Case 16 2012/13: Louis de Gruuthuse's copy of the Deeds of Sir Gillion de Trazegnies in the Middle East

Expert adviser’s statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary’s note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item
This illuminated manuscript on parchment contains the rare anonymous French romance Gillion de Trazegnies. It is dated 1464 and was transcribed by the Burgundian court scribe David Aubert. It includes eight half-page miniatures with painted borders and forty-four historiated initials, all by Lieven Van Lathem (fl. 1454-93), one of the most successful painters in the Low Countries in this period. The manuscript comprises 237 leaves, each of which measures 275 x 262 mm.

2. Context
The volume was made for Louis of Gruuthuse (1422-92), one the most trusted governors of the northern territories held by the dukes of Burgundy. Like the dukes, Louis was a great bibliophile and art patron in the Netherlands. His book collecting influenced Edward IV during his stay with Louis in Bruges in 1470-71. The manuscript includes a dedication to Louis as well as his heraldic arms, emblem, and motto.

As part of Louis’s extensive library, the volume was acquired by Louis XII of France (r. 1498-1515) and had the arms of France added. It was recorded at Blois in 1518 (no. 97). Whereas most of Gruuthuse’s manuscripts passed from the French Royal Library to the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Gillion came into the possession of William George Spencer Cavendish, 6th Duke of Devonshire (1790-1858) by 1817. It remained at Chatsworth as MS 7535 until its sale at Sotheby’s on 5 Dec. 2012 (lot 51).

It has been exhibited in London (1908, 2004), Brussels (1959), Manchester (1976), Bruges (1992) and Los Angeles (2003). It was included in two shows of Chatsworth treasures that toured the USA (1979-80, 2003-5).

3. Waverley criteria
I consider the work to meet two of the Waverley criteria and possibly all three.

The manuscript is of outstanding aesthetic importance as one of the finest secular works produced during the ‘golden age’ of Netherlandish painting in the fifteenth century. (criterion 2)

It is of outstanding significance for the study of French chivalric texts and of Netherlandish art of the period. It is the key secular work of one its leading painters and one of only four contemporary copies of an important text. (criterion 3)
The Committee’s Revised Waverley criteria state that in determining whether an object is so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune, its ‘historical significance’ and association with ‘significant historical’ people should be taken into account, and that the category can include items which have been produced abroad. The Committee may wish to consider whether the manuscript meets this test as a long-standing treasure of one of the most important British aristocratic collections. (criterion 1)
DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item

The manuscript is the finest copy of the romance *Gillion de Trazegnies*, in French: three others date from the fifteenth century and one from the sixteenth century. It is one of only two that is illustrated, the other being in a private, German collection. No other copies (nor the three copies in Latin) are in UK collections.

The text tells the story of a crusading knight, based on Gilles I (1134-61), lord of Trazegnies in modern Hainault, and his relative Gilles le Brun (1199-1276), who was a champion of the first Crusade of St Louis. Its author is unknown, but it was dedicated to Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy (r. 1419-67). The book was commissioned by Louis of Gruuthuse, an important Burgundian governor and bibliophile (his Bruges residence is now the Gruuthusemuseum). Of his large and important library—nearly two hundred of his manuscripts survive—this manuscript is arguably the finest artistically.

The volume is lavishly illustrated with eight half-page miniatures and forty-four historiated initials, all painted by Lieven van Lathem (d. 1493), who enjoyed the patronage of the dukes of Burgundy and their successors and became court painter to the future Emperor Maximilian I. For example, Van Lathem illuminated a lavish prayer book for Charles the Bold (d. 1477), which Dr Thomas Kren called ‘a landmark in the illumination of devotional books’ (*Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), p. 129). Similarly, Van Lathem was commissioned to paint the ‘ambitious and innovative’ Hours of Mary of Burgundy (*Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), p. 137).

The text of the *Gillion de Trazegnies* manuscript was copied by the ducal court scribe David Aubert (d. 1479). The illustrations constitute Van Lathem’s most ambitious narrative cycle, in which he created an entirely new sequence of pictures to accompany the romantic tale of the knight Gillion’s high adventures in the exotic lands of Egypt and Persia.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item

*Waverley 2: Outstanding Aesthetic Importance*

Van Lathem’s painting in the manuscript is particularly important for its ground-breaking and inventive interpretation of a secular, rather than devotional, text. As Dr Kren said, the paintings in this book ‘set the standard for secular narration for the following decades’ (*Illuminating the Renaissance* (2003), p. 239). The beauty of Van Lathem’s cycle of illustrations and his subtlety in the handling of the narrative, mood, and human emotion have few parallels among contemporary manuscripts or panel paintings. Because he was illustrating a contemporary text on a secular theme, Van Lathem had no illustrative tradition on which to draw. His innovative compositions represent
some of the finest paintings of secular subjects surviving from the Northern European art of the fifteenth century.

Van Lathem’s work demonstrates the developing interest of early Netherlandish painters in the depiction of the natural world—the human form, landscape, and the effects of light. He is also known for his distinctive treatment of space. For example, the scene of the hero, Gillion, bidding farewell to the Sultan of Egypt (f. 188v and Appendix I) includes a lush background landscape, a meticulously executed late Gothic gateway, weeping women in windows of the palace, all seen with ‘a strong effect of aerial perspective through the blue tones of the background, and a clear, almost harsh light’ (*Grove Encyclopaedia of Northern Renaissance Art*, II, p. 481).

Another striking example of this new spatial awareness is in Van Lathem’s painting of a duel between Gillion and the Saracen nobleman Lucion (f. 134v and Appendix II). The action in the field in the foreground is watched by a crowd of observers on an elevated platform. In the background is a closely observed cityscape that more clearly resembles an affluent Netherlandish town than the exotic Slavonian city of the text. Van Lathem carefully articulates the detailed brocades of the tents, the bridge and city gate, the agony of the defeated Lucion, and the onlookers’ expressions.

**Waverley 3: Outstanding Significance for the Study of Netherlandish Art and French Prose Chivalric Texts**

The significance of this work as Van Lathem’s secular masterpiece has already been noted. In addition to the miniatures, Van Lathem created forty-four historiated initials of extraordinary delicacy and interest. In most cases these were extruded into the margin to allow more space for narrative scenes. Similarly, the three-sided illuminated and inhabited borders around the miniatures are uncommon in Netherlandish manuscript production, and have not been found in other Van Lathem manuscripts. These unusual features cause the manuscript to meet Waverley criterion 3 as ‘bench marks for assessing other objects since they can throw new light on the study of their type’ (*Response to the Quinquennial Review, Annex B, Revised Waverley Criteria III*).

As noted above, the text is rare; there are no other copies of the text in this country, either in the French prose version, as here, or in Latin translation. This vernacular chivalric text is particularly interesting for its view of the East, at a point when a crusade to recover Constantinople from the Turks was the focus of Burgundian aristocratic fantasy.

**Waverley 1: Closely Connected with our History and National Life**

According to the revised Waverley criteria issued in 2003, the first criterion is to be interpreted in a ‘somewhat wider context to include items ... which have
been part of collections which are of great historical significance, or which are associated with significant historical events, people or places’.

This manuscript has been an integral part of the remarkable collection of art and books at Chatsworth since the early nineteenth century. It was acquired by the 6th Duke of Devonshire, William George Spencer Cavendish (1790–1858), the creator of one of the greatest aristocratic libraries in the country. It has been exhibited as one of the greatest treasures remaining in that library and epitomises the bibliophilia and cultural tastes of both the Duke and contemporary noble collectors in Britain. The Committee may wish to consider whether the manuscript’s provenance as a crucial part of this collection, both as an outstanding book and work of art, causes it to qualify under Waverley criterion one.

Appendix I
Image of f. 188v, Gillion de Trazegnies and Gracienne take leave of the Sultan

Appendix II
Image of f. 134v, Duel between Gerard de Trazegnies and the Saracen Lucion