

Suzan Noesen has entitled her projection « Livre d'heures », « Book of hours », which has a strangely old fashioned, out-dated and somewhat mysterious ring.

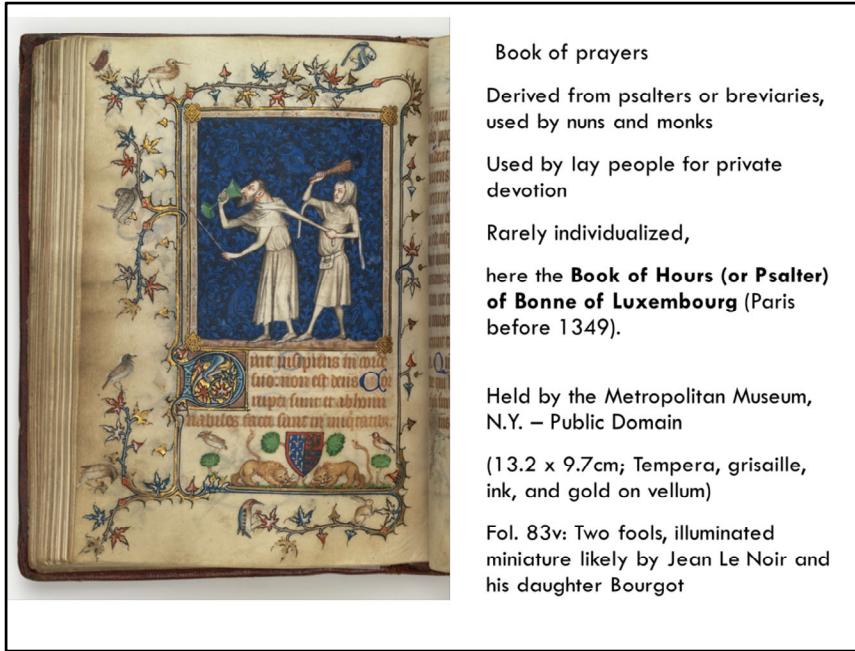
Nowadays, books tend to be seen as obsolete remnants of an bygone, analog world. For instance the University Library in Belval is not to be called »Library » but « Luxembourg Learning Center », and the National Library is also promoting the usage of e-books, that is, digital versions of items known as books or digital-born products, to console their readers (or should one say « users ») for the duration of its move to Kirchberg and maybe to prepare them too for the brave new paperless world.

Suzan's film does not take the form of a book either but is protean: in the Cercle-Cité/Ratskeller elements from her film were projected onto soft fabric and combined with paintings to form the exhibition « Libera Pagina! » (March 2019). Here, at the Black Thursday, the film is projected onto a conventional screen, but followed by an three-pronged analysis and a concert by the film musicians, a multimedia and multidisciplinary approach. Today's event is entitled « L'Heure bleue » and maybe the reference to the «Book of hours » has more to do with the hours than with the book. Nonetheless Suzan's work does have a bookish aspect, which has to do with two things:

1. Intertextuality, that is, the reference in her work to other works; or maybe the more appropriate term would be interobjectivity, as there are more references to artefacts than to texts. For instance, the film is subdivided in different chapters with titles reminiscent of prayer books. At the same time the frames remind one of intertitles in a silent movie, but with a decisive domestic touch because of the quaint background patterns, evocative of kitchen tiles.

2. The materiality and haptics, that is the perception of objects by touch. We may not be able to touch the things in the films, but there is also another definition of haptics, namely: the use of technology that stimulates the senses of touch and motion, especially to reproduce (for instance by computer simulation) the sensations that would be felt by a user interacting directly with physical objects (<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/3637/haptic>). Of course, Suzan's work is not a computer simulation, but it uses a technology that gives us – through long over the shoulder shots - access to a material world: the rough potato peels, the cool blade of the kitchen knife, the starched linen, the crust of paint etc.

So, how does this relate to medieval books of hours? To address this question, let me first introduce the genre and objective of books of hours, and then show how Suzan Noesen plays with that but does in some ways reverse its intention and mode of operation.



To put it simply, a book hours is a medieval book of prayers, appointed for particular canonical hours or times of day, used by Christians for private devotions. Thousands of them have survived until today, which shows just how popular they were, probably the most popular genre of books for many centuries, real “best sellers”. They were derived from liturgical books used by monks, so-called psalters and breviaries, and used since the 12th century by lay people who employed them to follow the Church calendar: different prayers for different times of the day, of the week and of the year.

Most were in Latin, [but there are examples in English or here in French] and were rather standardized with regard to the text, but they varied in terms of decoration. Some were very plain, “mass produced” by hand with embroidered initial letters at the most, and could even belong to servants, others were very lavish with a number of full page miniatures and coats of arms of the high nobility. Most owners – though not all – were women.

This example is a page from a book written not on paper but on vellum, that is, parchment, a prepared animal skin, typically calfskin.

This psalm is illustrated by the image of two fools, one drinking wine, the other one beating him. There are other minatures of memento mori (three dead and three

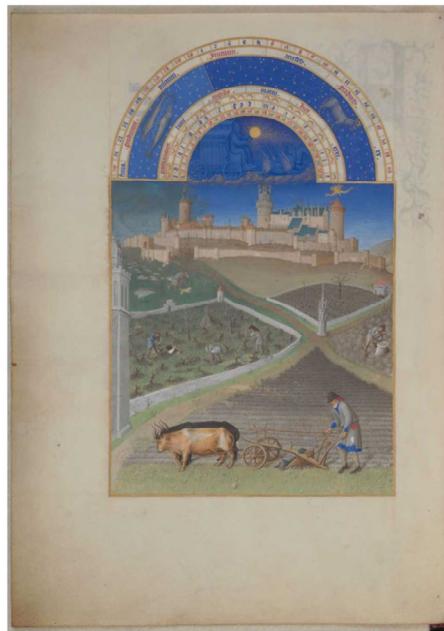
living) at time of the plague, which killed the owner Bonne of Luxembourg in 1349. Bonne was the daughter of John the Blind, count of Luxembourg, king of Bohemia, and had married the French heir to the throne. She died – bad luck- one year before he actually became king. Her younger son also owned what is probably the most famous Book of Hours, les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry.

**Les Très Riches Heures du
Duc de Berry**

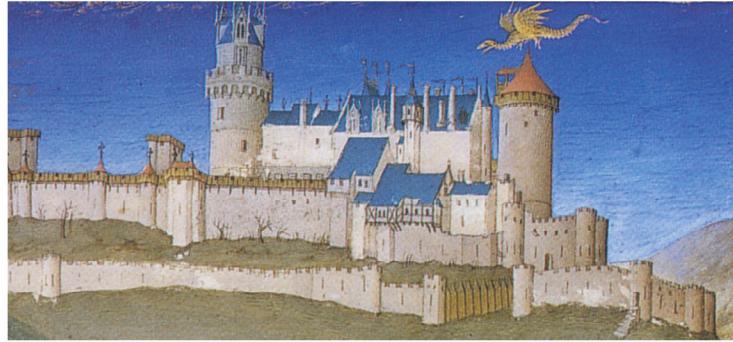
206 pages by different artists
during 15th century:
Limbourg Brothers
Barthélemy d'Eyck(?) and
Jean Colomb
29*21cm

Here: Le mois de mars
(Ms.65, fol. 3v)

Credit line: photo © RMN-
Grand Palais (domaine de
Chantilly) / René-Gabriel
Ojeda



This book is larger than the psalter of Bonne of Luxembourg and was painted partly by the Limbourg Brothers for John, Duke of Berry. It was continued later by different artists and came to represent an ideal image of the Middle Ages, especially the calendar pages, depicting peasant labour scenes.
The month of March is also interesting for another detail:

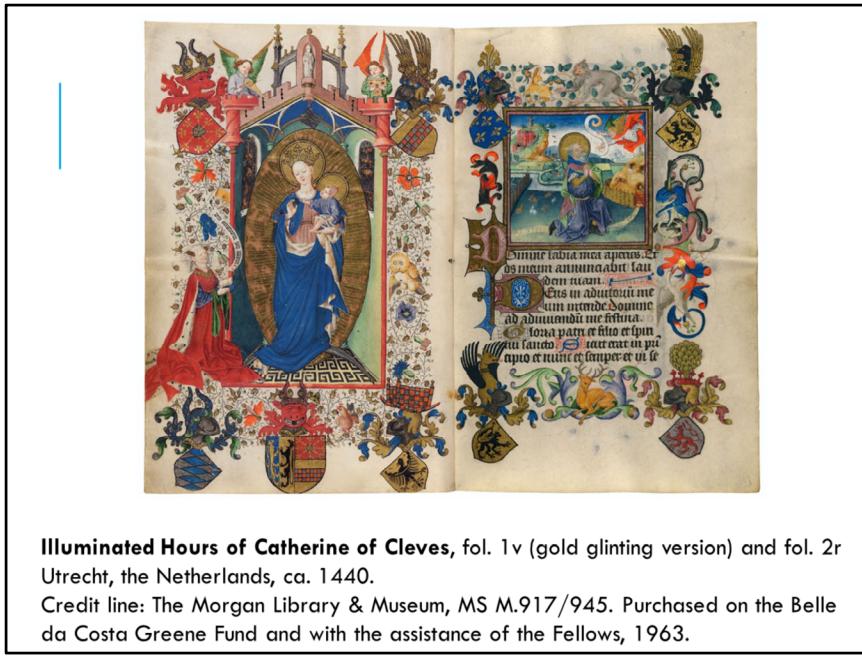


Detail: Melusina – jumping out of the tower and turning into a dragon.

« Alors, poussant une plainte déchirante et un formidable gémissement, elle se précipita dans les airs, s'éloigna de la fenêtre et dépassa le verger tandis qu'elle se transformait en une grande et grosse serpente, longue de 15 pieds »

Jean d'Arras, **Mélusine ou La Noble Histoire de Lusignan** (1393), fol. 140r

The dragon in the top right corner is none other than Melusina, the national mascot portrayed in Luxembourg mostly as a sexy siren, whereas in the original version she was a much fiercer and stronger woman, a builder of castles and cities, and legendary ancestor of the Duc de Berry through his mother, Bonne de Luxembourg (as developed by Michel Margue, <http://hdl.handle.net/10993/2211>).



To conclude with the medieval books of hours, one last example: The Books of Hours made for Catherine of Cleves. As you can see, it is lavishly decorated. Paola Corti wrote in 2015 her PhD on books of hours (<https://www.theses.fr/2014POIT5013>). She examined them as identity and memory politics, a way of ascertaining oneself and one's family. The art historian examined all the heraldics in detail, the colours and symbols and showed how noblewomen and men used these books to position themselves also politically with one side of the lignage rather than another – in this case with her father's lineage rather than her husband's who she was in open conflict with.

You have here a portrait of Catherine of Cleves kneeling in front of the Virgin and Child. Or, as the Morgan Library website puts it: « Catherine's prayer book begins with a bang. The first thing one sees is Catherine herself, praying from her Book of Hours before the Virgin and Child. On the right, the narrative of the life of Mary commences with an angel's telling the Virgin's father, Joachim, that his wife is with child. The many rabbits symbolize the old man's newfound fecundity. In a parallel manner, the borders proudly proclaim Catherine's noble lineage: eight of her ancestors' arms fill the corners of the folios. Her own arms as duchess of Guelders are prominently positioned directly below the Virgin. In a heraldic act of defiance, she surmounts her

arms not with her husband's crest but with the ox of her own house of Cleves." (<https://www.themorgan.org/collection/hours-of-catherine-of-cleves/14>) Yet, and that shows the ambivalence of this object, a books of hours is not meant to impress and dazzle others, it is not an object of prestige, but meant for private, intimate contemplation. Its performativity is spiritual (in prayer) not worldly (in ostentatious consumption). It may of course be bestowed, donated or inherited and thereby circulate and reinforce the message of family belonging. Which brings us back to Suzan Noesen and her story, which is also one of family belonging and shared space, rather a secular one by comparison, and a bit more modest than a Berry castle, but « my home is my castle » is an adage that seems not entirely unfitting here.



Still from *Livre d'heures*, by Suzan Noyesen (2018)

Just as Catherine of Cleves did, Suzan inserts herself into the picture. In her film a character called « Suzan the painter » lives with her grand-mother, called « Bomi » (granny), who is played by the director's real-life grand-mother and housemate. Real life experiences and scripted stories are superimposed. Nonetheless, it seems to me that Suzan's « Livre d'heures » is in many respects inverting its medieval namesake and is thereby actually more than an echo, but rather a counterfoil, which may say as much about our time than a book of hours did about its time.

It's a world without an otherworldly authority, fear of final judgement and the need to pray for the dead and for oneself. The flowers on the cemetery may act as memento mori, but they reflect more of a social convention than piety. Secondly, the film itself is not a object of private devotion, rather it is for public view. Thirdly, it is a filmic projection, which we cannot touch; a two-dimensional digital skin. Even in the Ratskeller exhibition, the three-dimensional elements were not meant to be touched. They were solely for the eye. By contrast, the medieval books of hours were haptically enticing, made of real animal skin and tempera, in vivid colours and ... presumably smelled. But they were made for private contemplation and meditation, not to be displayed. And, most importantly, they aimed at transcendence, at spiritual elevation and eternal salvation. Their objective was otherworldly, whereas Suzan Noyesen's art is very secular. At least, there is a clear separation between the

mundane everyday interactions with Bomi and the alternating dreamlike scenes of a girl riding a bicycle. In these scenes, there is a mysterious bearded guy, who is pointing his finger as if he were indicating a direction. But if that figure is God, he seems utterly isolated and rather useless, a traffic sign in the middle of a meadow. A voice (in the girl's head?) reveals her insecurity and search for reassurance, but her destination unknown. She errs through a garden maze, which is highly geometrical, a renaissance garden, neither Eden nor any intricate medieval reflection thereof. It rather prefigures modern rationality and « the need for transparency », as the voiceover puts it.