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## A "Late-Medieval" Miniature in The Houghton Library

Roger S. Wieck

IN the spring of 1978, The Pierpont Morgan Library mounted an exhibition of panel paintings, illuminated manuscripts and manuscript cuttings. The Library drew upon its own resources and also borrowed from museums and private collections both in this country and in Europe. The paintings, executed in a style typical of France in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, were gathered together for the first time and shown to be the creation of one man and his workshop. Works which had been wrongly attributed to the French painters Jean Fouquet and Jean Miraillet and to Jorge Inglès, a Northern artist active in Spain about the middle of the fifteenth century, were now correctly given to the painter in whose honor the exhibition was held. In conjunction with the show, a *catalogue raisonné* was published. This volume fully described and illustrated every known work — over 200 — by the painter. The publication also illustrated sources from which the painter drew inspiration, and it included productions of an earlier workshop in which the painter probably studied and learned his trade. Reviews of the exhibition which appeared in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *New York Magazine* contributed to the show's popularity.

What made the exhibition unusual, however, was the fact that all the paintings were forgeries. The exhibition, and the accompanying catalogue, finally exposed one of the most prolific — and gifted — forgers of all time.<sup>1</sup>

Even after the exhibition and its catalogue made scholars and the public aware of his notorious activities, the identity of the "Spanish Forger," as he is called, remains unknown. He received this nickname about 1930 when a certain Count Gnoli, a purchasing agent for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, brought to Belle de Costa Greene, the first Director of The Pierpont Morgan Library, a panel painting depicting, supposedly, the *Betrothal of St. Ursula*. He hoped

<sup>1</sup> William Voelkle, with Roger S. Wieck, *The Spanish Forger* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1978). The existence of the Spanish Forger and his activities had been known only to some specialists and collectors. The Morgan Library's exhibition brought the forger to the attention of the public. The catalogue was the first attempt to gather systematically all the forger's works, reveal his probable artistic origins and expose his *modus operandi* by publishing many of his sources.

that she would confirm the attribution of this panel to Jorge Inglès. Instead, she exposed this forgery and, because of the original attribution, gave its maker the name "Spanish Forger." It is a confusing title, however, because the forger was most probably not Spanish at all, but French; he probably worked in Paris about the turn of this century.



FIG. 1. The Spanish Forger, *Knight Slaying a Lion*

Although the Morgan Library's exhibition did not bring about the discovery of the forger's identity, it did cause works unknown to William Voelkle, Associate Curator at the Morgan, and myself to surface. A manuscript (complete with forged pictures and text), three panels and about ten paintings on single leaves of vellum have come to light.<sup>2</sup> Among the latter is the *Knight Slaying*

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Voelkle and I continue to collect material on the Spanish Forger and will publish a checklist of those works that have surfaced since the publication of the catalogue.

a *Lion* (pf MS Typ 405) in the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts at the Houghton Library (Fig. 1).<sup>3</sup>

The Harvard leaf is the gift of James R. Tanis, former Librarian of the Andover-Harvard Theological Library. It was presented to Houghton in 1961 as an example of the Spanish Forger.<sup>4</sup> The cutting is a typical example of the Spanish Forger's production. The miniature is painted on a fragment of a leaf from a late-medieval choir book. The worn surface of the old vellum and the clearly ancient text and music to be seen on the verso of the miniature would comfort a suspicious buyer. The depiction of a knight battling a lion for the safety — or amusement! — of a group of courtly onlookers is consistent with the forger's ideas of "medieval" subject matter. The ladies' hand gestures, their elaborate headgear and *décolletage*, the tapestry-like trees and Disneyesque castles are all devices which the forger used again and again.

But the Spanish Forger, like all forgers, made certain mistakes. Stylistically his facial expressions are a little too sweet, the mouths too small, to be truly medieval; their general nineteenth-century appearance is apparent to our eyes now. The very vellum the forger used to lend authenticity to his miniature reveals its spurious nature. What is this secular scene doing on a leaf from a liturgical service book?

How did he get away with it for so long? To say that scholarship has changed, that today we are so much more knowledgeable, is to look for an explanation in the wrong sphere. What has changed since the beginning of this century is not so much scholarship but taste. Proust, writing about the same time in which the forger painted, offers insight into that period's appreciation of medieval illumination when he mentions

. . . those ancient 'books with images' — historiated bibles or books of hours — which the collector nowadays opens not to read their text but to savor once more the enchantment of the colors which some rival of Fouquet has added to it and which make these volumes the treasures that they are.<sup>5</sup>

The nineteenth-century attitude toward collecting medieval illumination which led people to cut miniatures and initials from the folio, discarding text or music and thus destroying the context of the decoration, was part of that taste which appreciated the paintings only for their color or charm. The Spanish Forger's works helped fill his period's demand for "medieval" paintings full of color and charm.

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Rodney G. Dennis, Curator of Manuscripts in the Houghton Library, for bringing this leaf to the attention of Mr. Voelke and me.

<sup>4</sup> *The Houghton Library Report of Accessions for the Year 1961-62* (Cambridge: Harvard College Library, 1962), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Past Recaptured*, trans. Andreas Mayor (New York: Random House, 1970), p. 146.



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