

Mirror of a medieval world. The hours of Catherine of Cleves

Ruud Priem, Curator of Old Master paintings, Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves is beyond doubt the most beautiful and important medieval manuscript to have survived from the Northern Netherlands. Made around 1435-1440 for Catherine of Cleves, duchess of Guelders, it is illuminated by the eponymous Master of Catherine of Cleves. This illuminator is well known for his interest in unusual and inventive iconography, his skill as a storyteller and his acute observations of every day life. In the manuscript's 157 miniatures and their accompanying borders, we see glimpses of medieval life as through a mirror.

From October 9, 2009, until January 3, 2010, Museum Het Valkhof in Nijmegen (the Netherlands) will devote an exhibition to this monument from what aptly has been called 'the Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting' (cf. the exhibition of that name in Utrecht and New York, 1989-1990). For the first time, a comprehensive one-man show featuring this important illuminator will be staged centering on his masterpiece: the Hours of Catherine of Cleves. For this unique exhibition, the manuscript - which is currently kept in the Morgan Library and Museum in New York - will be disbound, so that over 90 illuminated leaves from this unique treasure will be on display.

These leaves will be presented in the context of the oeuvre of the Master; the aim of the exhibition is to gather all 14 manuscripts attributed to the master and his workshop. An important question that will be addressed is whether these 14 manuscripts can indeed be ascribed to one hand, or even one workshop. Also, the master's sources (other manuscripts, drawings, prints and panel paintings) will be considered, charting the transmission of motifs. Another angle that will be considered in the exhibition is Catherine of Cleves's role - and that of her immediate family - as patron of the arts, shown by other art-work and manuscripts commissioned by or connected to Catherine and her relatives. However, the exhibition will open with a display where archeological artifacts, the like of which are found in the miniatures and borders of the Master, are confronted with the work by the master, to show the verisimilitude of the objects he paints.

It is especially in this section where help from colleagues, both in national and international institutions, would be much appreciated. There is a wish-list of archeological artifacts that we would like to show next to the painted versions by the master, such as medieval birdcages, falconry lures, rosaries, to name but a few possible objects. Any help in locating such 15th-century artifacts would be greatly appreciated.