

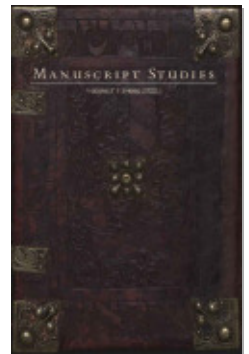


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The Library of the Dukes of Burgundy ed. by Bernard
Bousmanne and Elena Savini (review)

Hanno Wijsman

Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for
Manuscript Studies, Volume 7, Number 1, Spring 2022, pp. 229-232
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mns.2022.0012>

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Bernard Bousmanne and Elena Savini, eds. *The Library of the Dukes of Burgundy*. Studies in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art History (HMSAH). London / Turnhout: Harvey Miller Publishers / Brepols, 2020. Pp. 205. €75. ISBN: 978-1-912554-24-9.

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THIS ATTRACTIVE VOLUME was published in 2020 for the opening of the KBR Museum, a permanent (though rotating) display of manuscripts and other objects in the Royal Library of Belgium. Indeed, the historic origin and heart of this library is formed by the manuscript collection of the later medieval dukes of Burgundy. It is to this “Library of the Dukes of Burgundy” that the title of the book refers. The volume has few scholarly pretensions. It is unannotated and contains only a selected bibliography. It stands in a long tradition of beautiful books and catalogues on (aspects of) the library of the dukes of Burgundy published over the past decades.

The book is subdivided in two parts: a series of five essays and fifty-five manuscript descriptions. An essay by Bernard Bousmanne (11–25) offers a short general introduction to the library and its context. Founded by Philip the Bold (d. 1404), son of King John the Good of France, the book collection was built up by his son John the Fearless (d. 1419) and especially by his grandson Philip the Good (d. 1467). In the second essay (26–49), Dominique Vanwijnsberghe gives a lively introduction to the illuminators of the manuscripts and also offers more clues to the history of the library and its owners. As the only footnote of the book (26) states, this text was published in French in 2015 and has been only slightly adapted and translated for this volume. Jelle Haemers offers a well-structured text (50–90) on the historical context of the Burgundian Low Countries from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century. Highlighting consensus and confrontation and focusing on several personalities in a refreshing bottom-up structure (a townswoman, a nobleman, a princely couple), the author explains how the traditional dichotomies (city-court, city-nobility) are not valid because the nobility was in part city-dwelling and their income dependent on trade (68),

the cooperation between nobility and prince being essential for both parties (74). As a result, the princes were often forced to give in to the demands of the cities. The dense fourth essay (91–102) by Tania Van Hemelryck and Olivier Delsaux discusses the genres and contents of the French texts written and read at the Burgundian court in the fifteenth century. This interesting piece shows how the court of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold functioned as a hotbed where creative ideas concentrated and circulated among authors, patrons, and public. The last essay, by Tatiana Gersten (103–18), considers the care and conservation of the manuscripts today. Pictures and lively descriptions show the treatments that these venerable objects receive and the sometimes difficult choices that have to be made in the process.

This new book in English for a general public about the Library of the Dukes of Burgundy, presented like an exhibition catalogue with essays and descriptions, remains unfortunately wanting. The three (interlinked) problems I want to discuss are a lack of structural coherence, a lack of editorial care, and a lack of care for the English translation.

In spite of all the information the essays and descriptions offer, the title does not seem to cover the contents. Only the first essay introduces, all too rapidly, how “the Library of the Dukes of Burgundy” came about. Several essays and descriptions mention “the library of Burgundy” (23, 132, 143, 183), a notion that needs explanation, especially for an anglophone public. The wealth of information about specific aspects (illuminators, texts, etc.) of the library and about specific manuscripts is not balanced by a structure that leads the reader to a coherent understanding of the collection or its formation, use, and development.

The first essay remains general and at some points even promotional, stating that several of the manuscripts are among the most prestigious in the world (15) and that the illuminators were famous in their days (17; a historically problematic statement in my eyes), and it could have been elaborated much more. Whereas the third essay discusses aspects (other than manuscripts) of the lives of women and men in the Burgundian Netherlands, women are almost completely absent from the first one. Thus, Philip the Bold is presented as the sole founder of this library, skipping the fact that his son John the Fearless inherited more books from his mother, Margaret

of Flanders, than from his father. Other women are briefly mentioned (17–18), some merely as managers of the library (Margaret of Austria, Maria of Hungary, 23), which does not do justice to their prominent role in commissioning texts and manuscripts. For a reader who does not already know the subject, it is troublesome that some essays discuss only the period before 1475 (Vanwijnsberghe; Van Hemelryck and Delsaux), whereas Haemers focuses largely on the last quarter of the fifteenth century. The fourth essay is not illustrated but contains references to a number of manuscripts grouped by theme in nine sections headed by quotations from manuscripts. This is a nice idea, though the reader does not always know to what extent these phrases actually are section titles. Some illustrations would have been welcome, especially when miniatures are mentioned but not shown (e.g., on 95).

The fifty-five manuscript descriptions are multifarious, which adds to the attractiveness of the book. But the reader would be better served by some more guidance. The descriptions are not numbered and not subdivided. There is no apparent order; neither is it clear on what grounds manuscripts have been included or excluded. One apparently stray manuscript from the Croÿ library is described (MS 9510; 161–62), which came into the Burgundian Library only later on, via Margaret of Austria and Mary of Hungary (along with dozens of others); that provenance is not mentioned.

The book would have profited from better editorial care. No cross-references between essays, nor between descriptions and essays (nor an index), were included, though in many instances these would have added enormous value for better understanding, but also sometimes to avoid problems. The hundreds of shelfmarks mentioned are therefore far less useful than they could have been. Also, it is unclear why certain shelfmarks are mentioned and others are not, for example in the fourth essay.

When two descriptions of the famous frontispiece miniature of MS 9242 (78 and 178–79) give two different identifications of the depicted protagonists, this is in itself no problem, because it is an ongoing discussion, but doing this tacitly leaves the reader with questions. The beautiful frontispiece miniature of MS 9066 is reproduced and described twice (53 and 149), but it is not mentioned that the kneeling man depicted offering the manuscript to the duke is the nobleman Jean de Créquy and not “a chronicler.” A miniature from MS 9296 is also reproduced twice, in one of which the

depicted church is identified as Saint Michael's Church (68) and in the other as St. Gudula's Church (148). Though both dedications are correct, this could have been homogenized. The "French library" (170) and "what was to become the French National Library" (175) both refer to the "French Royal Library," which is not an anecdotal detail because the book is about a (French) ducal library. George Chastelain was never a knight in the Order of the Golden Fleece (95).

The different texts in this book have been translated into English from either French or Dutch. Several titles in the bibliography (202–5) give French and Dutch versions of works that are also available in English. Unfortunately, the linguistic editing has left errors and problems, some of which preclude a good understanding by the ingenuous reader. "Valet de chambre" (sometimes erroneously spelled as "valet de chamber") is sometimes translated as "groom of the chamber," sometimes as "groom of the bedchamber." Likewise, the "garde des joyaulx" is either "Master of the Jewel Office" (103 and 133) or "guardian of my lord's treasures" (22), which is preferable.

Discussing the miniaturists from "the North" (37) may be clear in French, but leads to misunderstandings when translated. What is meant here is the northern region of modern France, not of the Burgundian territories under discussion in the essay. "The old Netherlands" (38) should read "the Low Countries." At several instances "handwriting" should read "manuscript" (71, fig. 40; 75, fig. 43); "from" (78, fig. 45) should, apparently, be "by"; "novel" (87, fig. 50) should be "romance"; and "the history of the manuscript" (11) should be "the history of manuscripts."

These are selected examples demonstrating issues recurring throughout the book. Publications that translate and adapt scholarly knowledge for a large public are essential, but I think they take more rather than less editorial care, because the reader needs to be guided. It might have been a better idea to choose another, non-scholarly, publisher with more of an eye for the intended public. An otherwise nice and informative book has not received the editorial care it certainly deserved.