Savoy, in whose household Colombe was employed as chief illuminator.



**Jean Colombe,
'The Man of Sorrows', with
heraldry of the Duke of
Savoy,
Très Riches Heures, c.1485**

Although the contribution of these later artists must be acknowledged, it is the Limbourgs who are pre-eminent, for both their planning and their illuminating of the manuscript. They 'were like comets, hurtling through a private universe that belonged to them, and their inventive minds, unencumbered by the constraints of the marketplace, were free to create what had never been imagined before'.

The purpose of the *Très Riches Heures*

The *Très Riches Heures* is a Book of Hours. These were the most popular and significant devotional books of the late

middle ages, having come into prominence in the second half of the fourteenth century. They contained all the texts that were necessary for a private individual to follow the eight canonical hours or services of the monastic day. Whilst there was no liturgical requirement for such works to have illustrations, Books of Hours were usually lavishly decorated with ornamental borders, narrative scenes and extravagant lettering. Our manuscript has sixty-six large miniatures and sixty-five small ones, as well as decorative letters and borders. Its 206 leaves are written on high-quality parchment and, at 30 x 21.5 cm, each page is almost the same size as a piece of A4 paper. In theory, the rich and detailed illustrations served as the focus for meditation on the religious stories, the viewer using them not just as reminders of well-known episodes, but as gateways to empathetic understanding and to the sense that the viewer was actually there at the events depicted.

It is difficult, though, not to assume that works like the *Très Riches Heures* were also largely worldly status symbols. This might be written off as a cynical modern interpretation but the fourteenth-century writer Eustace Deschamps has left us an amusing but probably only too truthful verse that suggests that modern scepticism may be well placed:

*Get me an Hours of the Virgin,
Matched to my high degree,
The finest the craftsman can manage,
As graceful and gorgeous as me:
Paint it with gold and with azure,
With gold clasps to fasten it down,
So the people will gasp when I use it,
'That's the prettiest prayer-book in town.'*

The subsequent history of the *Très Riches Heures*

In 1416 both the Limbourgs and the duc de Berry died, the younger men of plague and the older patron probably simply of old age: he was 76. The story of the unfinished *Heures* is then unclear. It may have passed from the duke to his daughter, Bonne. Alternatively, and more probably, the manuscript became part of the collection of King Charles VI of France, Berry's nephew, to whom the old duke, none of whose sons survived him, had bequeathed his estate. At some stage the manuscript became the property of the Duke of Savoy, who commissioned the additions by Colombe in 1485. For nearly four centuries the manuscript's ownership is uncertain but in 1856 it was acquired by the duc d'Aumale from Baron Felix de Margherita, who claimed that he had inherited it from the Marchese Gerolamo Serra. It was said to have been in the hands of the Spinola family previously. The manuscript has been in the care of the Musée Condé, Chantilly, since the château and its collection were willed to the Institut de France by the duc d'Aumale. The *Très Riches Heures* is now considered so precious that it is never put on public display and is made available only to the most prestigious scholars.

Further information

Cazalles, Raymond and Johannes Rathofer, *Illuminations of Heaven and Earth: The Glories of the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* (Harry N. Abrams, 1988)

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