

## Bishop Fonseca's Book of Hours



This is the most precious item in the important library of what was once the Jesuit college and later the San Carlos Seminary. It was probably illuminated in Bruges, although the commissioner or first addressee is unknown. As Professor Elisa Ruiz suggests, it may have belonged to Queen Isabella the Catholic, but there is no documentary evidence to prove this. It later belonged to the former bishop of Palencia and Burgos, Don Juan Rodríguez de Fonseca, a man trusted by the queen. It would eventually belong to Cardinal Odescalchi, who would later occupy the papal chair under the name of Innocent XI.

Books of hours in general, and more particularly some as sumptuous as this one, must in most cases have been objects of ostentation, like any other kind of jewellery or prestige, as there are hardly any traces of continuous use, as would necessarily be the case if their pages had been continually handled. **Objects of piety, of devotion, of humble attitude before God, yes, but also objects of vainglory, power and love of luxury.** Virtues and vices go hand in hand.

The fact that it belonged to Bishop Fonseca is confirmed by the appearance of his coat of arms on folios 8v and 12r. And the subsequent belonging to Cardinal Benedetto Odescalchi, the future Pope Innocent XI, is confirmed by the beautiful angel on the first page of the manuscript carrying a large coat of arms with his emblem,

which is repeated on some of the pages of the calendar. However, of course, these coats of arms were executed later.

For a bishop like Fonseca, this book may have been used as a devotional book. Once he had finished his canonical prayers, from which only an express pontifical dispensation could exempt him, the bishop could use his book to increase his devotion to the Holy Face of Christ, reread the Passion of the Lord, ask for the gifts of the Holy Spirit, beg forgiveness for his sins by reciting the seven penitential psalms and the litanies of the saints, or commend himself to divine mercy with prayers attributed to various saints, not always with success. Something very necessary for the unpleasant bishop, although he was indeed fair and alms-giving. His portrait is masterfully drawn for us by Adelaida Sagarra in the pages of the volume of complementary studies that accompanies the facsimile.



Shield of Bishop Fonseca.

**The set of illustrations and borders is extremely fine.** It shows at least three different hands, two of which are clearly differentiated from each other.

This already extraordinarily rich copy could have been even more richly ornamented if all the pages reserved for borders had finally been executed.

**The set of themes and characters reminds us of the greatest Flemish painters of the time,** to such an extent that, on some of the pages that recreate and bring together various stories in a kind of small altarpiece, there are authentic reproductions of great well-known paintings.



The great masters who inspired this decoration are mainly Simon Bening, Gerard David, Memling and Van der Goes, but some models by Van Eyck also appear.

The style of the great miniaturist Simon Bening, unanimously recognised as one of the greatest Flemish miniaturists of all time, is clearly present in the depictions of figures.

Simon Bening's imprint is very present in the calendar, for example, with two pages for each month and abundant figurative decoration. There are faces and figures –such as the holding angel in the first miniature– of exquisite softness and prodigious execution. In others, however, the art is more energetic.

The miniaturistic ensemble in the manuscript is of the highest quality. The four evangelists are splendid, especially St. John, which we could highlight as the most beautiful miniature in the book.



Saint Luke

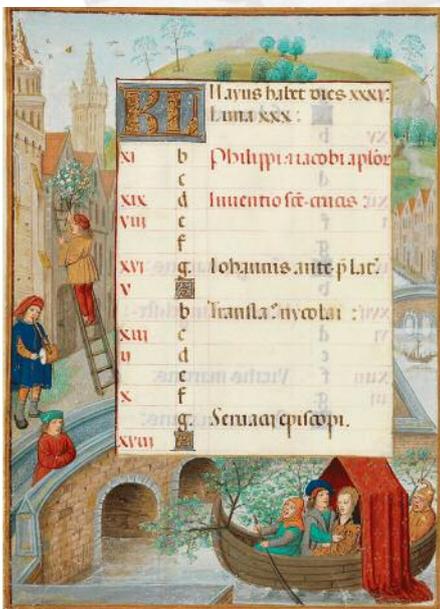


Saint Mark

Curiosities of the book are, for example, the repetition of scenes of lovers with their passionate vehemence, sometimes treated with discretion but sometimes with open brazenness. Even more brazen is the depiction of female nudes of an absolutely naturalistic nature, something totally unusual for the period.

The attribution of several miniatures to Gerard David is supported by the resemblance of many of them to those in the very beautiful Rothschild's Book of Hours, masterfully executed by that artist.

As a final touch to this series of considerations, it is worth mentioning the illustrious lineage of Bishop Fonseca, who belonged to one of the noblest families of the Crown of Castile, his aforementioned close collaboration with Queen Isabella, whom he supported from the beginning against the followers of Juana la Beltraneja, and his profound humanistic and scientific training, which brought him into contact with, among others, Elio Antonio de Nebrija.



Scene of lovers, cyclical border.



Orla illusionistic effect.



Biblical scene, border illusionistic effect.