

Jean Colombe, workshop of (Bourges, active c. 1460-65, d. between 1493 and 1498)

Pietà (155 x 105 mm.)

France, Bourges, c. 1480

Set between two columns painted in liquid gold, the Virgin Mary cradles Christ's body after his deposition from the Cross. Accompanying the Virgin is Mary Magdalene, identified by her ointment jar on the right, Mary Salome and Mary Cleophas, the two companions of the Virgin on either side of her, and the youthful John the Baptist on the left. Two angels support a trompe l'oeil banderole, on which an initial with the camaïeu d'or painting of a woman introduces the text of the "Obsecro te" (I beseech thee, O Holy Lady Mary), a prayer to the Virgin customarily included in Books of Hours. Extraordinary is the minutely detailed townscape that forms the backdrop of the miniature; this is surely the town of Bourges as it was in the fifteenth century with its Cathedral, and Gothic houses and palaces.

Jean Colombe was one of the most prolific French illuminators of the later half of the fifteenth century. The beginning of his activity may be situated around 1460-65. Working at first for the local elite of Bourges he soon attracted the attention of Charlotte of Savoy, queen to Louis XI, and received commissions for manuscripts from various members of the court. It was probably Charlotte who introduced Colombe to her nephew, Charles I, duke of Savoy, for whom he completed the illumination of two outstanding manuscripts in his library, the famous *Très Riches Heures* of Jean de Berry and the splendid Apocalypse by Jean Bapteur and Péronet Lamy (Madrid, Escorial MS E. Vit. 5). In 1486 Colombe was appointed official illuminator to the court of Savoy, a position he retained probably up to 1488, when he moved back to Bourges, where he died between 1493 and 1498.

The style of the present illumination compares closely with that of a Book of Hours by Colombe in Paris (BnF, MS n.a.l. 3181) painted in the middle of his career c. 1480 before his move to Savoy. The stippled treatment of the voluminous drapery, the relatively somber tones, the expansive landscape, and the facial types are all hallmarks of Colombe's style. For the landscape in the background, see the view of the town of Bourges that Colombe included in Sebastien Mamerot's *Les Passages d'outremer faits par les Francois ...* (Paris, BnF, MS fr. 554, f. 193v).

Literature:

Avril and Reynaud, 1993, pp. 334-335; Ribault, 1999, pp. 13-26