

Commentary on Morgan MS M. 729 fol. 345v, *Psalter-Hours of Yolande de Soissons*

The heraldic devices on roundels offer an indication of the miniature's (Fig. 1) provenance. Two coats of arms are shown: *zure, semy of lis or with a demt lion argent over all* and *or semy of lions passant and fretty gules*. The first is that of the Moreuil family while the second probably belongs to Yolande de Soissons.¹ The devices are interwoven along the bottom border, probably symbolizing the marriage between Yolande and Bernard V of Moreuil. These coats of arms are repeated throughout the manuscript along with four others, all of which indicate that Yolande was the book's original owner. This provides a valuable insight into the manuscript's historical context; Yolande's family was rooted in the nobility of Picardy, and the book was probably created during the late 13th century at Amiens close to the Moreuil fief.²

A striking feature of the miniature is its highly decorative border. A row of pointed arches forms a canopy comprising lancet windows, trefoil arches, gables and pinnacles. This is supported by narrow inner columns and pier buttresses on the outer edges that are painted to resemble brickwork. Roundels are placed at each corner and at the mid-sides, and cusped edges ending in stylized leaf-shapes run down the sides and along the bottom of the frame. The inner gables create a three dimensional effect by overlapping the top band of arches, while the columns placed just inside the buttresses offer an impression of receding space. This demonstrates an advancement in spatial conception in French Gothic art during the second half of the 13th

¹ Karen Gould, and of Soissons, Yolande, *Psalter and Hours of Yolande of Soissons* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1978), pp. 2–4.

² *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

century.³ While the result is a simplified rendering of contemporary Gothic architecture, the trilobed finials surmounting the gables, as well as the cusped-edges ending in stylized leaves, closely resemble features found on Amiens cathedral.⁴ Several other framing devices within the manuscript also appear to show specific features of Amiens, indicating that the illuminator who worked on them had studied the cathedral in detail. Not only does this help confirm the origin of the book, but it also offers an early example of medieval art reflecting real architecture.⁵

Within this border we find an atypical Crucifixion scene: Christ is crucified on a cross forming part of a tree that has twelve leafy branches. At the top of the cross is a sign that reads INRI (*Iesvs Nazarenvs Rex Ivdæorvm*), above which a pelican nests. There are six figures at the base of the cross, four of whom are identified by scrolls. To the left, Moses and John support the Virgin whose breast is pierced by a sword, while on the right we see the centurion as well as Caiphas and Balaam. As is common in medieval church art, the opposing sides of the image represent moral positions – Moses, John, and Mary are arranged to Jesus's right while the centurion, Caiphas, and Balaam are placed to his left. The Pelican in Her Piety is a motif that appears in Crucifixion art from the 12th century onwards owing to the widespread belief that the mother pelican pierced her own breast to feed her children with her blood.⁶ The sword piercing Mary's breast is the sword of Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:25–35). The earliest examples of this motif originate in Dominican art from Germany,⁷ and its appearance here suggest the synthesis of various strands of Christian mysticism during this period.

³ *ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵ Carl F Barnes, Jr, 'Cross-Media Design Motifs in XIIIth-Century France: Architectural Motifs in the Psalter and Hours of Yolande de Soissons and in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame at Amiens', *Gesta*, 17.2 (1978), 37–40 (pp. 37–39) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/766858>> [Accessed 19 Nov 2024].

⁶ Fr Jonathan Long, *Christian Symbolism: The Pelican in Her Piety*, The School of Theology St Mary Magdalen, Oxford (July 2022), <<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/symbols-the-pelican-in-her-piety>> [accessed 21 Nov 2024].

⁷ C R Morey, 'A Group of Gothic Ivories in the Walters Art Gallery', *The Art Bulletin*, 18.2 (June 1936), 198–213 (p. 205) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3045627>> [accessed 19 Nov 2024].

The other elements of this image such as the tree and the Old Testament witnesses are clearly not representative of the Biblical narrative. The basis for this scene is a contemporary spiritual work by the Franciscan, Saint Bonaventure, called *Lignum vitae* (The Tree of Life), written c. 1260. Bonaventure asks the reader to 'Picture in your mind a tree, whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church. From the trunk of this tree, imagine there are growing twelve branches adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit.'⁸ The tree is equated with the cross, and its leaves are a medicine to 'prevent and cure every kind of sickness', while its flowers contain the 'sweetness of every fragrance' and its fruits 'the sweetness of every taste'.⁹ Each branch has a single fruit that corresponds to a stanza of verse recounting an event in Jesus's life. Bonaventure then expands on each of these verses with a meditation on different aspects of Jesus's life and Passion.

While Bonaventure did not offer a pictorial representation of his *Lignum vitae*,¹⁰ by the end of the 13th century various illustrations of the Tree of Life were included alongside manuscripts of the text. *Lignum vitae* inspired pieces of church art, such as Pacino di Buonaguida's *The Tree of Life* (Fig. 2), and Bonaventure's meditations also 'became part of a compendium of diagrams or schemata illustrating various theological concepts that were intended to be read and completely understood without the aid of other texts.'¹¹ An example of this can be found in the *Speculum theologiae* produced in Germany around 1300 (Fig. 3). If in Buonaguida's painting we have an image that is faithful to Bonaventure's text and in the *Speculum* we have a diagram

⁸ Saint Bonaventure, *The soul's journey into God; the tree of life; the life of St. Francis*, trans. by Cousins, Ewert H, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 120.

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Philip F Esler, *Pacino di Buonaguida's Tree of Life: Interpreting the Bible in Paint in Early Fourteenth-Century Italy*, In: *Biblical Reception*, (Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2015) p. 7, <<https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/2857/>> [accessed 21 Nov 2024].

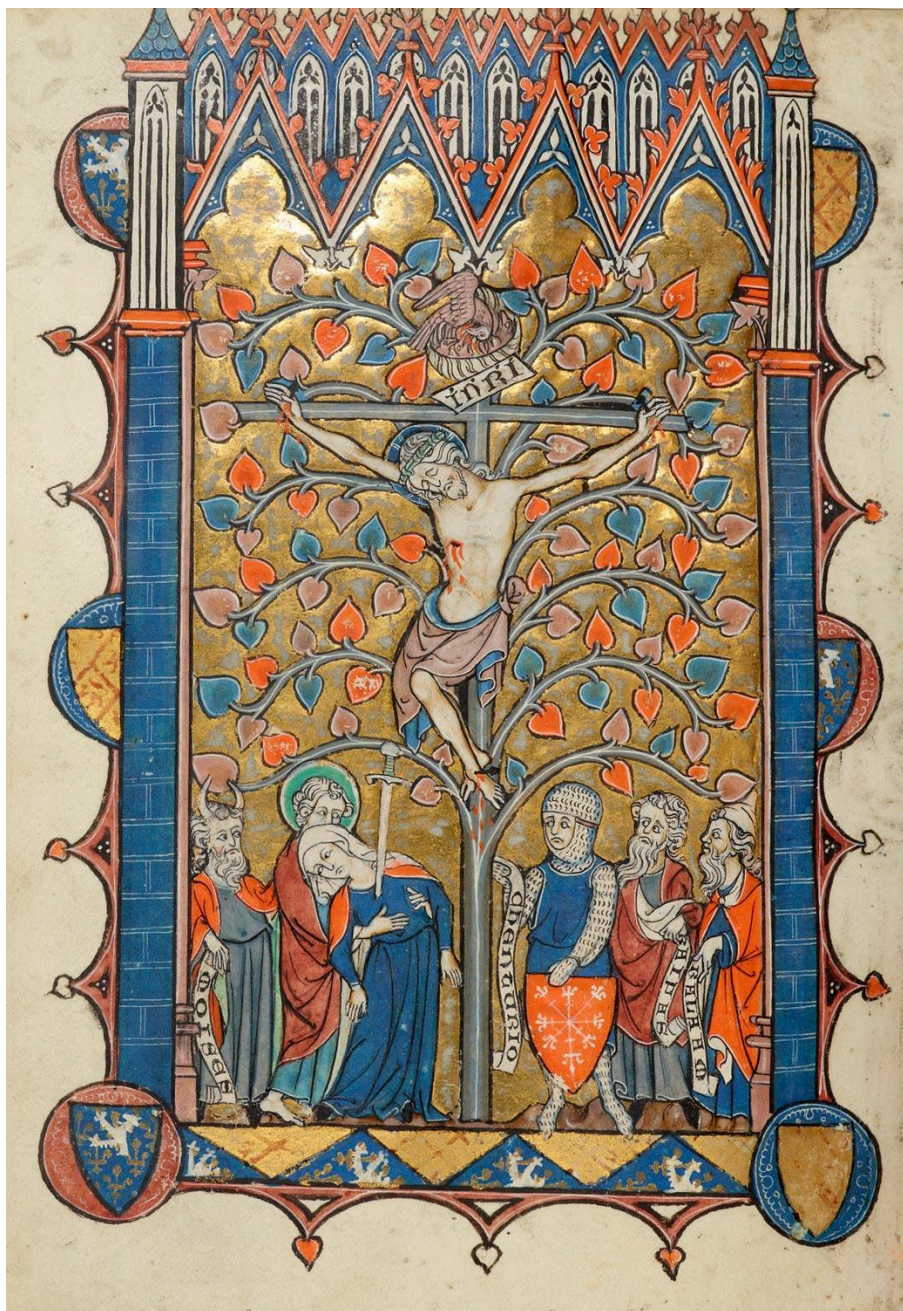
¹¹ Gould, *Psalter-Hours*, p. 100.

illustrating its concepts independently, then the miniature in M. 729 represents a simplified version of Bonaventure's work that is nonetheless visually concise. The number of figures present are reduced, and there are no texts or verses on either the witnesses or the branches. The fruits themselves are absent, and the image is less self-explanatory and didactic, suggesting that Bonaventure's work was well known enough in Northern France by the late 13th century that an allusory meditational image could be understood.¹² Not only is fol. 345v one of the earliest known examples of a depiction of Bonaventure's Tree of Life, it also represents a development in artistic expression and spiritual thought. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the wealthy laity of France during the late 13th century were well-educated and aware of contemporary philosophical paradigms.

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 102–103

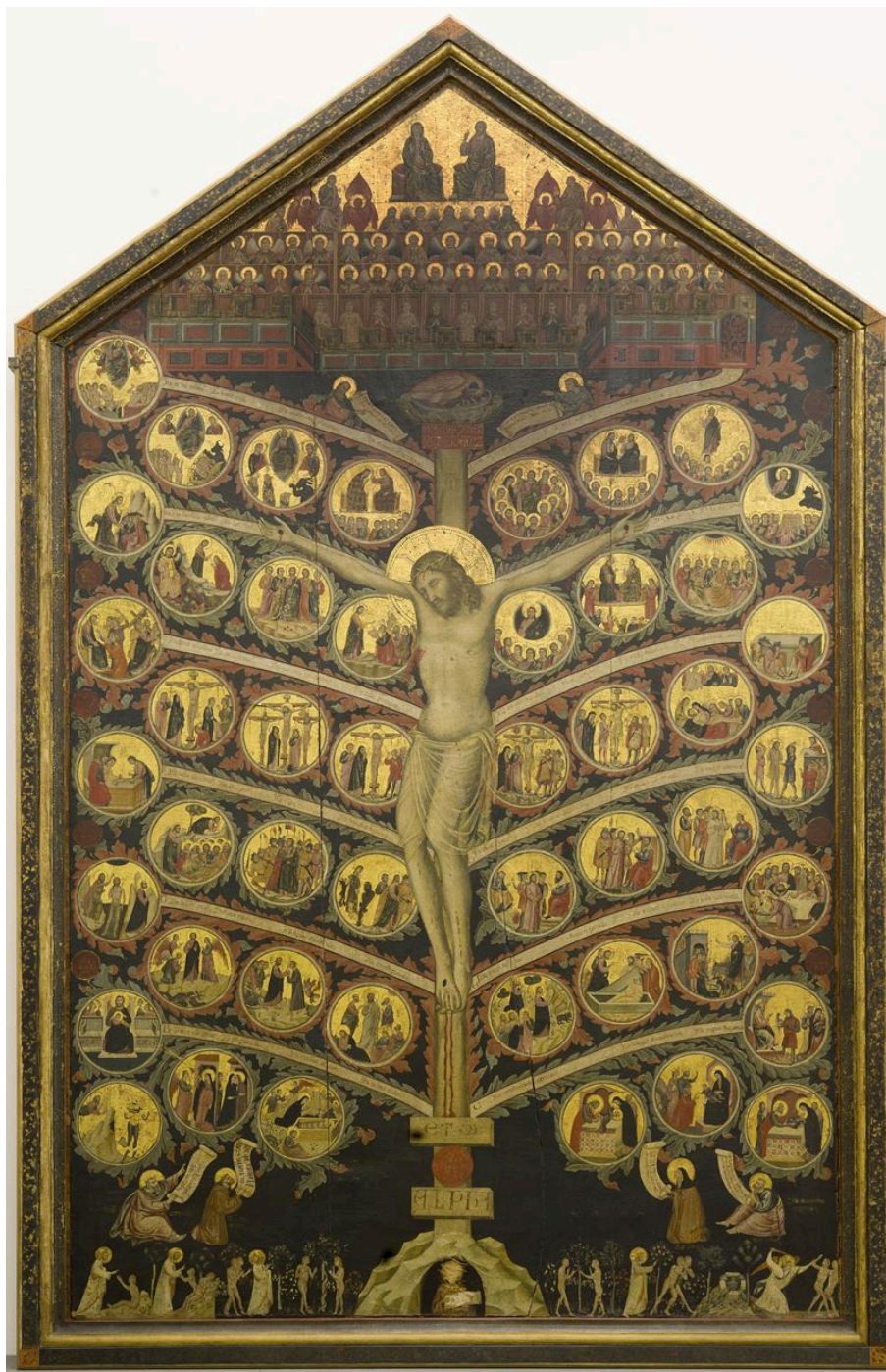
Images

Fig. 1



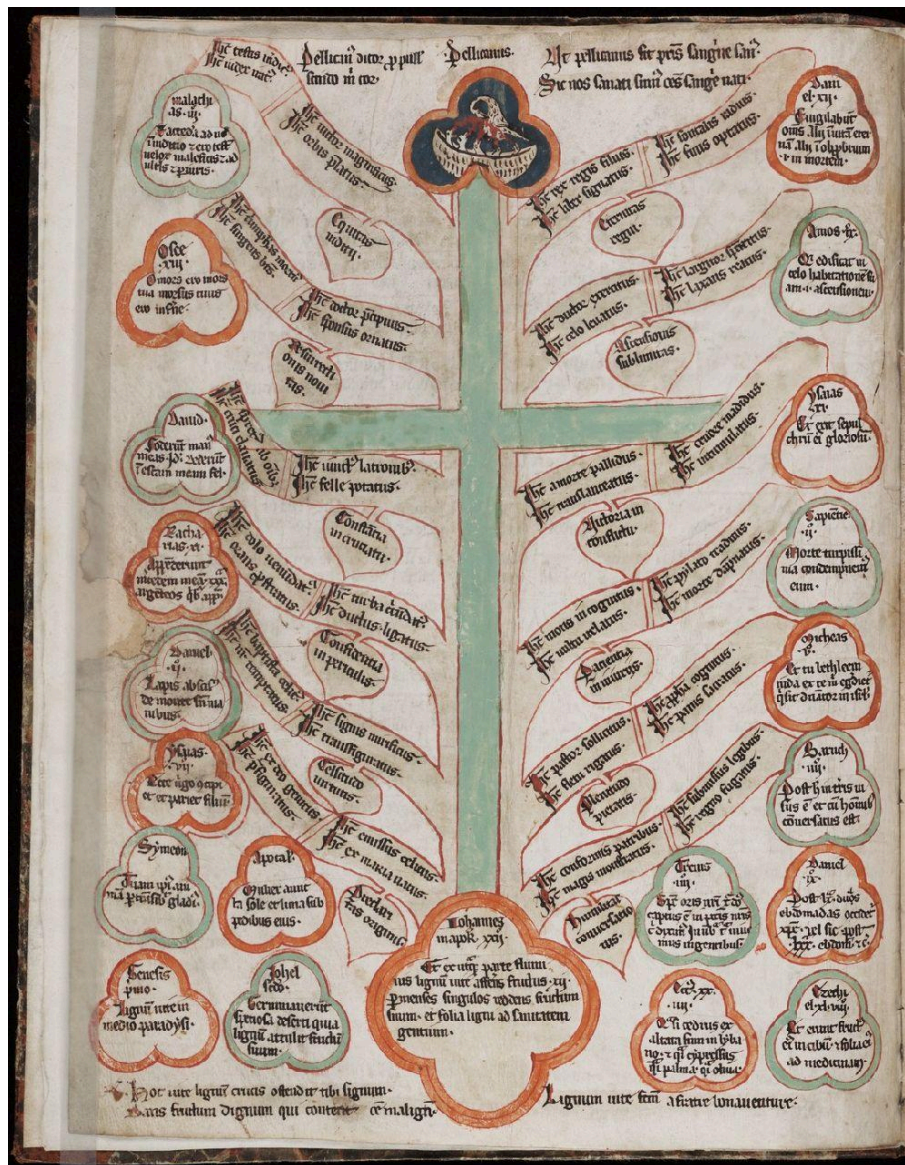
Morgan MS M. 729 fol. 345v, *Psalter-Hours of Yolande de Soissons*, Medieval World Handbook, UWTSO.

Fig. 2



Pacino di Buonaguida, *The Tree of Life* (1310–1315), Galleria dell' Accademia di Firenze, <https://www.galleriaaccademiafirenze.it/en/artworks/albero-della-vita-pacino-buonaguida> [accessed 21 Nov 2024].

Fig. 3



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- The Morgan Library and Museum, *Psalter-Hours, France, Amiens, between 1280 and 1299, MS M.729 fol. 345v* (no date), <<https://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/110/128492>> [accessed 19 Nov 2024]