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A once-in-a-generation chance to see the world's most beautiful book

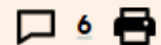
A show in Chantilly will reveal the 'Mona Lisa' of illuminated manuscripts — a rarely exhibited 15th-century prayer book



The opening page of *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* represents the month of January, the season of winter feasts and ostentatious gift-giving for the medieval nobility. The Duke himself is seated on the right, in blue © Gravure Francaise/Alamy

Marion Turner

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Lavishly dressed men feast at a table adorned with a huge salt cellar in the shape of a ship, topped with a bear and a swan. Behind the diners, a tapestry depicting the Trojan War covers the wall. Above this banquet, the sun god drives his chariot through the wheeling signs of the zodiac. The opening page of the 15th-century *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* represents January, the season of winter feasts and ostentatious gift-giving for the medieval nobility. The bear and swan are the duke's symbols, and his beloved lap dogs roam the table.

So begins one of the most famous (and probably *the* most opulent) of all medieval books. This extraordinary prayer book is about to go on display at the Musée Condé, in the Château de Chantilly — an hour's drive from Paris. It has only been exhibited twice before, in 1956 and 2004, and now these shimmering

manuscript pages will be removed from their bindings (which are being restored) so that they can be displayed side by side. This project has been made possible by a number of sponsors, including the Fondation Etrillard and the Tefaf Museum Restoration Fund.

If you were lucky enough to own a book in the later Middle Ages, it was probably not a copy of the *Divine Comedy*, or a book of Arthurian romance, or *The Canterbury Tales*, or a Bible. It was a book of hours. These prayer books proliferated between the 13th and 16th centuries across Europe. While each one was different, they were based around prayers to be said at the eight canonical hours (from matins to compline). Most books of hours began with a calendar and might also contain other material, such as the penitential psalms, a litany of saints and the office of the dead. Many thousands of these books survive — and some of them are works of incredible beauty.

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Medieval culture delighted in ambiguity; there was no sense that the sacred should be separated from the bodily, the funny, the profane

They allowed lay people to access prayers, psalms and information easily and independently. But the visual content goes far beyond what modern readers might expect to find in a devotional book. The *Très Riches Heures* contains 66 large and 65 small illuminations, as well as many other marginal images. Many of these are

social and political. The duke appears, a symbol of majesty and beneficence, dressed in the blue and gold that are also used for the celestial sphere. Castles and palaces — for instance, the Château de Lusignan (March) and the Louvre (October) — are gorgeously depicted. (Inspiration for the Sleeping Beauty castle at Disneyland Paris came, in part, from such pictures in the *Très Riches Heures*.) There are scenes of peasant labour in the fields, of boar-hunting, and of courtly love. The book is a religious object but it is also a demonstration of the duke's wealth, taste, dependants, and lifestyle.



In the margins of *Très Riches Heures*, a snail crawls up the side of a castle, only to be confronted by a knight with a lance © France, Chantilly, Bibliothèque et archives du château Courtesy Archives du Chateau, Public Domain



A bagpiping boar, in the margins of the *Très Riches Heures*, being carried by a monk © France, Chantilly, Bibliothèque et archives du château Courtesy Archives du Chateau, Public Domain

Marginal images are more playful. On one page of the *Très Riches Heures*, the main picture is of the Virgin Mary, and the initial of the first word (*Deus*) contains a swan, the duke's symbol. But in the margins, a bristly boar plays the bagpipes while sitting in a cart, snails crawl up the side of the page, hybrid human-animal-plant creatures joust and birds fly through the columns.

Other books of hours are often alive with eye-popping marginalia — even depicting obscene acts. In one such work, now held at Trinity College, Cambridge, a crouching man defecates, and then has his turds presented to his lady, in a sequence that defies logical explanation. Medieval culture delighted in ambiguity and juxtaposition; there was no sense that the sacred should be separated from the bodily, the funny, even the profane.

Each book reflects its patron. Jean, Duc de Berry was born in 1340, the son of the king of France, and he died in 1416. For most of his life, Jean had a virtually unlimited income (although he did spend several years as a hostage in England, living in luxurious captivity), and indulged his artistic tastes and collector's mania. Among his possessions were the engagement ring of the Virgin Mary, fragments of nails from the Crucifixion, the head of one of St Ursula's 11,000 virgins, a menagerie including a lion, a bear, a leopard, a

monkey, a wolf, a camel and an ostrich, a vast collection of jewels, and an enormous library of exquisite books. These ranged from Ovid to the *Roman de la Rose*, *Mandeville's Travels* to books of astrology and magic.



A page spread from the Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry depicting the Fall of Man © France, Chantilly, Bibliothèque et archives du château Courtesy Archives du Chateau, Public Domain

The illumination of the *Très Riches Heures* was begun by the Limbourg brothers — Paul, Jean, and Herman — who were all on the duke's payroll from 1404; after their premature deaths, possibly of the plague, other artists continued to work on the book throughout the 15th century. The duke's inventory includes evidence of his purchases for manuscript illumination: for instance, two leather bags of lapis lazuli, imported from modern-day Afghanistan and used to make *azur d'outreme*, the striking ultramarine colour that characterises the *Très Riches Heures*. While the calendar images depict local French life in the fields, forests and castles, these pictures are the result of the global trade networks that structured medieval life.

The *Très Riches Heures* belonged to one of the most privileged of all medieval men, a member of the French royal house. Many books of hours, however, were owned by women. One such book (dating to c1509), brought to Tefaf by Dr Jörn Günther Rare Books, was owned by Catherine of Aragon. It was probably a gift to her from her sisters, Joanna and Mary, as their coats of arms appear in the manuscript. It is testament to networks of female gift-giving and affection.



A page from a day book owned by Catherine of Aragon, created in about 1509 © Courtesy of Dr Jörn Günther, Rare Books

Old books are fragile. Light, heat and damp can ruin them. But it has long been a shame that the *Très Riches Heures* has not only rarely been displayed, but has also not been accessible to scholars. If a book is never seen, why should it exist? Imagine if no one were allowed to see the “Mona Lisa”. Many of us will rush to Chantilly, if we can, to marvel at the *Très Riches Heures* this summer. But I hope that the book will not then return to the dark for another generation. The beauty of medieval books needs to be seen to be believed.

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