

# A Burgundian Masterpiece Opening a Window on Chivalry

Too long and too often the Middle Ages have been described as the 'dark ages'. This common misconception persists, even though many fundamental institutions of the modern world were invented in medieval times. Towns, universities, monasteries, and the courts of noblemen contributed alike to high-quality arts and the blossoming production of written romances and songs to name but a few of the fine achievements of those days.

Epic poems like the *Chanson de Roland* and tales such as the Arthurian legends promoted the ideals of chivalry. Today, authentic medieval manuscripts, the precious reminders of that bygone era, show us that the realities of medieval life were often even more intriguing than fiction could suggest.

"Des droits d'armes de noblesse", a stunning handwritten and painted book from Bruges in Flanders, provides detailed information on chivalric protocol, heraldry, rights and privileges, and the laws of war in Spain, France, Burgundy, and England. This particular compilation of 14 texts was originally composed in Bruges in 1481 and is in various ways linked to Gilles Gobet, the herald of Maximilian of Austria, who was Duke of Burgundy and sovereign of the Order of the Golden Fleece since 1477. Although the original exemplar that likely was offered to the Duke has not survived, the compendium is known in four finely handwritten and hand-painted versions. Three of these are located in public institutions in Paris, Vienna, and New Haven, yet one recently came on the market at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books in Basel, Switzerland, and has found its way to a private collector at the most recent TEFAF Maastricht.

The Duke of Burgundy, whose court was the most glittering of all, united the best of his noble knights in the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece (in French: *Ordre de la Toison d'Or*), which became the most prestigious order of knighthood in Europe. As its sovereign, he bestowed unusual privileges upon the select members, who were consulted in matters of war and had exclusive jurisdiction in disputes and crimes. The members convened in chapters that were held in great splendour. Among the order's various officers was a King of Arms, or herald, named "Toison d'Or". It was his prerogative to guard the chivalric codes and *Toison d'Or* became Europe's most important herald. First, this role was fulfilled by Jean le Fèvre de St. Remi, who was succeeded by his deputy Gilles Gobet. The latter is named as the compiler of this codex.

The texts of the "Droits d'armes de noblesse" and their fine illuminations deal with subjects including just and unjust war, the right of spoils, keeping one's word, and the rules for the election of the emperor, for the investiture of the Herald, for tournaments, and for the duels of knights in armour. They cover codes that were valid across various European monarchies and regions.

The book describes the presentation of dignitaries and their correct heraldry at funeral ceremonies and other moments when traditions were strictly maintained. The most outstanding text in this book, called "L'Arbre des batailles", deals with legal and military matters, including the emergence and nature of disagreements leading to war, analyses of the fall of the great empires of the past, as well as discussions on battles and on the legal state of war. This work became a manual for commanders and rulers and had considerable influence on the development of international law and the law of war, as later published by Hugo Grotius in his famous *De jure belli ac pacis*.

What marks this codex even more, are the fascinating hand-painted illustrations by the (otherwise anonymous) "Bruges Master of 1482" which altogether make this book into a highly desirable work of art. In representing the Kings of Jerusalem and France on one throne, in painting knights fighting duels on foot and on horseback, the outstanding painter closely followed details of the texts. Maximilian and his wife Mary of Burgundy are both shown when conferring the collar of the Order of the Golden Fleece. A few years later Maximilian was crowned King of the Romans in 1486 in the presence of six electors (as shown) instead of seven, this may date the painting of the book in or shortly after 1486. The coat of arms on the first page reminds us that the manuscript's first owner was the honourable Claude de Neufchâtel of Luxemburg, brave soldier and diplomat, and knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece since 1491.

Details:  
Droits d'armes de noblesse: Honoré Bovet, *L'arbre des batailles*. – Diego de Valera, *Traité de noblesse*. – Thomas of Woodstock, *La manière de faire champ à outrance, selon l'ordonnance d'Angleterre* – and other chivalric treatises, likely compiled by Gilles Gobet. Manuscript on vellum, illuminated by the Bruges Master of 1482. Flanders, Bruges, c. 1486. 360 x 250 mm. 208 leaves. With 12 miniatures, 63 coats of arms.

Image descriptions:

Image 1: Presentation of the book within an interior – In a courtly scene, the monk Bovet offers his text to the King of Jerusalem and to the King of France who shares the throne in the presence of several knights of the Order of the Golden Fleece and other bystanders.



Image 2: *L'arbre de douleur* – A remarkable representation of a tree growing from hell. On the branches to the left are various men and only two women of the clergy, from simple monks and nuns to a pope and cardinal, fighting each other. To the right, the laity is represented by only men. Headed by a king and a prince, all classes are combating each other in palpable disputes.



Image 3: Conferring the Order of the Golden Fleece – Maximilian I, as duke of Burgundy (identified by his crown), presents a kneeling knight the chain of the Golden Fleece, whereas Mary of Burgundy offers a lady a chain.



Image 4: Coronation of the emperor with, to the left of the throne, the archbishops of Mainz, Cologne, and Trier, and to the right, the prince-electors of Brandenburg, duke of Saxonia and the count palatine of the Rhine, all identified by their coats of arms. The electors are depicted in fine, shiny armour; the bishops wear mitre and cope.



Image 5: Tournament within a town, en champ fermé, with spectators standing on a tribune – Two mounted knights tourney before a wooden fence. Behind the fence rides the herald of France.



Image 6: Funeral procession in a city and entering a church – To the left arrive, dignitaries, among whom is a knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece, and a group of horsemen. Men and horses are attired in black, one man carries a sword, another lifts a shield, and two others have banners. The shield and banners are decorated with the French fleur-de-lis; to the right, two mourners in black proceed with long candles to enter a chapel ardente with a bier covered in blue. A priest stands before the altar.



Bio

With a team of specialists at the helm, Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books provides scholarly services, expert advice, long-term support on the development of collections, and the acquisition and sale of manuscripts, miniatures, and rare early printed books from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Dr. Jörn Günther has worked with leading international museums and institutions, such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and alongside private collectors on a quest to create and develop their own collections.

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