

# The Many Artists of the Isabella Breviary

Scot McKendrick (The British Library)

The *Isabella Breviary* (British Library, Add. MS. 18851) is a remarkable book. Within its pages lie some of the finest illuminations ever painted during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. **Produced by some of the most accomplished artists of their day**, these miniature masterpieces bear vivid testimony to the high achievement of early Netherlandish art outside of the tradition of larger scale painting in oil made familiar to modern audiences through the work of such great masters as Jan van Eyck, Rogier van der Weyden, Hans Memling and Hugo van der Goes. Even within the distinguished tradition of Flemish illumination the *Isabella Breviary* is arguably one of the most remarkable works ever produced.



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London  
**David and his musicians (folio 184v)**, Solomon watches the building of the Temple-(folio 185r)

Yet, the *Breviary* is much more. **It is also one of the most outstanding works of art associated with the Catholic Monarchs of Spain, and Queen Isabella of Castile in particular.** It certainly offers a most vivid manifestation of the confidence, power, opulence and fervent Christian faith of the queen who, with her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon, single-mindedly sought religious and nation unity in Spain, laid the foundations of Spain's enrichment from the New World and established by inter-

marriage with the Hapsburgs a dynasty whose power and wealth was second to none within Western Europe. Much later, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the *Breviary* became one of the outstanding treasures of the British national collection of books and manuscripts. Within the British Library it bears testimony to the significance of its vast collections for the preservation and understanding of the world's cultural heritage.

## The Painted Decoration

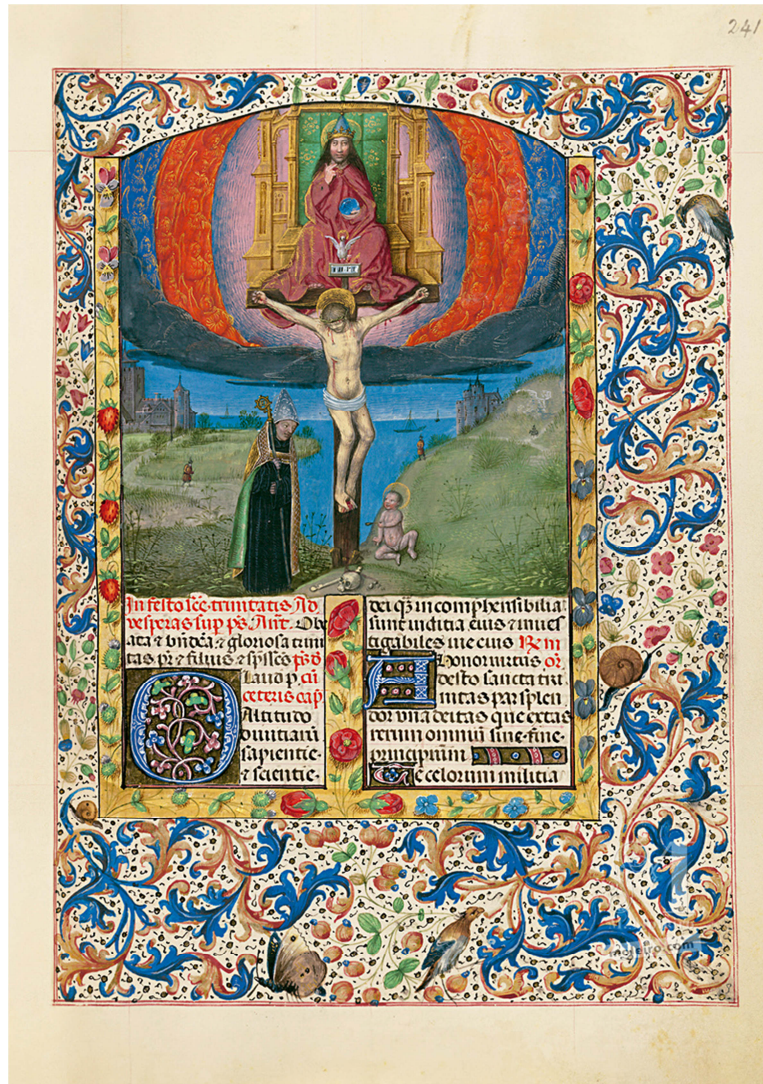
Without doubt it is its painted decoration that sets apart the *Isabella Breviary* as a work of outstanding artistic achievement. In its own time that decoration helped those who used the Breviary to follow and respond to the daily round of Christian worship, acting not only as markers for the main divisions of the text, but also as prompts to the visualization of the spiritual and religious points of focus of that text. Loosely described as illustrations, the numerous illuminated miniatures enriched the religious meaning and resonance of the Breviary text rather than depicted in images what it narrated in words. **Virtuosic miniature painting and sustained pictorial invention by some of the most accomplished artists of their times added to the volume's status as an object to treasure for both its colourful richness and its spiritual value. [...]**

## The Artists

Like many extensively illustrated manuscripts made before and after it, the *Isabella Breviary* required more than one campaign to complete it. In the face of the vagaries of life the high ambitions of those who originally planned the volume proved too demanding for such a simple model of production.

### The Master of the Dresden Prayer Book

The artist responsible for the largest part of the illustrative programme of the *Breviary* – 92 out of a total of 168 illustrations – is the anonymous illuminator, the Master of the Dresden Prayer Book. Named after an unusual book of hours in Dresden datable to c. 1470, he was responsible for many of the artistically most accomplished books produced in his time. **His highly imaginative and original approach to book illustration enabled him to make major contributions to the illumination of both secular and religious texts** during the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Within these works he was often the sole or leading illustrator. [...]



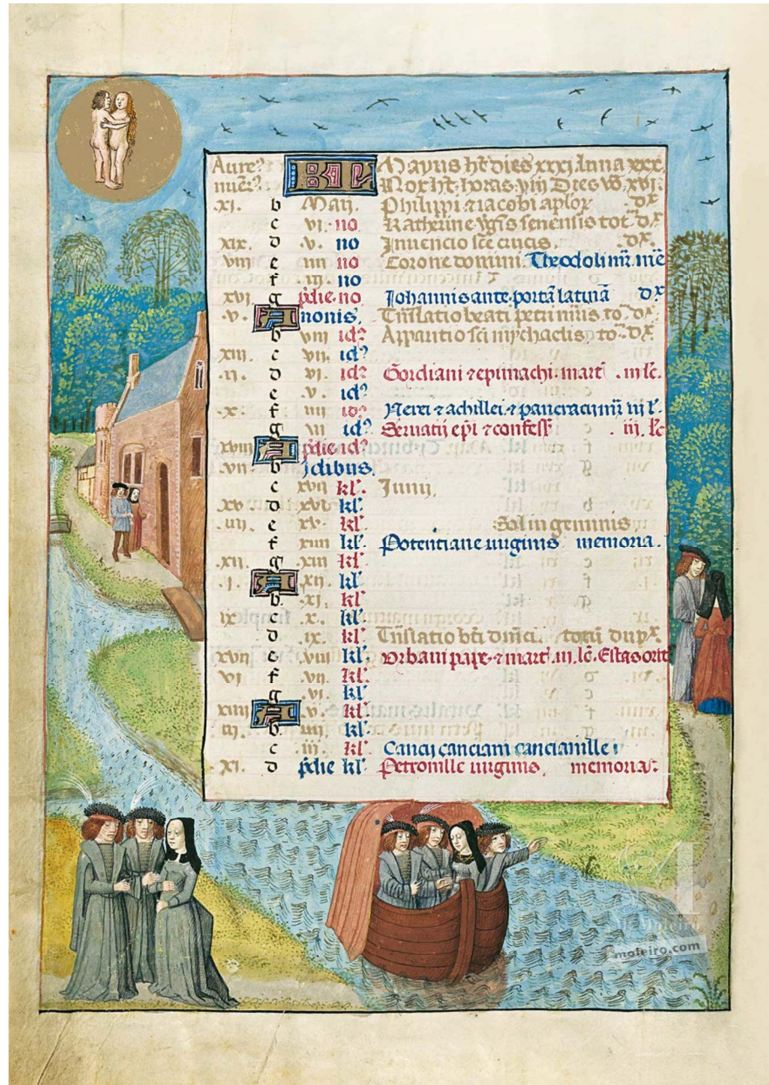
*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London  
The Holy Trinity with St. Augustine and the child by the shore (folio 241r)

His artistic invention repeatedly responded to the demands of both the common and uncommon subjects that are described or alluded to in the texts of the *Breviary*. His depiction of the Trinity (f. 241r), for example, is particularly unusual in its depiction of the Son on the Cross, the crossbar of which interlocks with the base of the throne of God the Father and the surmounting *titulus* of which acts as a perch for the dove of the Holy Spirit. The iconographic complexity of this miniature is compounded by the Trinity being depicted within the context of Augustine's legendary rebuke for seeking to explain the Trinity which, as the child explains to him, is as futile as trying to ladle the sea into a hole in the ground. The beautiful deep landscape adds a serene atmosphere to this mystical encounter.



## The Calendar Master

The illumination of the *Breviary's* calendar (ff. 1v-7r) was almost certainly executed at the same moment as the portion undertaken by the Dresden Master. Its artist has been convincingly identified as both a contributor to the type A borders in the first part of the volume and a known associate of the Dresden Master.



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London

**May (folio 3v)**

## Gerald David

[...] Two of the most prominent feast days celebrated in the *Breviary*, Christmas Day and Epiphany, were reserved for **an artist of outstanding artistic merits**. The subjects required were also two of those most commonly painted by contemporary artists of larger scale painting, namely the **Nativity** and **Adoration of the Magi** (ff. 29r and 41r).



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London  
**Adoration of the Magi (folio 41r)**

The Adoration has long been recognized for its strong links to early Netherlandish panel painting, both in technique and composition. In the description of the *Breviary* that he first published in 1838, the art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen not only praised the miniature for **its painterly style**, but also drew attention to its repetition of the composition of a large-scale panel of the Adoration that was by then at Munich (Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 715). Although Waagen was particularly well placed to make this comparison, having studied the larger painting first-hand before he saw the Breviary in 1835, he never attributed the miniature to a named artist, but restricted himself to identifying this hand with that responsible for not only the Nativity, but also the St Barbara and St John the Evangelist on Patmos (ff. 297r and 309r). Subsequently repeated attributions of the Munich panel to the painter Gerard David and comparisons of the Nativity miniature with a panel of the same subject in New York also attributed to David (Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 32.100.40a) have led modern critics to assign either all or some of these four miniatures to the Bruges painter. [...]



## The Master of James IV of Scotland

Of the remaining contributors to the *Isabella Breviary*'s illustration the most significant was the Master of James IV of Scotland, who was responsible for 48 of its 168 illustrations. Named after his contribution of a portrait of James IV of Scotland to a Book of Hours produced around the time of the king's marriage to Margaret Tudor in 1503 (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1897), this illuminator has come to be recognized as one of the greatest exponents of Flemish miniature painting of the generation after the Dresden Master and before Simon Bening [...]. Many previous critics have argued for the identification of the Master of James IV with the documented artist Gerard Horenbout [...]



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London  
**Apology of the coronation of Queen Isabella - The Crowning of Our Lady (folio 437r)**

The artistic style of the Master of James IV of Scotland is one of the most distinctive amongst Flemish illuminators. **His figure types are particularly fleshy, his handling of paint and brushwork notably free and innovative, and his choice and combination of colours often adventurous.** In his later works he explored further ways of developing and extending the illusionism of Flemish manuscript painting. He also made significant contributions to the development of book illumination in his inventive approach to the decoration of double-page openings and interplay between miniature and border spaces. Although little of these innovations appears in the *Isabella Breviary*, his main stylistic traits are well-developed in the volume and capable of close comparison with his later work. The contribution of

the Master of James IV is confined to the second part of the *Breviary*. Indeed he is the only illuminator responsible for the illustrations in that part of the book. Within that campaign all except three were one-column miniatures depicting individual saints. Even the three larger miniatures that he executed (ff. 437r, 477v, 481r) were produced in spaces much smaller than those allocated to the Dresden Master in the first part of the *Breviary*.

### The Spanish contribution

The remaining artistic contributions are relatively minor ones, but critical for a full understanding of the history of the *Breviary* and its production. First of all there is the rather ineptly executed Martyrdom of St Peter Martyr (f. 365r,) that Bodo Brinkmann thought was painted by a less talented artist over an existing sketch by the Dresden Master.



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London  
Peter and Paul (folio 392r)

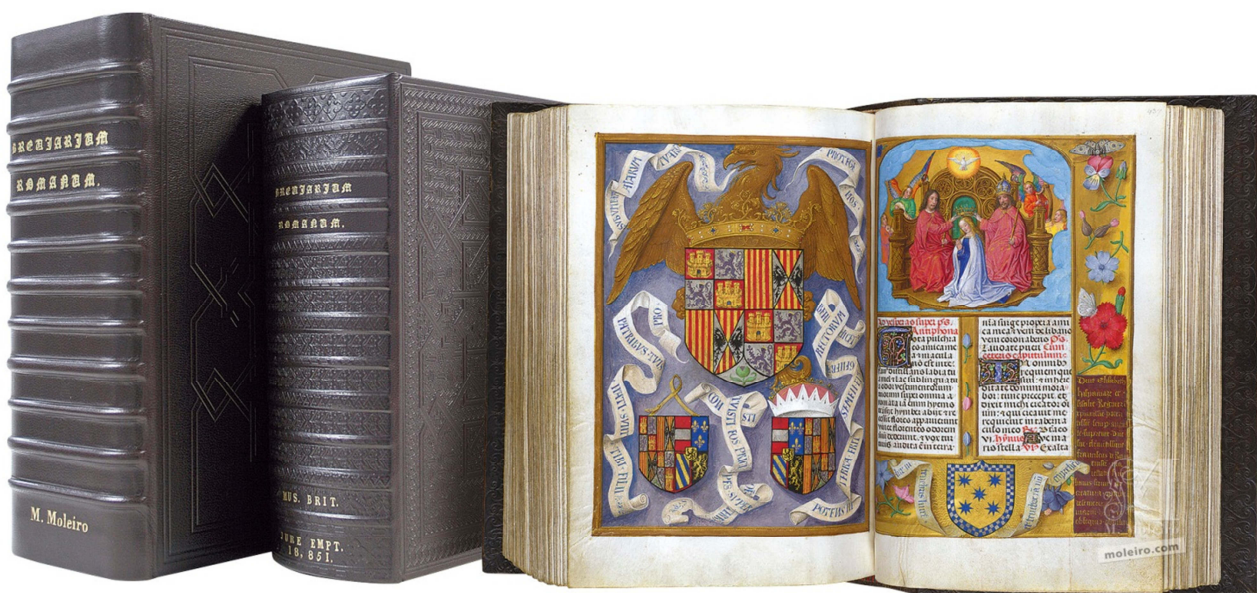


Second, there are three large and two one-column miniatures that were painted on separate sheets of vellum and pasted into the volume (ff. 372r, 374r, 386r, 390r, 392r, 399r). These miniatures are restricted to three of the final gatherings of the first part of the *Breviary* and within these they are the only illustrations. Although little attention has been given to their artistic character, recent critics have come to regard these miniatures as the work of a Spanish painter c. 1500 and as thus the final stage in the production of the *Breviary* within its early history.

Third, there are one large and four one-column miniatures that occur in two other gatherings in this same part of the *Breviary*, each of which is painted directly onto the original vellum of the book rather than a separate piece. Given their distinctively modern painterly style that draws on the techniques of oil painting more than on those of medieval illumination, as well as the observation by Dibdin that as late as his day one of these illustrations, the St Catherine, remained unexecuted, these five illustrations have now been recognized as the work of an English artist of the early nineteenth century.

## Modern History

After centuries in obscurity, the *Isabella Breviary* re-emerged in transformed glory. Whereas we know nothing for certain of the book's history after its arrival in Spain in the late fifteenth century, numerous records testify to its significant impact on new admirers in nineteenth-century Britain. Like many manuscripts of Continental origin, **the volume had migrated from Continental Europe to Britain** because of the commercial opportunities offered by London's vibrant book trade and thereafter had been seized upon by British private collectors whose considerable wealth allowed them to indulge their developing taste for illuminated manuscripts. [...]



*The Isabella Breviary*, last decade of the 15th century, The British Library, London

By 1815 the *Breviary* was owned by John Dent, of Hertford Street in Mayfair, London. Banker and Member of Parliament, Dent was also a Fellow of the Royal Society, founding member of the Roxburghe Club and prominent bibliophile. Besides the *Breviary* he owned a splendid Greek Gospel lectionary now in the Morgan Library (M. 639) which, like the *Breviary*, was reputed to have come from



the Escorial. Other manuscripts belonging to him were of either French or English origin. Although Dent acquired a large part of his collection en bloc around 1808, the Breviary does not appear ever to have belonged to library of Robert Heathcote that he bought on this occasion.

In March 1827 the Breviary was sold together with the rest of Dent's library at a spectacular auction held by Robert Harding Evans at his London rooms in Pall Mall. [...] Despite the fact that the sale overall exhibited what Dibdin noted in his *Bibliomania* of 1842 as the "first grand melancholy symptoms of the decay of the Bibliomania", **the Breviary fetched the substantial price of £378.**

At this point the Isabella Breviary became the property of the wealthy attorney-at-law Philip Hurd (d. 1831), of the Inner Temple and Kentish Town. Owner since 1819 of the impressive mansion at the foot of Highgate Hill named Bateman's folly, Hurd had accumulated a choice library of books and manuscripts. [...] Hurd had less time than Dent to enjoy his treasure. On 28 June 1831 he died, and in March of the following year, only five years since it had first appeared at auction, the *Breviary* was once again put up for sale by Evans. [...] Despite it being described in exactly the same way as in 1827, **the Breviary gained considerably in price, being sold for £520.**

Third in the line of British private owners of the Isabella Breviary was Sir John Tobin (1763-1851), merchant, shipowner and once Lord Mayor of Liverpool. Different in his social origins, place of residence and profession from both Dent and Hurd, Tobin exemplified the new mercantile collector of the North of England. [...]

During the volume's time in the possession of Sir John Tobin the Isabella Breviary gained wider recognition among art connoisseurs and manuscript specialists. In 1835, during their separate visits, Sir Frederic Madden, future Keeper of Manuscripts at the British Museum and the German art historian Gustav Friedrich Waagen (1794-1868) viewed Sir John's collection at Oak Hill outside Liverpool. Both noted the *Breviary*. For Waagen the main interest lay in **the work of the "accomplished artist, whose pictures are executed in a very refined taste of the later followers of Van Eyck, in an extremely delicate soft tone, in the flesh rather inclining to purple"**. [...] For Madden, who had already seen the volume before Hurd's sale in 1832, the Breviary was without doubt a great treasure.

Upon Sir John's death in February 1851 the second part of the history of the Isabella Breviary begins. The culmination of this part was to be its purchase for the British nation on 2 Feb. 1852, and its progression from private to institutional ownership – from the status of personal to national treasure. Yet, the course of history was far from straightforward. Early in 1852 the London book dealer, William Boone, had persuaded Sir John's son the Rev. John Tobin, of Liscard, Cheshire, to sell to him for £1900 all eight of his father's manuscripts, including the Breviary. He had also made Tobin believe that despite his "cherished intention" of doing so there was no realistic prospect of a direct sale to the British Museum. Having then offered the manuscripts to the avid collector, Bertram, 4th Earl of Ashburnham, without success, Boone himself approached the British Museum. As with most dealers, the price demanded by Boone was considerably higher than that which he had himself paid: what he now wanted for the Tobin manuscripts was **£3000**. Uncharacteristically the Trustees of the British Museum were unanimous in their determination to secure them "at all events". Thus, when Boone refused to reduce his price and threatened to reopen negotiations with Lord Ashburnham, the reluctant Keeper of Manuscripts conceded him the full sum, its payment split over two years. **In doing so he made for the British nation its single most important purchase of illuminated manuscripts.**

In 1973, together with the rest of the collections of the Department of Manuscripts of the British Museum, the Isabella Breviary became part of the newly created British Library.

*This was an excerpt from The Isabella Breviary commentary volume by Scot McKendrick (Head of History and Classics at the British Library).*