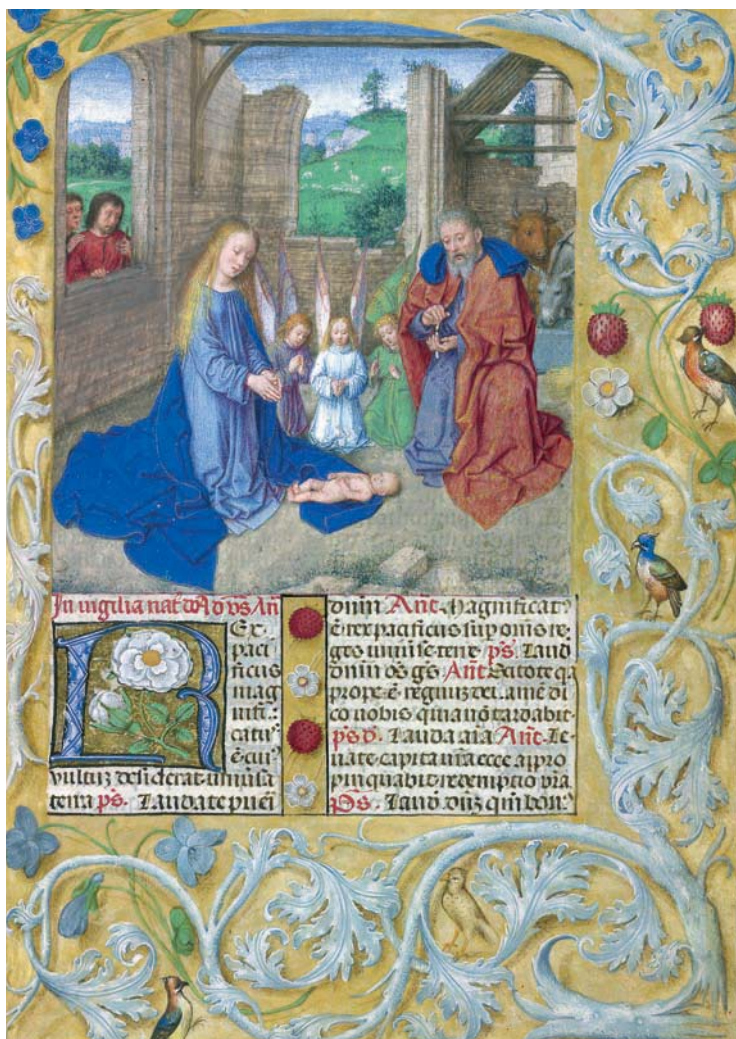


RELIGIOUS BOOKS CELEBRATED MANY EVENTS IN THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR AND OFFERED WAYS FOR THE DEVOUT TO OBSERVE EACH AND EVERY DAY. CHRISTMAS, ALWAYS A PARTICULARLY BELOVED SUBJECT FOR ARTISTS, WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR IMAGES WHICH WERE BOTH REVERENTIAL AND JOYFUL.

a little bit of

Heaven

Christophe Alzieu



Nativity Scene from The Isabella Breviary (f. 28r), last decade of the 15th c., courtesy M. Moleiro Editor

In the Middle Ages, the Christian church prescribed the so-called Divine Office—a certain order of prayers to be said at specific times of day. At that time, there existed a number of books containing such prayers, including the breviary and the book of hours. The breviary appeared in the eleventh century as a compilation of the numerous volumes used for daily prayer to supply poorer communities of canons, who had no means to possess all the required books, with the texts necessary to conducting the order of service. Initially the breviary was only used by monks, but eventually developed into a portable volume to be used in private.

One of the most highly prized breviaries is to be found in the collection of the British Library. The Isabella Breviary is an amazing manuscript which was intended to be the most luxurious Flemish Breviary ever created. Each of its pages was masterfully illuminated by the finest Flemish painters, resulting in a lavish manuscript of peerless beauty. Isabella the Catholic was given the manuscript shortly before 1497 by her ambassador Francisco de Rojas to commemorate the double marriage of her children, the Infante John of Asturias and the Infanta Joanna, to the children of emperor Maximilian of Austria and duchess Mary of Burgundy, Margaret and Philip. A full-page miniature shows the joint coat of arms created by Isabella and Ferdinand with a large eagle, the symbol of St John the Evangelist and the coats of arms of the two new couples underneath.

The originality and impact of the miniatures in the Isabella Breviary make it a unique codex. Having more texts than a book of hours, a breviary offers illuminators a wider range of themes and consequently more artistic license and a greater variety of images. The six masters who worked on the Isabella Breviary paid particular attention to the scenes depicting the building, destruction and reconstruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem and also the celebration scenes with musicians and singers led by David. No other contemporary manuscript features a similar series.



RETROSPECTIVE

The Isabella Breviary is also of great historical importance because it reflects not only the artistic context but also the great political unrest in late-15th century Europe, a time when royal marriages meant international political alliances and territorial expansion. Following the death of Queen Isabella in 1504 the codex was “lost” for three centuries, only reappearing in England in the early 19th century. It contains illuminations by Gérard Horenbout, also known as the Master of James IV of Scotland. The

scenes Horenbout painted for this outstanding breviary are noteworthy for the brilliant use of colours and masterful representation of textures and fabrics; some of his most important miniatures being the Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi.

Horenbout was also the creator of the Hours of Joanna of Castile, and one of the first Flemish illuminators to incorporate elements characteristic of the Renaissance into his miniatures.



Announcement to the Shepherds
from *The Hours of Joanna I of*
Castile (f. 95v), c. 1500,
courtesy M. Moleiro Editor

A book of hours, like a breviary, also contains a collection of texts, prayers and psalms, along with appropriate illustrations, to form a reference for Catholic Christian worship and devotion. The medieval manuscript known as a book of hours is, in fact, a condensed breviary which was usually composed for the lay people who wished to incorporate elements of monasticism into their devotional life.

Most books of hours typically centred upon the recitation or singing of a number of psalms, accompanied by

set prayers and expanded upon them with a variety of additional prayers and devotions. For the Hours of Joanna of Castile, Horenbout created striking miniatures that are characterised by their three-dimensional realism and great sophistication, particularly those illustrating the Passion cycle. The faces charged with emotion, along with the liveliness and realism of the illuminated scenes make this codex one of the most impressive works by the Flemish artist. □



Adoration of the Shepherds from The Hours of Joanna I of Castile (f. 96r), c. 1500, courtesy M. Moleiro Editor