

Medieval manuscripts: Easter in the Book of Hours of Henry IV of France



On the occasion of the Easter holiday, we present a set of exceptional miniatures from the [Book of Hours of Henry IV of France](#), created in Paris around the year 1510 and now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Passion according to John: Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and Betrayal of Christ

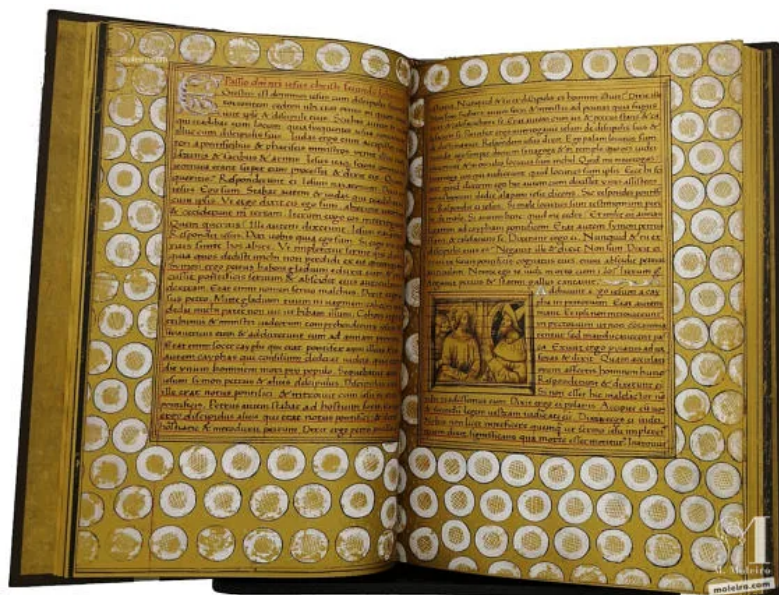


Interrupted by the two popular prayers to the Virgin, the Gospel lessons continue with the Passion according to John. The text opens with two full page miniatures on facing pages for Matins and continues with four more small drawings inserted in the texts to illustrate the further events of Good Friday.

Most fully illustrated Passion texts have eight pictures for the stations of Christ's suffering according to the prayer hours of the day; Matins, Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. The subjects accord with those of the Hours of the Passion or the Hours of the Cross.

The impressive opening pages with large framed miniatures are used to depict the first two events of the Passion which both take place in the Garden of Gethsemane to where Christ had retreated after the last supper accompanied by the apostles Peter, John and James. The first miniature illustrates Christ's Agony and the words of his prayer "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me". These are, as usual, visualized literally by an actual chalice standing on a high rock before him. The chalice not only illustrated the text but also refers the viewer to the sacrifice of Christ's blood and the familiar communion in mass. In the foreground, the apostles, whom Christ had asked to stay awake, are sound asleep. The second miniature gives a different view of the entrance of the garden from where Judas has arrived leading the soldiers who have come to arrest Christ and betrays him with a kiss. In his hand Christ holds the ear of the priest's servant Malchus, which Peter, still holding his sword, had cut off in fury. Both images adhere to a very common iconography, but reduced palette reveals a new quality, indicating a dim nocturnal light. Only the second scene of Betrayal shows a star spangled sky and a mysterious golden light shining pointedly on Christ's head.

Christ before Caiaphas



In the first drawing Christ is led to the high priest Caiaphas who is characterized by a long beard and a pointed hat and can be identified by the opening words of the text which are marked by a white initial A[dducunt ergo iesum a caypha]. The drawing effectively highlights Christ's accuser by setting his face off against the black wall decoration behind him.

The Hours of the Holy Cross: Christ Carrying the Cross and Crucifixion



The traditional subject marking the Hours of the Cross is the Crucifixion which is here preceded by a miniature of the Way to Calvary. Both images are particularly apt for both the devotion of the Holy Cross and the appeal for Compassion, which had become an increasingly important aspect of late medieval private devotion. With respect to the Carrying of the Cross this appeal is already founded in the New Testament where Matthew (16:24) cites Christ's words to his disciples "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

Following a standard iconography, the miniature shows the procession coming out of the city gate. Like in the small drawing which illustrated John's Passion test, Christ turns his martyred face to the viewer, although with an absent look not actively addressing them. One of the henchmen pulls him cruelly by a rope slung around Christ's neck. Following the cross the St. John, holding a cloth to his face and the praying Virgin bemoan Christ's fate.

Obsecro te: Lamentation of Christ below the Cross



In this first of a group of diptychs that unite two miniatures in one image the main scene, placed on the second page, is an autonomous composition which could also function as a single miniature. The four figures – The Virgin Mary with her dead son in her lap, the apostle John holding Christ's head and Mary Magdalen with an ointment vessel drying her tears with her scarf – are closely grouped to form a relief set against one of the illuminator's typically deserted landscape backgrounds. Unusually in the cycle of this manuscript, the group displays a strong emotional intensity and devotional appeal emphasized by the drastic blood flow from Christ's wounds shown in bright red, the sunken chest of his large corps which threatens to slip from his grieving mother's knees and the absence of colour which here assumes a saddening.

This was an excerpt from the [Book of Hours of Henry IV of France](#) commentary volume by Dr. Caroline Zöhl (University of Vienna). Learn more about this book and other by visiting [Molero.com](#)