



Book of Hours made as a wedding gift for Bianca Maria Sforza, Italy, Milan, 1493

Newly Discovered Wedding Hours of Bianca Maria Sforza and Maximilian I of Habsburg: A Guide for Life

For tourists in Europe who wander through medieval towns with their narrow streets and church squares, a good guidebook (or tablet) is still indispensable. In Innsbruck, Austria, a guidebook would provide information on the cathedral and its sculptures, or about the Golden Roof. This Golden Roof is a famous symbol in the medieval town centre that was made for Maximilian of Austria to mark his wedding to Bianca Maria Sforza. The gilded roof covers a balcony, which served as a 'royal box', where the emperor and his wife could sit and observe tournaments and festivities on the square below.

In medieval times, the most important book to accompany one's travels, at home, in church, and everywhere else, was a small prayer book, a so-called Book of Hours. It was used like a talisman – for protection not only against the dangers of the road or

life in general, but also for guidance through the day, and for preparation for life in the hereafter. Every day all over Europe, the bells of towers and churches tolled at seven or eight special hours of the day, to indicate the time and summon people to prayer. As Latin was the common language for those who learned to read and write, these books usually included standard Latin prayers, but they could be personalised upon request. A spectacularly important Book of Hours has recently been discovered, made for the emperor's wife, Bianca Maria Sforza, as a wedding present. This small format, lavishly decorated prayer book was given to her to accompany her on her way to the North, through the Alps, and into a new life far from the warmth and wealth of her ancestral palace in Milan, Italy.

The marriage of Bianca Maria Sforza (1472-1510) to the Holy Roman Emperor-elect, Maximilian I of Austria-

Habsburg was arranged between Maximilian and the girl's uncle, Ludovico 'Il Moro' Sforza. The arrangement served both of their political ambitions: Maximilian had inherited his father's undivided power but was not yet crowned Emperor. He needed finances and safety for his coronation in Rome.

In return, Ludovico Sforza, the uncle and mentor of the bride, craved the ducal title of Milan. The present gift from Ludovico to his niece and was completed just before the famed marriage by proxy was celebrated with great pomp in Milan on the 30th of November 1493. Soon after, the official wedding was held in the Innsbruck on the 16th of March 1494.

The painted manuscript testifies to the excellence of Renaissance book art and shows how art was used to link social, religious, and political life. This extraordinary book represents highly important cultural heritage, conveying exceptional historical and art-historical value. It transmits rank through many cases in which the noble coats of arms of Visconti-Sforza-Savoy are combined with those of Maximilian. The jewel-like illumination was designed to honour and perpetuate the Sforza family bond after the bride followed wherever the emperor would bring her. From her finely painted book, Bianca Maria could pray for saintly support. At the same time, it would remind her of the warmth of the southern colours and the splendour of her native Milan.

This entire manuscript is a feast for the eyes and mind. It is lavishly illuminated with opulent Renaissance motifs in gold and saturated colours. Among the copious riches in secular references, the holy is never absent. Every detail is executed with precision.

There is a kaleidoscopic combination of gems and pearls in different settings. Other pages show dragons, mythical animals like griffins, sphinxes, dolphins, as well as skulls. The decoration on about 200 text-pages and all 15 full-page miniatures were executed by a painter, whose artistic context is intimately connected to the city of Milan, where artists like Donato Bramante, Leonardo da Vinci, and the De Predis brothers were active. The illuminator, dubbed the 'Master of Anna Sforza', as, a few years earlier, he had been engaged to illuminate manuscripts for the wedding of Bianca's sister Anna (1491).

This artist shows in our Book of Hours that he was familiar with other works made for the court in Milan. Intricately tied to patronage, this manuscript gives evidence of socially engaged art of the highest level, in an age that was one of the most critical periods in European development.

Details: Book of Hours, made as a wedding gift from Ludovico 'Il Moro' Sforza to his niece, Bianca Maria Sforza, upon her marriage to Maximilian I, manuscript on vellum, illuminated by the Master of Anna Sforza. Italy, Milan, 1493. 98 x 70 mm. 235 leaves. With 15 full-page miniatures, 14 of which are accompanied by an elaborately decorated text-page with full, historiated borders.

Image description:
Page opening, f. 36-37. On the left: Nativity set before an arch with portrait busts in roundels. A shepherd with sheep in the background points upwards to angels and the star of Bethlehem. Bas-de-page with reclining putto leaning on a vase and holding a serpent; flanked by fragmentary portrait roundels with inscriptions: QUI HABITAT and DICET DOMIN[...]. (Ps. 90:1-2 He that dwelleth, He shall say to the Lord). On the right: Office of the Virgin. Inscribed: 'AD PRIMAM USUM'. Opening text 'Deus in adiutorium meum intende'. Decorated capital D with a bust portrait of St. John the Evangelist (scroll, eagle). Illusionistic decorative border including an arch with profile roundel portraits in spandrels, boys in tunics and boots holding the fictive text panel and dancing with scrolls. Bas-de-page: Arms of the King of the Romans impaling those of Sforza and Savoy, flanked by scrolls and gems. Both pages are adorned with elaborate architectural designs.

Bio: With a team of specialists at the helm, Dr Jörn Günther Rare Books provides scholarly services, expert advice, and 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 collections.

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