

Assessment 4: Image Commentary

Image: Full Page Illustration in Margaret of Croy's Book of Hours (1430/1450)

Source: Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 56, fol. 53r

Introduction: A Medieval Book of Hours

The image for this Assessment was found within the Book of Hours owned by Margaret of Croy. The library which houses the manuscript reports that it was created in Flanders in the Netherlands and is written in both Latin and Dutch. Folios 1-107 are believed to have been made in 1430, with Folios 109-221 added c. 1450, for Margaret of Croy, daughter of Antoine of Croy, who lived in Holland.¹ The Croy family rose to significant power during the Burgundian dynasty of the 15th century. The Croys were noted to have become "one of the most prominent and powerful families of the fifteenth century" due to their connections to the Valois dukes of Burgundy who assumed control in the region at this time.²

Margaret's Book of Hours is very elaborate, with dozens of illustrations – many filling the entire page. There is also a significant amount of variety in the colors of ink and a liberal use of gold leaf, which would all have indicated just how wealthy and important the Croy family was in order to afford such a book. When the additional folios were added, Margaret of Croy was depicted in one of the illustrations, holding a prayerbook in her hands and kneeling in front of the Pieta, again reinforcing her status as

¹ Newberry Library catalog entry for "Book of Hours, Use of Rome, prayerbook of Margaret of Croy" https://i-share-nby.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?vid=01CARLI_NBY:CARLI_NBY&lang=en [accessed 23 November 2021].

² W. Prevenier, *The Burgundian Netherlands* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986), p.136.

patron of the church and devout Catholic.³ A final testament to the expense of the book is the handwriting style used. The book was written in Gothic lettering, which would have been very expensive to produce as it was time consuming to write. Personal ownership of such a book would also have confirmed that Margaret was a person of high status, for she presumably had the financial resources available to have been taught how to read both Latin and Dutch.

As stated in her article 'The Book of Hours: A Medieval Bestseller', Wendy Stein relays that these books were designed to help laypeople with their daily prayers and devotionals. Stein notes that hundreds of these books were created in the Middle Ages and while no two are identical, standard hymns and parables were included to help non-clergy with their daily prayers. The prayers were to be recited at the eight canonical hours of the day, hence the name the 'Book of Hours'.⁴ Even though the manuscript is not in English, its religious intentions are quickly discernable while looking through the book. Being Catholic myself, I am able to pick out words and images that I have seen repeatedly throughout my life. The church uses repetition and common themes to help instill the lessons in the public and they haven't changed much over the millennia! While looking through Margaret's Book of Hours, I was able to easily understand images of the crucifixion and key figures like the Virgin Mary, Jesus and various Apostles. As Margaret of Croy would have experienced nearly 600 years ago, the book still inspires a sense of reflection and contemplation on the teachings of the church and a reminder that God rules over all.

³ L. Seidel, *Pious Journeys: Christian Devotional Art And Practice In The Later Middle Ages And Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2001), p. 54 identifies the kneeling person in the image as Margaret. The image itself can be found on folio 151r of the manuscript.

⁴ W. Stein, 'The Book of Hours: A Medieval Bestseller' from the Museum of Art website, Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hour/hd_hour.htm (June 2017), accessed 26 November 2021.

The Image



Figure 1. Photograph of Folio 53r, Chicago, Newberry Library, MS 56
Source: Author's own image

The image chosen for this Assessment comes from folio 53r in the manuscript (Fig. 1). It comprises a seated figure holding a sword upright looking at two men who are in front of him. The seated figure is likely a king, as he appears to be on a throne, though he does not wear a crown. He wears his dark hair down loose and has a long beard, and his head is covered with a plain hat. He also wears a long, blue, plain tunic. One of the two men he is observing appear to be a knight or soldier fitted out in armor and the other is possibly a servant or vassal in lay clothes. There is a fourth figure in the image, a man peering over a half wall behind the scene. Though this figure is mostly obscured by the wall, you can make out his tonsure and part of his blue robes, so he is most certainly part of the clergy.

The most striking part of the image, however, are the two infants in the scene. One has been decapitated, his swaddled body lies next to the King's feet and the head is on a spike, still in the hands of the soldier. The other infant is in the arms of the second man in front of the king. The man appears to be trying to flee with the child, but the soldier is stepping on the back of his tunic and preventing him from leaving.

The image is set within a frame on the page, and the effect is that of peering through a window onto the gruesome scene within. The margins are brightly decorated (like many others in the book), with flowers and vines weaving their way around the page. Two figures in the margins look on. One of these is a kind of hybrid centaur poised with a spear of his own to throw into the scene, while the individual possibly dressed as a jester at the bottom of the page is gasping in horror at the scene above him (Fig. 2). Part of a green dragon is visible at the top of the page, though part of his body and the top border have been cut off. Many of the other full page images in the book had the same feature, so perhaps at some stage when the book was re-bound it was trimmed and the tops of the full page images were cut off.



Figure 2. Marginal detail of a horrified onlooker
Source: Author's own image

I believe this image is depicting the “Massacre of the Innocents” story in the Bible. In this narrative, King Herod ordered the murder of male children under the age of two in an attempt to prevent Jesus from exceeding him in power and influence.⁵

In addition to the large image on the page, there are a few lines of text included which seem to be in Latin and are most likely the prayer which is to be recited at the given hour. While transcription and translation is not part of this assignment, it is easy to make out the first word with its illuminated initial letter “D” in “Deus” (God) as well as the next illuminated letter “G” in the word “Gloria” (Glory). In the fifth line, the word “Memento”, meaning “remember” (with an illustrated “M”), followed by what looks like “salutis auctor” which Google translates as the phrase “remember the author”.⁶ This phrase was

⁵ S. Cho, *Matthew's Account Of The Massacre Of The Innocents In Light Of Its Reception History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2021), pp. 31-36.

⁶ Google translate, Latin to English, www.translate.google.com [accessed 3 December 2021].

also repeated in other full page illustrations in the manuscript, though with other words following the invocation.⁷ It is not entirely clear what the line is meant to convey in each instance, but assumedly it is a plea for the penitent to be remembered and protected by the Holy figures in the book.

The folios are made of parchment and the ink remains incredibly vibrant even today. There are a variety of colors on the page, including blue, red, green, yellow, purple, and a significant amount of gold leaf framing the image and applied to the marginal plants so that they shimmer and catch the eye while turning the pages. Additional attention is given to details within the image, such as the wall tiles in the background, the floor tiles of the chamber and the fabric which is draped over the throne upon which the King observes his orders being carried out. The scribe could have easily left these sections a single color with no detail but they have taken the time to add detailed patterns which give the scene more depth and reality.

Significance and Importance

The image depicts an event which purportedly took place more than a thousand years before the image was created (essentially in Year 1 of the Common Era) and it is one of hundreds of Biblical events and religious figures that could have been included. This begs the question of why *this* scene was included in Margaret's Book of Hours to begin with and, furthermore, why was it selected as one of the few full-page images to lend it additional prominence? It would seem the reader is being reminded of the cruelty of the mortal world and that Jesus is the one true King who will bring salvation. It is a message the church would be wont to repeat and reinforce, as it ensures that they are the only path forward to Heaven.

⁷ MS 56, Margaret of Croy Book of Hours; folios 47r and 50r also contain this phrase

As to the question of why the Massacre of the Innocents was selected out of all the possible stories to reinforce the lesson of the power of God and the warning against false Kings, there may have been a contemporary revival of the Massacre of the Innocents parable due to a discovery a few centuries earlier.

The book *Early Christian Iconography* explains that the tomb of St. Maximin was discovered in France in the Middle Ages and was reported to also contain the bones of Mary Magdalene in the crypt, which would have been tremendous news. The sarcophagus of Maximin included a depiction of Herod's Massacre of the Innocents and the popularity of the story surged following the discovery of the crypt.⁸ This revival of the story could account for why it was included in a full page image in Margaret's prayer book. The religious scribe would have wanted to choose a story readers would be very familiar with so that there was no question as to the lesson being taught.

Conclusion

The vivid illustration in Margaret's Book of Hours is an example of visual culture reinforcing one of the key institutions of the time in which it was created: the church is the means to salvation and the end of human cruelty and suffering. Being included in a Book of Hours meant this image was seen by the reader frequently, likely every day, which would have further ingrained the image and its meaning into their mind. The image was created pre-Reformation and pre-Dissolution of the Monasteries that would come about in the 1500's and greatly decrease the power of the church throughout Europe and the rest of the world. That shift, however, would not start for nearly a century after this image was created, so the power of the church was still in full force to drive their message home. The Massacre of the Innocents image from Margaret of Croy's book of hours is a stark reminder to the reader of the cruelty of the

⁸ E.B. Smith, *Early Christian Iconography* (Princeton: University Press, 1918), p 67.

earthly world around them, the challenges that arise for the faithful and a reminder that leading a penitent life is the only way to salvation.

Bibliography

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