THE HOURS OF CATHERINE OF CLEVES *Devotion, Demons and Daily Life in the Fifteenth Century*

Rob Dückers
Ruud Priem

With contributions by Gregory T. Clark
Henri L.M. Defoer
Jos Koldeweij
Eberhard König
Anne S. Korteweg
James H. Marrow
Arent Pol
Kathryn M. Rudy
Bert Thissen
Roger S. Wieck

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The Golden Age and the Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves

Henri L.M. Defoer

1 Gerard ter Borch, *A Mother Combing her Child's Hair*, formerly known as *Hunting for Lice*, c. 1652–1653. The Hague, Koninklijk Kabinet van Schilderijen Mauritshuis.

The exhibition of Northern Netherlandish miniatures held in Utrecht and New York in 1989–1990 was the first major survey of its kind. The title of the exhibition, *The Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting*, not only recalls the glory of Northern Netherlandish art in the seventeenth century, but reminds us that art also enjoyed a golden age in the 15th century. Miniatures dating from that time have an idiom of their own and are quite different from anything produced in the Southern Netherlands. From the 1850s onwards, 17th-century Dutch painting gained increasing popularity both in Europe and beyond, thanks largely to the writings of the French art historian E.J.T. Thoré.[1] Holland's unassuming brand of art had just as much to offer as anything by the Italian old masters: a renewed appreciation of the brilliant versatility and emotional strength of Rembrandt, the elegance and perceptive characterization of portraits by Frans Hals, the extraordinarily lifelike quality of Dutch landscapes, the *joie de vivre* of Jan Steen and the realism of genre and domestic scenes by painters such as Gabriël Metsu, Pieter de Hooch, Johannes Vermeer and Gerard ter Borch.

What appealed most was the authenticity of those scenes from everyday life. In 1875 the French painter and author Eugène Fromentin wrote of the artists of the Golden Age: 'They were content just to look around them and leave fantasy for what it was.'[2] This realistic quality was in fact the true hallmark of Dutch painting, reflecting the pragmatism of the down-to-earth Dutch people. Nineteenth-century Dutch writers, as well as those in France, acclaimed 17th-century painting as the country's greatest cultural achievement and the expression of its national identity.

This view of Netherlandish art of the Golden Age prevailed into the second half of the 20th century. Only then did people begin to realize that, apart from this 'everyday' art, the Dutch excelled in the more 'aristocratic' genre of history painting, for which they drew elements of style from other schools, such as Caravaggism and Classicism, in other parts of the world.[3] It turned out, too, that many of the domestic scenes were more contrived than they had seemed, and that the ostensibly neutral genre scenes in fact often contained moralistic undertones, admonishing us to virtue or reminding us of the fleeting nature of life.[4] Even so, it was not entirely wrong to see those realistic-looking representations of the everyday world as something typically Dutch. We should remember that artists in other countries had already produced monumental history paintings, and that Dutch Caravaggists and Classicists found their inspiration in Italy and France, not the other way around.

But nowhere except in Holland were moral ideals so cryptically embedded in scenes from daily life as to be undecipherable to later generations. It is therefore not incorrect to say that this kind of true-to-life art epitomizes the culture of a nation less impressed by the noble and the heroic than by the simple reality of everyday life. It is a nation that in the 20th century loved and admired Queen Juliana (1948–1980) precisely for being so ordinary, so just like anyone else.

Some genre scenes stand out not only for their lifelike realism, but also for the intimacy they evoke. One of the

2 Rembrandt, *The Holy Family*, 1646, Kassel, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen.

most moving of all is Gerard ter Borch's small panel in the Mauritshuis in The Hague (fig. 1). Around 1650 he painted a profoundly sympathetic picture of a mother gently removing the lice from her child's hair as the child leans against her knee, lost in thought.[5] And Rembrandt, who chose intensely dramatic themes such as the Blinding of Samson or Belshazzar's Feast,[6] also depicted quiet, unassuming stories from the Bible. In his *Holy Family* in Kassel (fig. 2), in a room dimly lit by the glow of a small fire, the Virgin takes her child from the crib and holds him tenderly to her breast, while Joseph carves a piece of wood in the right background.[7] A kitten gazes wistfully at a bowl of porridge in the centre of the room, heightening the sense of warm domesticity. Rembrandt's *Holy Family* in St Petersburg, although much larger than the painting in Kassel, evokes a similar mood (fig. 3).[8] Once again Joseph works with his hands, representing the life of action. The Virgin quietly watches over her sleeping child in the crib, an open book on her lap alluding to the loftier virtue of 'contemplation'.

This feeling for intimacy in 17th-century painting was nothing new. Its precedent is found in late medieval art, also marked by a tendency to present the exalted and the sacred in human terms that make it easier for people to relate to them. The Catharijneconvent in Utrecht has a group of figures of the Holy Family carved from oak in the studio of Adriaen van Wesel (fig. 4).[9] The Virgin, seated, concentrates on her book, alluding to the life of meditation. A basket in the foreground we see contains a carpenter's tools; in front of the basket a heavy beam is balanced on two blocks of wood. Joseph, representing the active life, measures the beam with a length of string as his young son lends a hand and pays close attention. Another domestic scene, which shows the Holy Family at table, was made around 1500 and is variously attributed to the Haarlem artist Jan Mostaert and the Master of the Brunswick Diptych (fig. 5).[10] Joseph slices a loaf of rye bread, while the Virgin, holding the infant Christ on her arm, stirs a bowl of porridge. The many objects around

3 Rembrandt, *The Holy Family with Angels*, 1645, St Petersburg, State Hermitage Museum.

4 Adriaen van Wesel, *The Holy Family*, 1475–1480, Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent.

5 Attributed to Jan Mostaert or the Master of the Brunswick Diptych, *The Holy Family at table*, *c.* 1500, Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz Museum.

6 *A Man Grilling Two Chickens on a Spit*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 101.

them are rendered with extraordinary precision: the porridge bowl, the bread, the German stoneware dish and jug, the pewter salt dish and the tiny spinner's lard jar hang on the wall below a shelf, which supports a box and some books alluding to the contemplative life. The scene reflects the spirit of Modern Devotion, a religious movement that gained momentum towards the end of the 14th century in reaction to the secularization of the power structure of the Church. It emerged in the eastern part of the Low Countries but soon spread to the west. The founder of the movement, Geert Grote (1340–1385), advocated a simple life in the spirit of Christ. Men and women joined together to form religious communities known as the Followers of the Common Life, and some evolved into monasteries. Geert Grote's principles spread beyond the boundaries of these cloisters and communities, inspiring a spirituality that was to leave its mark on the religious life of our region. Great importance was attached to prayer and meditation, through which believers sought to assimilate the experience of Christ's life and death. Like Christ, they had to be willing to lay down their lives for their fellow men. Though divine, Christ had come to the world out of love for mankind, thereby bridging the gap between the human and the divine. Grote's followers abandoned the practice of following the Latin prayer books that had previously been used for devotion in favour of personal Books of Hours written in the vernacular. Translated by Grote, these Books of Hours were repeatedly copied and widely disseminated. Many were beautifully illuminated with ornate initials, marginal decorations and, in some cases, illustrations to inspire pious contemplation.

These miniature paintings were quite different from those in the Latin prayer books of the French and Southern Netherlandish nobility and aristocracy. The illustrations in the latter, which have more to do with the world of court etiquette and social convention than with reality, can be said to be characterized by simplicity that they presented an idealized world peopled by decorative beings. The images in Northern Netherlandish Books of Hours, by contrast, evoke a sense of intimacy and familiarity that was calculated to bring the faithful closer to the sublime and the sacred. These Dutch illuminators depicted sacred events with a keen awareness of the reality of their world. They sought and discovered new compositions to tell the old stories in contemporary ways that people would recognize. And as a result, they have given us a glimpse into the everyday lives of our medieval forebears.

The most beautiful of all Dutch Books of Hours is the one that belonged to Catherine of Cleves. Many of the miniatures as well as the marginalia are amazingly realistic: a man grills two chickens on a spit above a drip-tray (fig. 6), another empties his fish trap, and others catch birds, either with a lime-twig or by trapping them in a cage (figs. 7, 8). An innkeeper draws wine from a vat and a baker bakes bread while his assistant kneads the dough and a woman weighs the flour (figs. 9, 10). The scenes in the margins often have a bearing on the main illustration. For example, the virtue of Piety is interpreted as charity: a

7 *A Man Emptying His Fish Trap*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 85.

8 *A man catching birds*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 107.

9 *An Innkeeper Drawing Wine from a Vat*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 224.

10 *A Baker Baking Bread*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 226.

11 *A Wealthy Lady Dispensing Alms*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 917, p. 65.

12 *A Man on his Deathbed*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 180.

wealthy lady – probably Catherine – dispenses alms, while below, a woman delivers food to a prisoner who appears as the infant Christ (fig. 11). These images illustrate the words, 'What thou hast done for the poor man, thou hast done for me'.

In a profoundly moving scene from the Visitation, the pregnant Virgin visited her likewise pregnant cousin Elizabeth. In the lower section of the margin are two children: Elizabeth's son, a tiny John the Baptist, and on the left, the infant Christ, whom John captures in a bird net. The motif alludes to the Son of God, who was as free as a bird, but allowed himself to be captured by assuming the nature of man in order to redeem mankind (fig. 13).

The miniatures that illustrate the Office of the Dead are highly original. The first shows a man on his deathbed. In the background at right are his two heirs, dressed in all their finery. That they have come not out of compassion but from greed is evident from a scene in the lower section of the margin, where one of the men appraises the contents of a brimming money chest. In the background at left, a physician examines a half-filled urinal with a look of dismay, a woman rests her hand on the patient's forehead and another hands him a burning candle, which signal death's imminent approach. In the foreground a Carmelite and a nun prays for his soul. On a table between them are a loaf

Deus in adiutoriū
meum intende. Do
mine ad adiuuan
dum me festina. Gloria
patri et filio et spiritui sancto.
Sicut erat in principio:
et nunc et semper. et in secula
seculorum amen. Ymnus:

13 *The Visitation*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 32.

of bread, an apple, drinking vessels, and a box, which may contain pills (fig. 12).

A few pages later, we come to a rather distressing scene. It shows two men unceremoniously laying the rigid corpse on a bed of straw, in a bare room, a custom observed for reasons of hygiene, as the straw could be burnt once the deceased had been buried (fig. 14). In the miniature illustrating the requiem mass, a man makes an offering of two loaves of bread in the hope of alleviating the suffering of the deceased's soul in purgatory (fig. 15). His sacrifice is not in vain: further on, an angel descends into purgatory where he gives the bread to three souls kneeling behind a laid table (fig. 16). The story ends with the angel delivering the souls from purgatory (fig. 17). In

15th centuries. The meticulous rendering of the domestic interior and its contents is, however, similar to that seen in the panel. At upper left are a shelf crammed with crockery and drinking vessels and, on the wall below, a pair of iron scissors. On the right is a small cupboard with its door open to reveal a dish, some bread, and other provisions. On top of it is a jug and a drip-tray, and beneath it a pair of bellows. A copper candlestick stands on a small shelf to the left of the cupboard, and a skimmer and other cooking utensils are stored in a rack against the wall. In the centre is a tall, semicircular hearth. A three-legged cooking pot, known as a *grape,* stands in the fire, while a kettle hangs from a chimney crook above it. On the left is a pair of tongs, and above them a trivet.

14 *Two Men Laying a Corpse on a Bed of Straw*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 99v.

15 *A Man Makes an Offering of Two Loaves of Bread*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 104.

those days, the deceased's loved ones could expedite a happy ending of this kind by praying for the departed soul or by gaining indulgences.

Two of the most poignant scenes appear in the Hours of the Virgin. One shows the Virgin weaving Christ's seamless cloth (for which the soldiers cast lots after the crucifixion) (fig. 18). In the background at right Joseph carves a piece of wood, as he does in Rembrandt's Holy Family (fig. 2). Between them the infant Christ takes a few steps with the help of a walking frame. He holds a banner inscribed in Latin, 'I am your consolation'. The scene takes place in a realistic interior. In a second miniature of the Holy Family the room is rendered in even greater detail (fig. 19). On the left, the virgin suckles het child, alluding to her divine motherhood. She is seated not on the chair behind her, but on a mat on the floor, which points up her humility.[11] On the right, Joseph is seated on a chair made from a barrel, eating a bowl of porridge. He is not the earnest, retiring man portrayed in the panel attributed to Mostaert or the Master of the Brunswick Diptych (fig. 6) but, rather, something of a nonentity, as is often the case in German art from the late 14th and early

The same painstaking attention to detail can be seen in illustrated bibles from this period. Until the 14th century the Bible had been essentially a scholarly textbook for use by theologians. It was written in Latin, but the laity were privy to a few sections of the Gospels, known as Pericopes, which were read out in the vernacular during Mass. Priests would familiarize congregations with Bible stories by using them in sermons and religious instruction. Modern Devotion led to a surge of interest in the Bible: people wanted to be able to read it themselves. Translations of the Old Testament were published in Middle Dutch, as was the so-called Harmony of the Gospels, in which the overlapping accounts of Christ's life, as described in the four Gospels, were worked into a single narrative. These texts were often expanded to include non-biblical stories, such as the history of Alexander the Great or the Destruction of Jerusalem. Woven into the text, by way of commentary, were fragments of the *Historia Scholastica,* a compilation of the historical books of the Old Testament by the twelfth-century theologian Petrus Commestor. These translations of the Bible cannot be compared to Erasmus' or Luther's critical transla-

16 *An Angel Descending into Purgatory to Give Bread to Three Souls Kneeling behind a Laid Table*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 105v.

17 *An Angel Delivering Souls from Purgatory*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 945, f. 107.

18 *The Virgin Weaving the Seamless Cloth for Christ, with Joseph and the Infant Christ*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, New York, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 149.

19 *The Holy Family in an Interior*, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, Morgan Library & Museum, Ms. 917, p. 151.

tions, but they do bear witness to a growing interest in the Bible on the eve of the Reformation.

Before 1477, when the first Dutch bible came off a press in Delft, translations had been available only in manuscript. Bibles were sizeable and no more than twenty of the early Dutch bibles have come down to us, some wholly, others only partly intact. Thirteen are illuminated, some with several hundred illustrations, which are generally small.[12] Several illuminators, of variable skill, would collaborate to produce illustrated bibles of this kind. Many miniatures are in the form of pen drawings, some of which are lightly coloured in. The Master of Catherine of Cleves was one of those artists who, around 1440, also produced illustrations for bibles. A history bible in London contains seven miniatures from his hand, and another in Munich seven superb pen drawings (see cat. 22).[13] A second bible in London includes a large number of pen drawings by him (see cat. 21).[14] These too are rendered with a keen eye for realistic detail. Many of the scenes are set in small, low-ceilinged rooms, which are every bit as convincing as those in Catherine's Book of Hours. Two good examples are the miniatures illustrating the birth of Moses, and the young Moses who, after accidentally damaging the pharaoh's crown, is subjected to a trial by fire (figs. 20, 23).

Another miniature offers a fleeting glance into the workplace of a medieval gold- and silversmith (fig. 24). Bezaleel, who in Exodus was ordered to make a tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant for the Lord, hunches over his anvil as he adds the finishing touches to a capital, while his assistant Oholiab heats a metal rod in the fire. We see finely rendered tools on shelves against the back wall.

Some twenty years after the Hours of Catherine was created, Evert Zoudenbalch, canon of Utrecht, commissioned a costly, two-volume bible, with illuminations by six miniaturists. The most important of them was called the Master of Evert Zoudenbalch.[15] The artist depicted numerous Old Testament episodes with great originality, all in obviously Dutch settings. Boaz and Ruth, for example, rest in a real barn, with a haystack in the background (fig. 21). They are surrounded by sacks of grain; in the foreground is a bushel basket. The rooms in which the biblical scenes take place are reminiscent of Dutch interiors – even in the case of a throne room or King David's bedchamber (fig. 22). There are tiles on the floor, a rough-hewn wooden-beamed ceiling and a rudimentary door made out of planks give us a Pieter de Hooch-like view down the length of a corridor. The old king lies in bed, his crown hanging from a nail above him and his harp on the wall. He is no longer able to keep his body temperature sufficiently high, and so has a young virgin at his side to keep him warm. On the left, behind the curtain, we glimpse the king's bedpan, a true-to-life, if undignified, detail.

The same kind of realism occurs again in Dutch art in the 17th century. I say 'occurs again' because no line of development runs from the 15th to the 17th century. On the contrary, the art of the 16th century forms a distinct cut-off point. The artists of that time, under the influence of the Renaissance and following the example of the Italians, painted increasingly idealized figures. Simplicity and intimacy were overtaken by dramatic gestures and theatrical poses. The subjects people chose were informed by biblical humanism, a movement that sought to combine Christianity and Graeco-Roman culture. Both the biblical stories and the writings of the ancients became the compasses for moral direction. For many, the saints were more than simply sanctified and venerable beings: they were moral heroes and role models to be emulated. A growing number of paintings depicted mythological subjects and scenes from the Old Testament, while those inspired by the New Testament shifted in content from the relatively

20 *The Birth of Moses*, London, British Museum, Ms. Add. 38.122, f. 73 v.

emotional episodes from Christ's youth, his suffering and death, to parables and subjects from his public life. The trend continued in the Low Countries into the 17th century, but by then the Italian examples, apart from the Caravaggists and Classicists, were no longer considered the be-all and end-all. Life had moved on, and the idealism of the Renaissance lost ground to a new realism that often had the appearance of a revival of the 15th century. Painters abandoned the elegant figures of Mannerism in favour of ordinary human figures with human emotions, which, though dramatic at first, gradually became more restrained. More and more biblical stories were located in ordinary homes, rustic interiors, or in the flat Dutch countryside rather than in monumental surroundings or Arcadian landscapes. All things considered, the realism of the late Middle Ages seems to have foreshadowed that of the 17th century, and it was indeed appropriate to call the exhibition held in Utrecht and New York twenty years ago 'The Golden Age of Dutch Manuscript Painting'.

21 *Boaz and Ruth Resting in a Barn*, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2771, f. 153 v.

22 *King David in his Bedchamber with a Young Virgin beside Him*, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2771, f. 190 r.

23 *The Young Moses Accidentally Damages the Pharaoh's Crown*, London, British Museum, Ms. Add. 38.122, f. 75 r.

24 *The Workplace of a Medieval Gold- and Silversmith, with Bezaleel at his Anvil, and his Assistant Oholiab*, London British Museum, Ms. Add. 38.122, f. 117 v.

1 W. Bürger 1858–1860.
2 Fromentin 1876, p.181.
3 See Blankert 1980 and 1999.
4 See De Jongh 1967, 1971 and 1976.
5 Inv. no. 44; no. 12 in Broos 1987), where the painting, traditionally called *Maternal Care* appears under the title *Hunting for Lice*. In my view this is less accurate, as nothing in this introverted picture conjures up the idea of a frantic hunt. It simply depicts a mother caring for her child.
6 Frankfurt, Städelsches Kunstinstitut (Bredius 501), and London, National Gallery (Bredius 497), respectively.
7 Kassel, Gemäldegalerie (Bredius 572).
8 St Petersburg, The Hermitage (Bredius 570).
9 Inv. no. ABM bh471. It probably formed part of the Altar of the Virgin of the Confraternity of Our Lady, carved by the Utrecht sculptor Adriaen van Wesel during 1475–1477. See Van Vlierden 2004), pp. 194–195.
10 Cologne, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, inv. no. WRM 471. See Hiller 1969, pp. 101–102 and Lammertse 2008, no. 18.
11 She is a Madonna of Humility. For this type of Virgin, see Meiss 1936 and 1951, p. 134.
12 Defour et al. 1989-1990, pp. 129–130.
13 Defour et al. 1989-1990, cats. 42, 41.
14 Byvanck and Hoogewerff 1922–1926, p. 12, no. 26, pls. 63, 64; Byvanck 1937, p. 146; Delaissé 1968, pp. 28–29.
15 Vienna, Osterreichische Nationalbibliothek, cod. 2771–2. Pächt and Jenni 1975, pp. 43–85; Defour et al. 1989-1990, cat. 61.