FEATURE

RECONSTRUCTING THE HOURS OF LOUIS XII

In 1973, the late Janet Backhouse, the distinguished scholar and curator of illuminated manuscripts at the British Library, published an essay identifying a group of three full-page miniatures and an incomplete and disorganized text manuscript in the British Library, together with another five miniatures, as elements of a major French book of hours. The text had been given to the British Library in 1757 and its three miniatures purchased in 1895, while the additional miniatures had appeared quite recently. This book, probably executed in 1498 and/or 1499, is now known as the Hours of Louis XII. With its large-scale miniatures and innovative three-quarter-length format, this work signaled a new direction in the art of Jean Bourdichon, the painter to four successive French kings. It represents a key monument in manuscript illumination from the last years of one of the most fertile centuries in the history of European art. In her persistent and perceptive manner, Janet had rediscovered a manuscript that had disappeared from history more than 300 years before.

Two more miniatures from this manuscript surfaced a year after the appearance of Janet’s article, and she remained alert for evidence of further leaves. An additional six had been identified by 2001. When the miniature of Louis XII, previously known only in a photograph, appeared on the art market in 2003, she was convinced it came from the same source. Following the Getty’s and Victoria and Albert’s recent acquisition of leaves from the book, we both agreed that the time was ripe to introduce this great treasure to a wider public and to publish all that is known about it in an associated volume.

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Excerpt from the preface of *A Masterpiece Reconstructed: The Hours of Louis XII*, edited by Thomas Kren with Mark Evans (Getty Publications)

*A Masterpiece Reconstructed: The Hours of Louis XII* is on view at the Getty Center from October 18, 2005–January 8, 2006. The exhibition complements the Getty’s 2005 Premiere Presentation *Painted Prayers: Books of Hours from the Morgan Library*, which runs concurrently.

**TIMELINE OF THE RECONSTRUCTION**

1498/1499  The Hours of Louis XII is illuminated by Jean Bourdichon.

Late 1500s–1600s  The manuscript is unrecorded in this period. It may have gone to England following the death of Louis XII.

1700  Leaves from the book are dispersed by this time in an early instance of a practice that became common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Two leaves from the manuscript are documented in England in a volume of calligraphy compiled by the famous diarist and naval administrator Samuel Pepys (1633–1703), and in the collection of John Bagford (1650–1716). They later pass to the British Museum in 1753.

After 1734  Portions of Bourdichon's manuscript, lacking any of its miniatures, are acquired by George II and entered into the royal library in the British Museum.

1835  The German art historian Gustav Waagen (1794–1868), the director of the Altes Museum in Berlin and a principal early authority on Northern Renaissance painting, visits the home of collector William Beckford (1760–1844) in Bath, England. He recognizes two leaves as being excellent examples of French miniatures from around 1500, and correctly attributes them to someone painting in the school of Jean Fouquet, who was Bourdichon’s mentor. These could be the *Louis XII of France Kneeling in Prayer* and its facing miniature, the latter now lost.

1848  A sale catalogue of Beckford's estate lists the miniature *Louis XII of France Kneeling in Prayer, Accompanied by Saints Michael, Charles, Louis, and Denis*. It is purchased for £11 pounds and sixpence for the English politician Henry Laboucherre, later Lord Taunton (1798–1869).
1849 Lithographic reproductions of several text leaves from the Bourdichon work are published in *The Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* but mistakenly identified as English rather than French illuminations.

Around 1891 The Argyll landowner John Malcolm of Poltalloch (1805–1893) likely acquires three miniatures: *The Virgin of the Annunciation, Pentecost, and Job on the Dungheap*, that eventually prove to belong to the Hours of Louis XII.

1895 These leaves along with the rest of Malcolm’s collection are sold to the British Museum, where they are catalogued as Flemish instead of French.

1920 The miniature in Lord Taunton’s estate is put on sale and acquired by the French collector Baron Edmond de Rothschild (1845–1934). It is subsequently seized by the Nazis but returned to the owner after the war and included in an exhibition in Paris in 1946.

1940 Another leaf from the Hours of Louis XII, *The Nativity*, surfaces in the possession of surgeon and radiologist Christopher Kempster (1869–1948), who gives it to a friend. This leaf is brought briefly to the British Museum for examination in 1952 but is thereafter unseen for 50 years.

1946 The miniature *Saint Luke Writing* is sold at Sotheby’s for £30 to antiquarian book dealers Maggs Bros. Although attributed to “School of Bruges 1500,” the dealers recognize its relationship to the Bourdichon miniatures in the British Library. The work is sold in May 1947 to W.L. Wood.

1955 The Bristol Art Gallery receives Bourdichon’s *The Visitation* as a gift from their Friends association, which had purchased it for £150 from a Miss R.L. Williams.


1971 D.L. Schwabach of London brings the miniature of *Bathsheba Bathing* to the British Museum for opinion.

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1972  *The Flight into Egypt* is similarly brought in by Sir Tom Hickinbotham (1903–1983), a former governor of Aden, who recalls that it had been acquired by his grandfather.

1973 Janet Backhouse identifies the three miniatures in the British Library, as well as *Bathsheba Bathing*, *The Flight into Egypt*, *Saint Luke Writing*, *The Nativity*, and potentially *Louis XII of France Kneeling in Prayer*, as belonging together with the portions of the manuscript that the British Museum acquired after 1734. She proposes, however, that the manuscript may have been made for Henry VII or Louis XII.

1974 *Bathsheba Bathing* and *The Flight into Egypt*, along with *The Adoration of the Magi*, which was in the possession of Mrs. Patricia Clogg, a daughter of the London antiquarian bookseller Lionel Robinson (1897–1983), are sold at auction at Sotheby's and Christie's. All three are purchased by the antiquarian book dealer Bernard H. Breslauer (1918–2004). *The Flight into Egypt* for £2,300, and *The Adoration of the Magi* and *Bathsheba Bathing* for £6,800 each. This same year, Breslauer also buys the then-unidentified miniature *The Presentation in the Temple* from the New York book dealer H. P. Kraus.

1980 *The Betrayal of Christ* from the collection of George Wildenstein (1892–1963) is given by his son to the Musée Marmottan in Paris.

2003-2004 Breslauer's collection is sold. *Bathsheba Bathing* and *The Presentation in the Temple* are acquired by the Getty, where they are reunited with *Louis XII of France Kneeling in Prayer*, purchased by the Getty in 2004, which once belonged to Lord Taunton. *The Adoration of the Magi* is sold to the Musée du Louvre and *The Flight into Egypt* enters a British private collection. The Victoria and Albert Museum acquires *The Nativity*.

Compiled with information from “The Rediscovery of a Royal Manuscript,” by Mark Evans from *A Masterpiece Reconstructed: The Hours of Louis XII*, edited by Thomas Kren with Mark Evans (Getty Publications)

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