

Reviewed by: Kathryn M. Rudy

CD ROM: La Librairie des ducs de Bourgogne: Manuscrits conservés à la Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, Vol. I. Textes liturgiques, ascétiques, théologiques, philosophiques et moraux. Edited by Bernard Bousmanne and Céline van Hoorebeck. Tournhout: Brepols, 2001. Regular price 1250 Euros.

Let me begin by lauding Bousmanne and van Hoorebeck, along with all of their colleagues who contributed to this CD ROM, which is a remarkable achievement. The 1200-or-so images collected on the CD are some of the most beautiful in the Royal Library in Brussels. They are integral for the study of this history of illumination, of book production and collecting. The accompanying codicological descriptions and bibliographies are solid and useful, as are the introductory essays on individual illuminators (such as „Simon Marmion“ by Dominique Vanwijnsberghe), collectors („Margaret of York“ and „Isabelle of Portugal“ by Claudine Lemaire), and ideas (such as „Burgundian Heraldry“ by Christiane Van den Bergen-Pantens). The drawbacks of the CD have everything to do with its format and accompanying frustrations with manipulation of the CD.

Volume I of the CD treats 54 liturgical manuscripts that belonged to the Dukes of Burgundy, rapacious patrons and collectors throughout the fifteenth century. Subsequent volumes in the series are to treat biblical, hagiographical, didactic, legal, literary, historical, and classical texts, with a final CD providing a cumulative index. Among the featured manuscripts in the first CD are ms 11060-61, the „Très Belles Heures“ of Jean, duc de Berry with its famous devotional diptych on vellum depicting the Duke in prayer across the vellum fold from a grisaille Madonna enthroned; the Breviary of Philip the Good (ms 9026); an illustrated treatise on the Angelic Salutation (ms 9270); a French translation of the Horologium sapientiae (ms 10981); the richly illustrated Somme le Roi (ms 11041), of which 15 illuminated folios and 3 text folios are illustrated; and the French translation of Ludolph of Saxony's Life of Christ, written by David Aubert and illuminated in a bold palette by Loyset Liédet in 1461 (ms IV106).

As is fitting, the authors give more attention to some manuscripts than to others. They reproduce 64 images from ms 9005-9006, the two-volume edition of De Civitate Dei translated by Raoul de Presles. This allows them to reproduce nearly all of the illuminated initials and provide a sample of all levels of decoration in the manuscript. They also reproduce 112 folios from the Breviary said to be from Louis de Male (ms 9427) in order to fully catalogue its monochrome, devious and highly playful grotesques inhabiting the margins of the page, as well as its colorful historiated initials, some of which illustrate Flemish proverbs. On the other hand, they reproduce only five folios from the unillustrated Revelations of Brigitte of Sweden, which is enough to sample its script.

Many of the manuscripts featured on the CD are unillustrated, and most of the digitized folios comprise text pages. To their credit, the authors reproduce entire folios, and not just the miniatures. It is unfortunate that they reproduce no bindings, however. Given the haphazard nature of some of the selections of materials that appear, the CD might be of use to an art historian or a

paleographer, but ill serves a text historian or anyone interested in bindings.

With 1200 images on the CD, they need to be small. The images are in JPEG format and average an insufficient 188-550 KB. Each image is stored as a full page, complete with decorated borders, and in many cases, luxurious quantities of bare vellum. This was, of course an excellent decision. The downside is that to study any aspect of a large folio in detail, one must enlarge it to the point where it is pixilated. The granular quality disappoints consistently when trying to zoom in on particular areas of the image. For example, the digital file for ms 9005, fol. 1 is only 278 KB, which makes reading the tiny script of this text page an impossibility. By the third zoom, the image disintegrates into pixels, by the fifth zoom, it becomes a history of Burgundian scripts interpreted by Chuck Close.

Although the CD is supposed to be bilingual French-English, in fact, the components available in English are diminimus. This will not inhibit the serious scholar, who presumably would know French-the language in which most of the manuscripts are written-but may deter libraries outside France and Belgium from purchasing this CD as a learning tool for undergraduates. At any rate, the bilingual claim is misleading. The Help Screens are available in English, or rather, in poorly translated technicalese, but anyone who could figure out how to install the CD, would be able to intuit the use of the CD. The Installation Procedure (buried on p 53 of the User's Guide) can only frustrate the novice, for they erroneously state: Insert the CD-Rom „La Librairie des ducs de Bourgogne“ into the CD-Rom drive. [fair enough] Start from the CD-Rom the file Setup.exe [very misleading. Instead it should read: „Click on the Start button and type E:\setup.exe“] Follow the instructions on the screen who ask you to choose: -the installation language, -the destination drive where the installation must be done, -the Program Manager Group to add the icons to. [good luck]

Although these unwieldy translations are puzzling, the more significant problem with the CD is that its structure defies the possibility of manipulating the images; the user is stuck using the rigid format of the program. In fact, the strictures of the CD are so tight, that it really only serves a limited kind of art history, one based on Woelffflinean pairs. The user cannot display, say 20 images, on the screen together, but is limited to two images at a time, to compare and contrast. The structure reiterates that of a typical art history classroom in which two projectors beam two images onto a horizontally oriented screen. It seems a shame that this mode-a product of dinosaur technology-should remain with us even when the technology now exceeds those initial limitations. For example, the CD is built so that a user cannot display every text page attributed to the copyist David Aubert, nor compare multiple portraits of Jean, Duc de Berry. In this technology, which should be more swift, supple, and graceful than a printed book, is much less supple.

Furthermore, the „right-click,“ or image-capture function, has been disconnected to prevent the user from capturing an image and saving it, which precludes pasting several images together into a file to compare them, or viewing them in relation to one another. This also means that a purchaser, someone who has shelled out over a thousand dollars/euros for this CD, cannot legitimately copy the JPEGs into an academic document, but still has to write to the Royal Library for images, a notoriously slow process. Another manifestation of this jealously guarded electronic information is that the „control-C,“ or copy function, has also been disconnected in the text files; as a result, a user must toggle between the Librairie program and a word processing program in order to retype information from the Bibliography file. Because the text files are in a different limb of the

choice tree, a user cannot simultaneously display an image on the screen and read about it.

I must compare this CD with the corresponding solution from another Royal Library, the one in The Hague. Last year Anne Korteweg and her co-workers in the Byvanck project launched a web site at which viewers can see thousands of images from that library's Dutch manuscript collection (www.kb.nl). One drawback is that the project features only folios with decoration, pen work or illuminations, and is not a tool that will advance related studies, such as paleography. But the advantages of the website are tremendous: first, it's free (vs. the hefty price for the Belgian Library's CD). Second, most of the images are available in three qualities: quick thumbnails that can be moved and manipulated; mid-sized JPEGs (30-50 KB); and large BITMAPs. Better yet, you can right-click on these images to capture them on your hard drive then work with them any way you want.

In short, the material on the CD is boldly presented and jealously guarded at the same time. Technology allows 1200 images in full color to be available on a single CD, but mandates that each of those images will be grainy, somehow unsavory. The most salient feature of electronic media-that it can be searched quickly, copied, and shuffled into useful forms with no loss of quality with each generation-are here nullified by the disabled copy functions. Paradoxically, the digital medium feeds our impatience, yet it is in fact quite slow. The digital format should be supremely flexible, yet it remains rigid, more rigid than if the equivalent information were printed in a book.

Recommended Citation:

Kathryn M. Rudy: [Review of:] . In: ArtHist.net, Jan 21, 2003 (accessed Dec 17, 2025),
<<https://arthist.net/reviews/25431>>.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License. For the conditions under which you may distribute, copy and transmit the work, please go to <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>