

# Ode to Les Très Riches Heures

On Earth as it is in Heaven

The astrological and astronomical foundations of the compositions of the calendar miniatures of Les Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry (1340-1416)

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Essay (concept version)



Figure 1. Examples of calendar miniatures from les Très Riches Heures (Ms 65).

## Foreword

I would especially like to thank the scientists who took the effort to give constructive comments.

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## Introduction

*Hundred thousands of art minded people all over the world, among them many Americans, are acquainted with the reproductions of the medieval miniatures of the season calendars presented in the famous book of hours, "les Très Riches Heures", of the Jean de France, Duc de Berry, brother of the king of France (1340 -1416). It seemed that the miniatures of this manuscript, by many attributed to the Limburg Brothers and considered as the peak of western medieval miniature art, had abandoned all its mysteries. If this really is the case can be questioned.*

This essay should have been published around 1948, when the known American photo magazine LIFE published, with the help of mass printing technics, 12 calendar miniatures of "les Très Riches Heures" in full colour. As a result, the calendars became extremely popular in hundreds of thousands of American families

Many publishers knew to adapt to this success by publishing many scientific and popular works on the issue.

In the eighties of the last century it seemed that specialists in the history of art had answered the most important questions about the makers, their styles, the landscapes, the persons and even the astrological meaning of the data in the semi-circular tympana (superstructure). From then on the scientific interest for the "Très Riches Heures" slowly decreased. Because the original manuscript with its famous calendar miniatures (now preserved in the Musée de Condé in Chantilly (FR)), is not allowed to be exhibited, the best we can do is admiring colour reproductions which seem to give only a slight idea of the beauty of the originals.

Before the definitive fall of the curtain, here a last analysis of the calendar miniatures of the "Très Riches Heures".

## The cult of mystery and exclusivity round les Très Riches Heures

It is almost certain that the exclusivity of the book of hours with its calendar miniatures, has been due to the duc d'Aumale, son of the French king Louis Philippe, who in the mid-nineteenth century obtained the lost manuscript. To him the book of hours was something exclusively intended for the happy few nobilities and dignitaries of his time. The privilege of having had a look at "les Très Riches Heures" with its miniatures, meant a confirmation of being member of an absolute elite.

The cult of mystery and exclusivity that it provoked cannot solely be explained by the limited access, the extraordinary compositions and the richness of the vivid colours made out of gold and precious stones. The miniatures with semi-circular tympana, golden layers, blue paint, astrological data and the mysterious charioteer with the sun in his hand driving winged horses, must have provoked discussions about the interpretation of the astrological relation between earth and heaven. Today the discussions have disappeared after scientific analyses of the tympana data in the seventies of the last century came up with a rather disenchanted conclusion:

*“A general representation of liturgical calendrical competence with hardly any practical function.”<sup>1</sup>*

Was this all the calendar miniatures were about?

## The beginning

During my enquires in France and Italy on the astrological influences on public life and on religious art in the middle ages and in the renaissance, I found more indications that

(1250-1316), representing zodiacal signs, seasonal activities (figure 2)

This historical place as well as the 14/15th century wall size frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara (IT) with its allegories of seasons, its planet metaphors and its zodiac signs, were clear witnesses of the all over influence of astrology on mediaeval life. After having experienced this overwhelming astrological influence it was not difficult to suspect that the famous painters of that époque, in one way or the other, also had



Figure 2. Example of frescoes, representing, seasonal work, zodiac signs, personifications of constellations and religious images by Nicolò Miretto and Stefano da Ferrara (1423-1440), (Palazzo della Ragione, Padua)

some of the famous paintings and frescoes of, for example; Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337), Duccio di Buoninsegna (1255-1319), Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), Simone Martini (1284-1344) and Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) possibly contained hidden astrological metaphors.

The important role of astrology in medieval life became clear to me after a visit of the 14<sup>th</sup> century town hall and courthouse “Palazzo della Ragione” of Padua (IT). The main hall contains 333 frescoes by Nicolò Miretto and Stefano da Ferrara (1423-1440), who were partly inspired by the theories of the philosopher and astrologer Pietro d’Abano

adapted this into their religious works of art. Unfortunately it is difficult to find direct historical prove for this. One way is searching for the religious, astrological and philosophical ideas of the master painters. However this is rather complicated, because astrological or alchemical ideas and arguments in religious matters were not publicly tolerated by the church. This means that finding information about astrological influences for a great deal is restricted to difficult accessible heretic doctrines, inquisition reports and alchemistic tracts with symbolic language used by guilds and secret societies.

<sup>1</sup> O.Neugebauer (1975)  
E.G.Richards (1998)



## July harvest time

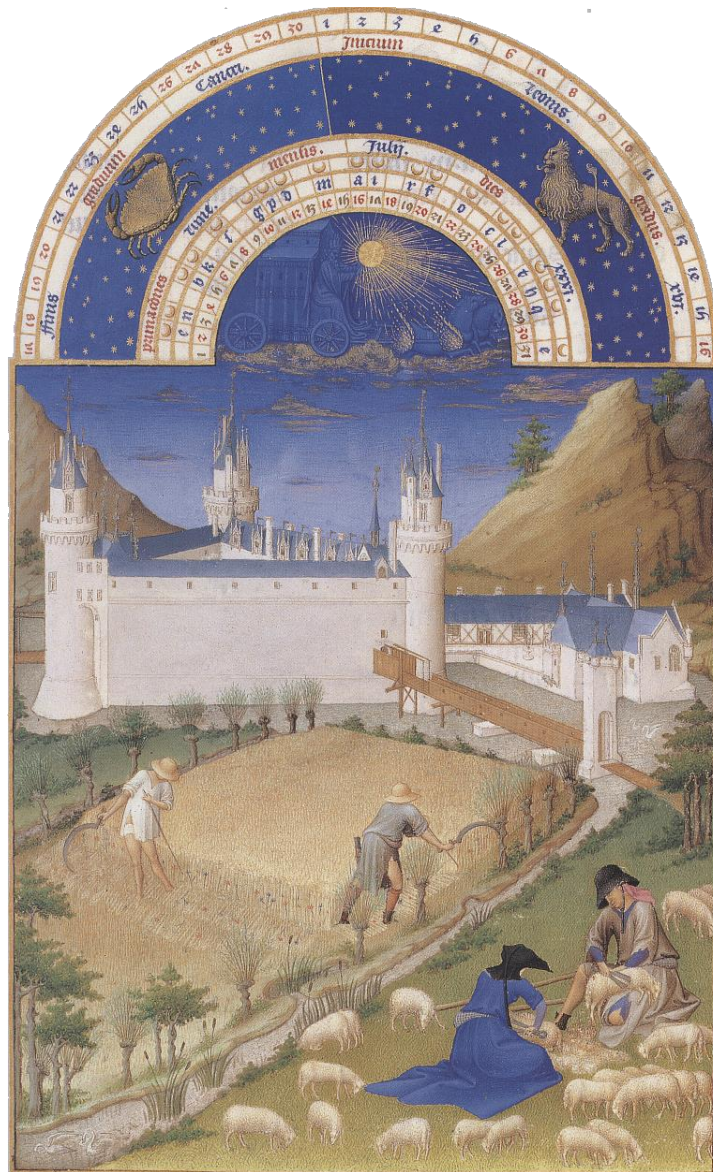


Figure 3. Très Riches Heures, month of July (Ms 65,f.7)

By accident (and this is not a cliché) I bought at a flea market in Brussels a popular scientific book about the history of astronomy. When I turned over the leaves a striking picture titled “July harvest time” (figure 3) drew my attention. My first impression was a moment of surprise. Never before I had seen such an extraordinary illustration. Its tympanum showed numbers and signs in gold and blue, above a landscape with workers painted in fine variations. At the same time this artistic

illustration contained something I was searching for during a long time. The way the display with astrological zodiac signs and calendar information was connected to the harvest scenes by the charioteer with the sun in his hand, gave me the impression that tympanum and scenery below were different ways of telling one and the same story

It took some time before I found that the ‘July harvest time’ illustration was a reproduction

of one of the famous 12 seasonal calendar miniatures of “les Très Riches Heures”, a late medieval book of hours of Jean de France duc de Berry.

It happened to be that in 2005 at Het Valkhof museum in Nijmegen (NL) there was an exhibition titled “De Gebroeders Van Limburg, Nijmeegse meesters aan het Franse hof” (the van Limburg Brothers, Nijmegen masters at the French court). These Nijmegen masters are the creators of the book of hours ‘les Belles Heures’ (1405-1409) and for an important part “les Très Riches Heures” (1410-1416), both commissioned by the duke. I hoped, taken in account the great attention of the media, that this was an good occasion to see myself the beauty of the original manuscripts. Unfortunately only 17 (out of) 172 miniatures of les “Belles Heures” were exhibited, while there was no original but only a low quality digital presentation of a facsimile of “les Très Riches Heures”. Probably the many visitors attracted by the publicity, were not sufficient informed that the calendar miniatures, the most famous part of the work of the Van Limburg brothers, was not part of the exhibition because since 1980 the “Très Riches Heures” was not allowed to be exhibited and even not allowed to leave France.

Here a short report of a conversation between two persons I picked up while watching the digital facsimile (replica) presentation of the “Très Riches Heures”:

*.....Coming all the way from Groningen<sup>2</sup> you'd think to see the “Très Riches Heures”, you have to stand in line to pay high entrance fee, stand in line to see a glimpse of only a few Belles Heures miniature.... to finely watch a low quality video of the famous “Très Riches Heures”.... I think, in order to waste no more*

*time, it might be better to buy that expensive catalogue...*

However nowadays one need not to be amazed, that museums and publishers invent all kinds of strategies to attract visitors to exhibitions mainly to make money. In France near Paris in the Musée de Condé were “les Très Riches Heures” manuscript is guarded and preserved, they only show one page at a time of a lower quality facsimile edition. For the rest, visitors are referred to popular literature and souvenirs from “les Très Riches Heures”, offered in the museum shop. In Nijmegen the merchandising of the Van Limburg brothers did not stop after the exhibition. The foundation “*Stichting Gebroeders van Limburg*” kept organizing annual festivals and prestigious lectures and festivals, apparently all in memorial of the Nijmegen born Limburg Brothers.

Although the exposition was not what I expected of it, I gathered sufficient information to start a last fundamental study on the astrological meaning of the calendar miniatures of “les Très Riches Heures”.

A couple of months later, after some literature studies about the “Très Riches Heures”, I was allowed to study a facsimile edition at Het Valkhof museum. There I met P.R., a conservator who was one of the organizers of the Exhibition “De Gebroeders Van Limburg, Nijmeegse meesters aan het Franse hof”. After telling him some of my views, he stated that it was worthwhile elaborating my hypothesis and advised to contact the scholar Rob. Duckers, a known Van Limburg Brothers connoisseur, who was the co-author of the prestigious exhibition catalog and affiliated to the Emerson College European Centre in Well (NL).

R.D. was indeed a connoisseur and we could openly discuss several hypotheses. The most

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<sup>2</sup> (Province in the Netherlands)

important thing I could learn from him was the expected resistance by some history of art scholars, because they were in general not open to astrological and astronomical analysis in art.

After R. assisted me writing out some texts I elaborated analysis of calendar miniatures of the “Très Riches Heures”.



## Chapter 1)

### On Earth as it is in Heaven

Abstract: This study is an effort to understand the astrological iconography of the calendar- miniatures of the late medieval book of hours, the "*Très Riches Heures*" in the light of the beauty of multi-layer medieval allegories. It is inspired by the iconological and astrological analysis of the Schifanoia frescoes (IT) by art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929).

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