

Medieval Manuscripts: The Great Canterbury Psalter



By Rosa Alcoy

[The Great Canterbury Psalter](#), a masterpiece of late-twelfth-century English art and the last of a series of splendid psalters linked to Christ Church, Canterbury, is also the most important and ambitious creation known today of the oeuvre of the Catalan painter, Ferrer Bassa.



The Great Canterbury Psalter (Anglo-Catalan Psalter), 13th/14th century, Bibliothèque nationale de France

Also known as the *Anglo-Catalan Psalter*, its folios feature only the first 98 psalms, all of which are accompanied by a large header miniature. Forty-six of them are by English hands alone, 45 are the work of Catalans and 7 are combined efforts. The fact that the miniatures are in virtually mint condition, together with the length, originality and complexity of the motifs employed to illustrate the content of the psalms, and the large size and quality of the images it contains, all combine to make this manuscript an artistic landmark with the added merit of featuring the figurative reality of two different periods more than one hundred years apart on the same pages.

The fourteenth-century Catalan workshop was faced with a first-rate but unfinished work containing transcriptions of the three versions of the Psalter (Roman, Gallican and Hebrew) or Latin translations of the Psalms attributed to St Jerome, accompanied by large miniatures. The second workshop had to complete some of the initials at the top of these three versions, plus seven miniatures that had already been partly or completely drawn by the English masters and 45 spaces left blank for illustrations.

A variety of events and circumstances caused the delay and consequently the remarkable and unexpected convergence of English illumination of the closing decades of the 12th century with the Catalan, Italianate tradition of the second quarter of the 14th century. Both traditions, representative of two unmistakable languages – but also inextricably interwoven in the illustrations that merged their respective styles – make the *Great Canterbury Psalter* undoubtedly different and unique in all respects. In short, whereas the first half is representative of the most splendid, English painting of the late-twelfth century, the second half is the work of the most innovative and interesting representative of fourteenth-century, Catalan painting, an artist who took into account both the models in the manuscript itself and the values and demands of a new era.

Traits and Plasticity of Fourteenth-century Illustrations

From psalm 53 (f. 93r) onwards, the spaces reserved for miniatures were dealt with entirely by the Catalan workshop. Ferrer Bassa and a team of miniaturists following his teaching faithfully displayed their obvious knowledge of pictorial resources originating in Italy. Despite the changes and reworking to be found in the Catalan pages of the psalter, the English lesson was taken into account and it can be said that its complexities were, in one way or another, incorporated into the fourteenth-century vision.

Landscapes and architecture

Fortified cities full of buildings are one of the most eye-catching themes in the manuscript. Ferrer Bassa produced a singular language to create these images. He made the very most of the knowledge he acquired in Italy whilst designing a universe that somehow takes the contribution of his English predecessors into account. The circular towers topped by rounded turrets are one of the most commonplace motifs in the book but are only found occasionally in other works related to the Bassas' workshop.



The Great Canterbury Psalter (Anglo-Catalan Psalter), 13th/14th century, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

O God, the heathens are come into your inheritance (folio 141r)

In this manuscript, Ferrer Bassa toys with space on many occasions and in many different ways. He chooses different viewpoints, some of which are very artificial, designed to endow certain elements with relief or to imitate unusual visions of space like the one in the small image of David as a musician on f. 107r. Figures are arranged according to their rank and importance, although decidedly hierarchical perspectives are only employed occasionally. Most are majestic moments in which the narration takes a back seat (ff. 94r, 100r, 103v, 109v, 147r, 166r and 169r). This resource is never used to excess and it could even be said that it is avoided when the centre of attention is the tale itself, in which case subtler ways are used to convey the hierarchy of those present. Christ is sometimes positioned aloft and even extending beyond the frame, as on f. 132v (Preaching and Transfiguration). The debate with the doctors in the synagogue (f. 146r), where an adolescent Jesus clearly stands out as the main speaker, is a very attractive scene. Nor does the constant occupation of the centre, always reserved for Christ, go unnoticed in the small images depicting the Passion on f. 117r. The drastic reduction in the size of the leading figures in comparison with the enlarged architecture in other passages is in response to the script and creates very suggestive effects as, for example, when reference is made to the majestic moment when Christ talks to the devil on the roof of the temple (f. 163r).



Hear my prayer, O God (folio 94r, psalm 54)

It is probably no coincidence that the first image on this significant first folio produced entirely by the Catalan workshop, now working on spaces left blank, is an enthroned king surrounded by a few soldiers. Seated on the lavish, ornamental, fourteenth-century throne, the monarch governs and commands. At the gate of the city where the king's palace is located are two old men, one shod and the other barefoot. The latter is depicted going through the gate. The painter has made great efforts to portray this movement, showing how the old man releases the dove held in his hands and lets it fly away, only to reappear in the picture alongside. The dove's wings, expressly mentioned by the psalmist (v. 7, ... *Quis dabit mihi pennas sicut columbae, et volabo, et requiescam* // ... Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest?) evoke the spiritual nature, the soul and its flight from sin ("*columa simplex animal est absque felle, et a malitia fellis alienum: quia osculum charitatis animae significat*"). The space the bird flies to is a cave where a tonsured, pensive hermit rests ("*et requiescam*") with a hand upon his face. The bird, depicted three times, alights upon a tree growing next to the cave, the top of which extends beyond the frame. This is a reference to the persecution by Saul and the search for solitude emphasised in the psalm (v. 8, *Ecce elongavi fugiens: et mansi in solitudine.;* // Lo, I have gone far off flying away; and I abode in the wilderness) that St Augustine linked to David's flight into the desert. This is the place chosen to begin a new life, the "home of solitude" reflected in the psalm's home-making in solitude or living there. The hermit remains alone, meditating in the cave, giving rise to expectations about a synthetic representation of the Thebaides that the Italian Trecento had already transformed into far-reaching, pictorial scenes.

You can purchase a facsimile copy of the *Great Canterbury Psalter* from Moleiro.com. [Click here to find out more.](#)

From dress to anatomy

The interest in fabrics and garments extends beyond liturgical and court realms into those related to daily life. They all make it possible to insist on the book's Italianate dimension. Figures such as the one depicted inside the initial on f. 131r highlight the links between the Italian, pictorial civilisation and the culture reflected in it. The hangings of certain beds with white sheets and pillows covered by attractive, boldly designed bedspreads have little in common with the finery sported by a wide range of figures belonging to the nobility and even the court and the monarchy of that period. Tall caps, stiff collars and oversleeves are just some of the details sufficient to show how Ferrer Bassa embraces the fashion of the first Trecento, also characterised by long tunics. Many of the garments, hats and head-dresses depicted in the codex reveal their Italian sources. The best-dressed men and women contrast with the physically (f. 156v) or spiritually (f. 152r) poor and needy usually shown half naked. In this instance, attention must be paid to their anatomy, for the significance attributed to the bodies suggested beneath the garments and the bodies visible when completely or partly unclothed, is just as important as the garments themselves.



Incline your ear, O Lord, and hear me (folio 152r)

The book has many of this type of partly-naked images ranging from the needy to the Resurrection of either Christ (f. 101v) or the dead (f. 147r). From the 13th century onwards, and probably from the Renaissance in the 12th century, the passion for and recuperation of models of classical Antiquity encouraged a fondness for nudes, the appearance of which was renewed in many creations belonging to the Gothic period. Nor are naked figures completely absent from the Great Canterbury Psalter. Christ is not portrayed naked by chance: he appears naked apart from his legs coloured slightly by the blue waters in the Baptism on f. 144v, whilst in the Passion scenes on f. 117r he is already covered by a loincloth. These images are reminiscent to a certain extent of the naked Christ that St Francis declared he followed. The great impact of the Franciscans' vision of Christ and the world helped create a new type of religious sentiment of great transcendence in the history of art and its representations. The *Great Canterbury Psalter* was not unaffected by this course of developments, although it must be remembered that baptism is a way of garbing oneself with Christ, in which the body can be deemed to be a habit or garment. A positive meaning is added to the austerity of the clothes and the body begins to be appreciated as an indication of facilitating the recognition of the true human appearance. If the Man-God can appear naked, then so can the souls on the way to either hell or heaven (ff. 106r and 111r).



O God, who shall be like you? (folio 147r)

Still on the subject of garments, special mention must be made of the soldiers and military men depicted in the book's Old Testament scenes, some of its Passion of Christ scenes and those faithfully reflecting David's text. The armour of St Peter shown lying on the ground on f. 109v is a clear example of the master's Italian links, with his Giottoesque or para-Giottoesque learning reflected in the knight's breastplate. This green armour covered in foliate motifs combines with the pink colour of the skirt. The suit is reminiscent of the garb worn by other representatives of the military class (f. 101v). Other particularly noteworthy features include certain helmets with rather pointed profiles, and the shields featuring a variety of painted motifs that distinguish the different groups of combatants.



Deliver me from my enemies, O God (folio 101v, psalm 58)

The miniature in this psalm, described as a “resurrection canticle”, toys with contrasts in the spaces created by two registers. In line once again with the beginning of the psalm (...*quando missit Saül, et custodivit domus ejus, ut eum interficeret* // when Saul sent and watched his house to kill him), we return to the history of Saul who mounts a guard around David's house in order to put him to death (I Sam. 19: 11). Michol, David's wife, upon hearing of Saul's plans, warned her husband and hung him out of the window of a quadrangular tower representing his abode, thereby saving him from the clutches of his persecutor. The same scene shows a group of haggard soldiers waiting in vain whilst their prey flees. A city besieged by starving dogs precedes David's escape who cleverly deprives the hunter of his prey (v. 7, *Convertentur ad vesperam: et famen patientur ut canes, et circuibunt civitatem* // They shall return at evening, and shall suffer hunger like dogs: and shall go round about the city). At the same time, the theme seeks to demonstrate that the soul must be built like an impenetrable fortress for, despite being devoted to God, it can be attacked at any time (v.10 *Fortitudinem meam ad te custodiam, quia Deus susceptor meus es* // I will keep my strength to thee: for thou art my protector). All this is reflected in two adjoining sequences separated by a reddish frame but both featuring very prominent architectonic elements.

The bottom register features two spaces: one containing the men unable to see God, blindfolded and enclosed in a room, and another in which they are able to overcome the threshold of blindness and perceive Christ's presence, and then, by means of the rite of baptism, adopt the New Law. The main figure in the lower register's last scene is Christ upon a small mountain with a scroll in each hand beneath the space occupied by the Resurrection. The Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is alluded to but not portrayed here, appearing on f. 132r. People are not present in their usual numbers which may suggest that this is a general reference to the divine presence defined on the basis of previous approaches to the conversion and acceptance of the divine law, the new law, following the demise of the Old Law.

This was an excerpt from *The Great Canterbury Psalter (Anglo-Catalan Psalter)* commentary volume by Rosa Alcoy of the University of Barcelona.

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