

Louis de Laval's Book of Hours

Begun around 1470-1475, its illumination was resumed and continued between 1485-1489.

In the words of François Avril, world-renowned medievalist and leading European authority on ancient codices and manuscripts:

- This unusually rich manuscript is undoubtedly the most ambitious work ever to come out of Jean Colombe's workshop.
- *Louis de Laval's Book of Hours* is a veritable iconographic feat that far surpasses any other contemporary attempt to make books of hours into a compilation of biblical illustrations.
- A colossal iconographic programme for an exceptional manuscript. This is a heavyweight of medieval miniatures.
- From 1480 onwards, the manuscript was further enriched by the addition of the superb cycle of biblical illustrations from Genesis to the story of Daniel.

The book was bequeathed by Louis de Laval, Lord of Châtillon, to Anne of France, Duchess of Bourbon. It would later become part of the royal collections following the confiscation of the possessions of the Constable of Bourbon.



The *Book of Hours* by Louis de Laval, según Christine Seidel according to Christine Seidel –in her magnificent essay for our book of complementary studies to the facsimile– is an unprecedented macro-project and one of the most lavish examples of French illumination of the entire 15th century. Seidel takes up the widely held opinion of experts that this is a true masterpiece for its commissioner, Louis de Laval, with a load of such overwhelming plastic richness as to make it unique and exceptional, a monumental set of images from an unparalleled manuscript.

Louis de Laval was one of the French greats, to whose biography we could devote an entire volume. Here we will be content to note that he was the son of an aristocratic Breton family, that he was lord of Châtillon, Frinandour, Blanquefort and several other domains, and that he was always at the side of King Charles VII of France in the fight against the English in the very prolonged Hundred Years' War. He would later be appointed governor of the Dauphinate, Genoa, Champagne and even, at the end of his

days, governor of La Touraine. He was also one of the first 15 knights of the Order of Saint Michael, which had just been founded by Louis XI. He died in 1489 at the age of 78.

But, as Samuel Gras later reminds us in the other excellent work for the facsimile's complementary volume of studies, in addition to being an outstanding bibliophile, Louis de Laval was a patron of the arts who attached considerable importance to his Book of Hours, in which he was deeply involved, so that he could count on the best miniaturists of the time and who he must surely have demanded the best of their ability. The fact that he later gave it as a gift to Anne of France –the first-born daughter of King Louis XI and Anne of Savoy– is enough to confirm the great value he attributed to the book. So while the bulk of the project is the work of Jean Colombe and his Bourges workshop, it seems quite obvious that he was also keen to commission contributions from other artists from the most prestigious workshop of the time, that of Jean Fouquet.

Seidel invites us to take a look at one of the most significant diptychs in the book, on folios 50v and 51, which presents the impressive portrait of the commissioner, Louis de Laval, in front of the beautiful image of the Virgin and Child, which seems to have been inspired by an admirable model by Jean Fouquet, revolutionary for the time, and which would only find a parallel,



and rather distant, in one of the commissions of the famous Duke of Berry. The splendour and vividness of the faces of the figures, Seidel continues, are presented with a solemnity and grandeur that are truly unheard of in the history of miniatures and perhaps condense the best of the entire manuscript. The portentous execution of this bifolium leads the author, as other critics have already done, to consider the possible intervention of another painter from Fouquet's circle –or even Fouquet himself– for the elegant figure of the commissioner, a marvellous portrait, unparalleled for its time.

It is interesting to note how the second major illumination campaign concludes by rendering much of the Old Testament in evocative images, making this



manuscript not only one of the most spectacular books of hours of all time but also a major biblical project. In any case, the history of the manuscript is fascinating and certain sections such as the Suffrages of the Saints –which Gras also highlights in a very special way– are of an absolutely exceptional artistic richness.

But Seidel extends her admiration to the long series of masterly illuminations by Jean Colombe, which are remarkable for their truly audacious decoration and which make this manuscript a jewel in the devotional field, making it a unique and unrepeatable testimony to the decorative registers of religious art in the late Middle Ages. It will undoubtedly be inscribed among the most beautiful of an entire epoch. Colombe's workshop was very

active and produced a substantial and extensive output, but this was not only the most voluminous of all the projects but also the most ambitious, ultimately becoming its greatest exponent and the most extensively decorated manuscript before the printing press. The illuminators here display an almost limitless imagination that, for Seidel, borders on genius, and end up producing a work like no other.

Gras reminds us that various experts agree in identifying, in several of the miniatures in the manuscript, a disciple of Jean Fouquet –who would end up going by various names– as one of the artists of the highest level. One of the most interesting hypotheses provided by this rigorous and conscientious historical-stylistic analysis by Gras is the figure of painter **Guillaume Piqueau, a disciple of Fouquet**. Let us retain this name and this little revelation made by Gras, for, although definitive proof is still lacking, there are powerful reasons to support his intervention and his presence, something that no one had previously postulated.

It seems that the miniatures painted by Guillaume Piqueau for this manuscript are the most beautiful of his entire career as an artist. Inspired by Fouquet, sometimes using *trompe l'oeil* or perspective, with superb decorations, he wisely arranged the palette of colours and provided details of great precision and beauty, in a style that reveals considerable maturity. He masters symmetry and knows how to give depth to his compositions.

Once again, and this time in Gras's hand, we must take a look at the impressive image on folio 51, that of *Louis de Laval praying*, which, with very precise strokes, such as the scar on the temple, the lips, the nose, the grey hair on an almost bald head, etc., are possibly the artistic highlight of the entire manuscript.

The burden of age on the character is conveyed by the laxity of the face and a slight double chin, which does not detract from a certain liveliness and great personality. The whole reveals the mastery of an exceptional artist, whom many experts identify with the only hand that can display such expertise, that of Fouquet himself. François Avril says that the portrait in question is of a psychological penetration worthy of Jean Fouquet, only to insist later on that it is an execution of extreme delicacy and prodigious psychological intensity, leading us to a professional portraitist. And although a problem of dates would complicate the veracity of this hypothesis, the new dates proposed by Gras for the different campaigns would solve this problem. There are other questions that arise in this case, but the other major argument, perhaps definitive, in favour of Fouquet's authorship is the enormous interest of Louis de Laval himself in having his portrait painted by what was undoubtedly considered by everyone to be the best painter of the time.

We invite the reader to enjoy each and every one of the suggestive pages of this splendid facsimile and we invite you, by reading and contemplating it, to an invigorating and vivifying experience, and we invite you, by reading and contemplating it, to a vivifying plunge into that pulsating medieval world, more specifically in the Christian late Middle Ages, in which the church, as can be clearly perceived, continues to be of paramount importance.

This splendid *Book of Hours* by *Louis de Laval*, witness, like so many others, to a remarkable moment of social





change, has an exceptional symbolic charge and is one of the best vantage points from which to observe the vital and religious rhythm of an entire era, in which the church is not only omnipresent in society, but, as medievalists say, it is society itself. Thus, the religiosity of the pages of this book is inseparable from that everyday medieval reality. These books are full of the most intimate beliefs and daily experiences of those people, of their deep longings, their aspirations and certainties. The other side of the coin is, of course, that of the prestige, the temporal power and the economic-social status they flaunt and which, in some way, these very books granted and sought to safeguard.



After all this, it is easy to understand the passion with which we undertook this great challenge: **to produce the best possible facsimile of the most dazzling book of hours.** In one of our annual bulletins we enthusiastically welcomed this facsimile –now available but at that time still in its pre-publication phase– saying: *The Laval Book of Hours is almost finished and is already causing a sensation. We are definitely facing one of the most beautiful books in the world according to many voices.* And we explained how the arduous process of perfectly drawing the golds on each of its 700 pages alone required an average of seven hours per page of intense work by one of our best craftsmen, which in the end meant that he devoted almost three years exclusively to such a demanding task. Not to mention all the other work and the exclusive techniques of our workshops for the final stage of die-cutting, ageing and handling of each copy. It is therefore not surprising that the Ministry of Culture once again awarded Siloé the prize



for the best book published in Spain in the facsimile category for this conscientious copy.

We would like to close this prologue by bringing to mind the final paragraph of our introduction to the volume of studies of the *Book of Wonders of the World*, since, *mutatis mutandis*, it would seem perfectly suited to this book and to this occasion: from here we beg the reader to read the book in its entirety.

We beg the reader's pardon for the immodesty, not to say pride, with which we **at Siloé approach this edition of one of the great treasures of the National Library of France, the *Book of Hours by Louis de Laval*.** We would have loved to provide everyone with the original, but as that is impossible, we have thought of offering everyone the chance to enjoy the best replica, so that every bibliophile has the opportunity to shudder, to dream and, with this book in their hands, to feel for a few moments like a medieval man, one of those ancestors for whom the world was a veritable anthology of wonders that made him kneel every day before his creator and pray to him ardently for its preservation and for the salvation of his sometimes troubled spirit.

