

Materiality Analysis: Books as a Reflection of the Owner

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves is a 192X130mm book, which means that it is quite portable. The size tells us that this was a private devotional book meant for the personal use of the owner, and not for the use of a church. The quality of the book shows us that it belonged to someone of a higher social class. The book is written in Latin. Though a majority of the population could not speak or read Latin, it is quite possible that Duchess Catherine could, since she was royalty and must have had at least some education in Latin. The book was written and illuminated in the year 1440, by Master of Catherine of Cleves, in Netherlands. He is believed to be a highly celebrated illuminator whose style was unique and was adopted centuries later in still-life paintings. Only a person of considerable wealth and high social standing would have had the fortune of having a book illustrated by an artist of such high caliber.

The first page of the book has an image of Catherine herself kneeling beside the Virgin. This illustration uses pathos to connect Catherine in a somewhat direct sense, to divinity. It also shows us the importance the Virgin held in Catherine's life. At the same time, the image also hints at the idea that Catherine, because of her royal status, was closer to divinity than the common people. The notion that kings and queens were closer to God and therefore had power over people was a popular one. The image of Catherine kneeling beside the Virgin supports the idea that she was superior to the others not only because of her birth into royalty, but also because of her close connection to the divine. Another image of Catherine that supports the idea of her being superior to others is in the Vespers. She is shown wearing her royal robes, giving alms to the beggars who are holding up cups. This image reiterates the fact that Catherine was kind, and helped people of lower standing in the society, thereby implying that her place in the society was higher up. The fact that the book contains an image of the person who commissioned the book also supports the fact that the owner of the book must be of a high social standing.



The image above is that of Catherine kneeling beside The Virgin. (Source: Morgan Library & Museum, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, MS M.945, ff. 1v-2r)

Another interesting thing about the book is how it reflects Catherine's equation with her husband. The borders of the first page of the book contain the crests and coats of arms of Catherine and her father. She omits her husband's crests the majority of the time. Even when she does include her husband's crest, it is placed below that of her father's. She also incorporates her husband's image in the illustration of "The Final Gift of the Holy Spirit". He is shown kneeling beside Christ as if being judged by God himself with a demon arguing for Arnold's damnation. Compared to Catherine's own portrait in the book, she portrays her husband in a negative light. At a time when women were supposed to consider their husband superior to anyone else, these images use ethos to convey Catherine's spiritual superiority. The fact that she portrayed her husband in bad light further goes to show that Catherine wanted to be perceived as a person of high social standing who was powerful and independent.



The image above shows Arnold of Egmond in "The Final Gift of the Holy Spirit" (Source: Morgan Library and Museum, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, MS M.917, pp. 68-69)

The plethora of the elaborate miniatures, of which there are a hundred and fifty-seven, coupled with the fact that the pages of the book are vellum is a clear sign of the wealth of the person who commissioned it. The book itself must have been slightly bulky before it was separated. It contained a total of about three hundred and sixty-nine leaves. Thus, we can assume that it wasn't portable enough to carry on one's person. The book may have been kept propped up on a bookstand in a room where Catherine prayed.

We can assume that the original binding must have been quite elaborate given the stature of the owner. However, we have no way of confirming that since the book was removed from its original binding, separated in to two, and rebound as two books in the mid-19th century. The reason for this may have been to preserve the pages of the book. The very fact that people found it a need to preserve the book highlights the fact that it was considered precious. The people who rebound it may have felt that the book would be easier to preserve if it were made more compact, hence they separated it into two. Since the pages weren't in order in the two separate books, it is quite possible that they had come loose from the original binding and the people who rebound it simply couldn't place the pages where they actually belonged before binding them again. The book was disbound again (as of 2011) by the Morgan library in an effort to put the pages in the proper order.

Since the book was separated, both its halves have had considerably different histories. One half was owned by and passed on along the d'Arenberg family. It was bought from a book dealer in Paris by Charles d'Arenberg, who gifted it to his wife, Julia. Since then it has passed on to the hands of several book collector and book dealers. The second half of the book was owned by the Rothschild family. Where they acquired this book from is unknown. The book they owned was kept a secret, hinting at the value they attached to it. They sold it to Morgan in 1963. Now, Morgan owns the loose leaves of both the books, and is in preparation for rebinding into a single book.

The illustrations are bright with a lot of attention being paid to details. The backgrounds of all the images have also been filled in. The borders are very elaborate as well. We can see floral patterns as well as angel and human figures in some of the borders. We see the use of the colour pink in the borders of several pages, which is rare. We have hardly seen the use of the colour pink in any of the medieval manuscripts so far. The use of such a rich variety colours, designs and designs were also a proof of the high-class status of the owner or the book. It was a manifestation of the luxuries of the royal life that the owner enjoyed.



In these illustrations, we can clearly see the use of the color pink, which is very rarely found in other books from the same era. (Source: Morgan Library & Museum, Hours of Catherine of Cleves, MS M.917/M.945)

In conclusion, looking at the way the book was made, as well as its history, we can tell that it is a valuable manuscript which belonged to a person of high social and economic standing in the society. The book contains elaborate and intricately detailed illuminations made by the one of the best illustrators of the time. In addition to that, the images of the owner itself were included in illustrations. This indicates that the book was commissioned for someone important. The image of Arnold is used to contrast those of Catherine to further highlight her spiritual superiority. All these aspects of the book support the fact that the owner of the book was a person who held a high place in the society, and wanted to be viewed as an independent woman who was socially, spiritually, and morally superior to others. Efforts were made to preserve the book, and the existence of a part of the book was kept a secret for generations by a family since people knew that the book held special value not only because of the excellent workmanship that went into it, but also because it was owned by a person of historical, and social significance.

Reflection

During my first revision, it was suggested to me that I describe the effect the illustrations have on the reader. Since every image is supposed to mean something, it forces the readers to feel a certain way. For example, the image of Catherine with the Virgin and child pushes readers to acknowledge the connection Catherine had with the Virgin, as well as the importance of worshiping the Virgin in Catherine's life. During the second revision, I kept this in mind and stated what effect the artist was trying to have on the audience through the painting of Arnold. I was asked to make the claim more explicit. I did so by incorporating and restating the claim in the paragraphs following the introduction. One major way in which I remind the audience of my claim is by restating the claim in my conclusion. I have also described in brief the several different points that make up my argument in the conclusion, in order to remind the reader of the reasons I believe my argument is valid. In my second revision, I added two new aspects to my old argument. I brought up the implications of Catherine's connection to the Virgin, and how she used the book to portray her husband. Through these two new points, I wish to further my argument about how the book was used to portray Catherine not only as socially superior, but also spiritually and morally superior. Since the new aspects I introduced into the piece were about more than just Catherine's social standing in the society, I changed the title from "Books as a Reflection of the Social Standing of the Owner" to "Books as a Reflection of the Owner".