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Melissa Medefesser
Portland State University

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Stylistic Aspects of the Portland State University Book of Hours

Melissa Medefesser

The artistic language of manuscript miniatures provides insight into changes and developments of style within specific regions. The six small scale and four full-page miniatures in the Portland State University Book of Hours were illuminated in the style of the Master of Jean Rolin, one of the leading manuscript illuminators in Paris in the middle of the fifteenth century. This style, which is characterized by an increased interest in linear perspective, an emphasis on form, and figural interaction, marks a transition from the abstraction of Gothic art to the more naturalistic and expressive art of the Renaissance.

The Master of Jean Rolin studied under the Bedford Master, whose name was taken from the two manuscripts he illuminated for John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford.¹ Complex compositions, elongated forms, and painterly brushwork characterize the Bedford Master's style, sometimes referred to as the Bedford Trend or the Bedford Style. This style was associated with the Gothic International Style, or "soft style," which was often used in painting during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.² Like the Master of Jean Rolin, the artist of the PSU Book of Hours incorporates elements set forth by the Bedford Master while integrating a closer study of the natural world.

The compositions of the miniatures in the PSU Book of Hours convey a clear sense of space and relationship between figures and objects. The simple composition departs from the style of the Bedford Master, who was known for including several narratives in a single pictorial frame.³ The green tiled floors, seen in images with interior settings, are also derived from the Bedford Master, as seen in Miniature of Anne, Duchess of Bedford, Praying Before St. Anne from the Bedford Hours (Ill. IV). In the PSU Book of Hours these tiled floors appear to recede toward a single point in the background creating a sense of perspective while inviting the viewer into the scene. This is especially noticeable in the images of the Flagellation and the Madonna and Child (Figs. 10 and 13). Spatial depth is conveyed by angled views of architectural elements and background objects. However, these objects do not always line up toward the vanishing point, as seen in the angles of the podium and bedchamber in the image of the Annunciation (Fig. 4). It is possible the artist was incorporating elements of linear perspective, which had become popular earlier that century.

¹ Colum Hourihane, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Medieval Art and Architecture*, Volume 2. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 270

² Martin Kemp, *The Oxford History of Western Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 111

³ Hourihane, 270

Vibrant shades of blue, green, orange, and yellow provide a pleasing aesthetic to the miniatures while correlating with the marginalia. The palette is also characterized by gray tones, seen especially in the violets, and gold to highlight prominent forms. This application of color was strongly influenced by the Master of Jean Rolin, as can be seen in depictions of garments in the image of the Crucifixion from the Missal of Jean Rolin. Depictions of drapery in the PSU Book of Hours are defined by immediate shifts in hue creating a naturalistic sense of shadows and forms. However, this tone-on-tone design is also suggestive of stylized drapery seen in earlier, Gothic art. The portrayal of monochromatic colors was characteristic of the Bedford Master who often used shifts in color, rather than line, to define edges.⁴ This resulted in the soft, painterly effect associated with his style. While elements of this can be seen in the PSU Book of Hours, primarily in representations of garments, bold outlines are also used to convey form. Thick, black lines outline the entire body of Christ in the images of the Flagellation and Crucifixion (Figs. 10 and 11). They are also used to emphasize hands and faces.

Although there is a stiff quality to the figures in the PSU Book of Hours, emphasized by vertical postures and outlines around forms, they also suggest some study of the natural world. Tall, elongated figures associated with the Bedford Master and International Gothic style became more proportionate with the development of the Master of Jean Rolin's style.⁵ Figure proportions in the PSU Book of Hours follow this trend and are also relatively naturalistic. Curved torsos and diagonal limbs help express movement, while gesture and three-quarter views of figures create a sense of interaction between them.

Figure sizes are generally consistent in relation to each other, although it is worth noting the size difference of the Virgin compared to the nearby angel in the depiction of the Madonna and Child. The Madonna and Child continued to be an important iconographical depiction throughout the Middle Ages, with Gothic images often placing them into a separate niche to convey importance.⁶ Although the figures have been grounded into a natural and earthly realm, the size difference maintains a level of hierarchy to dominate the focus of the viewer.

While it appears the artist of the miniatures in the PSU Book of Hours was influenced by elements of Gothic art, the inclusion of perspective, form, and movement allude to the increasingly naturalistic artistic style of late fifteenth-century French miniatures.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Peter Rolfe Monks, "The Rolin Master's Hand in London BL MS Additional 25695," in *Medieval Texts and Images: Studies of Manuscripts from the Middle Ages*, ed. Margaret M. Manion and Bernard J. Muir (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1991), 61

⁶ Joan Naughton, "A Minimally-intrusive Presence: Portraits in Illustrations for Prayers to the Virgin," in *Medieval Texts and Images: Studies of Manuscripts from the Middle Ages*, ed. Margaret M. Manion and Bernard J. Muir (Sydney: Craftsman House, 1991), 116

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