

Time & the Flower: Significant Images of the Passage of Time in the Floral Borders of the Hours of Catherine of Cleves

ELIZABETH R. SCHAEFFER, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, produced in the Netherlands c. 1440-45, is one of the most beautiful and complex illuminated manuscripts of the late Middle Ages. The originality of the Artist of the Floral Borders in his symbolic use of floral images in the borders of the manuscript is remarkable. For example, in the Hours of the Virgin and the Hours of the Cross, he used the rose, violet, pea, artemisia, physalis, pink, fumitory, calendula, vinca, daffodil, columbine, strawberry, bindweed, nightshade, and a crucifer in borders that relate to scenes of the life of the Virgin and the Passion of Christ. Not only had many of these images never been seen in illumination before, those taken from conventional iconography were changed and extended to emphasize their meanings in very novel ways.

This artist's breadth of choice and individual handling of these floral images often make these images difficult to recognize and to interpret today. A comparison of the images in the borders with Netherlandish plants known to have grown in the Middle Ages shows that the artist drew from live models.¹ A comparison of the plants he chose to those described in herbals and used symbolically in literature shows that the artist combined plant images taken from personal experience with a wide range of sources, textual as well as visual. Further comparison of known plants, however, to the artist's changed images of them shows how he created images with great symbolic impact. Finally, an analysis of the borders' images shows that they reflect and support the symbolic meaning of the miniatures, adding significantly to the meaning of the manuscript's total illumination.

This paper will discuss two plants, a bindweed and a crucifer, and study the ways in which the Artist of the Floral Borders used these images, at first conventionally, to represent humility and the Cross, and then unconventionally, using a pattern of reversals to represent the change of time and place before and after the Resurrection.

One might wonder why there was a need to express this passage of time symbolically in the border of a miniature rather than in the miniature itself. Both the miniaturist and the border artist worked in an atmosphere responsive to the *Devotio Moderna* according to Delaissé and

Randall,² the *Via Moderna* and Nominalism according to Panofsky,³ and to an emerging bourgeoisie according to Marrow.⁴ These influences, by no means mutually exclusive, affected the artists in various ways. For our purposes the most important was the tendency of artists to portray scenes from Christ's life by images and settings of middle-class Netherlandish people and places. Further, scenes of Heaven and the personages of the Holy Trinity are presented in concrete physical settings peopled not by cherubim but by very human representations of God the Father and the Holy Spirit. A problem thus arose. How were the artists to represent the difference between scenes set on earth before the Resurrection and heavenly scenes set after it. The distinction is made, not within the miniature itself but in the border surrounding the scene.

One plant used to symbolize this change of time and place is the bindweed, a *Convolvulus* species. In the fifteenth century the bindweed had an established symbolic meaning of humility, based on its low trailing habit of growth and its pure white and blush pink flowers blooming close to the ground.⁵ Though it is seldom seen in northern illuminated manuscripts, the bindweed is well represented in Italian herbals.⁶ It appears six times in the borders of the Cleves Hours.

Bindweed is featured in the border of Joseph of Arimathea before Pilate (G-f.67), in a way that shows how the Artist of the Floral Borders used plants with special relationships to his miniatures. The flowers and faded blooms, taking up the right-hand border, demonstrate the artist's understanding of the way the plant grows, with the open blooms along the stem behind the faded ones at the tip of the twining stem. Most of the flowers are wide open, making the round white flowers with their light pink stripes easily identified. Gray tarnish shows around the edges of the flowers, indicating that the flowers were originally highlighted with silver. The stem is a lightly drawn penstroke, the leaves form *rincaux*. While these are drawn rather than painted, and in that way resemble the traditional *rincaux*, they are definitely subordinate to the flowers and support rather than detract from the pattern of their forms. The flowers themselves are shown against a plain background. The silver recalls the medieval herbalist's use of the word "golden" to describe the rose and "silver" for the lily, used in terms of reverence as much as color.⁷ Clearly the artist intended a symbolic relationship of the plant to the miniature. As Plummer notes, we see Joseph, the "rich man of Arimathea and secret disciple of Christ[,] bending forward humbly, his hat removed, as he approaches the enthroned Pilate to beg for the body of Jesus."⁸ Joseph, the rich man humbled, relates visually and symbolically to the lowly bindweed, done in rich silver, bowing humbly down the side of the border, the lines echoing the bent body of Joseph. This portrayal of the rich man humbled bordered by a humble plant

enriched is typical of the delight in paradox and reversal that we will see later in the work of this artist. It is also typical of the relationship of border and miniature throughout this manuscript.

Bindweed also appears in the border of a miniature of the Trinity in an Apse (G-f77v.), again along the right side. Significantly, the flowers are all faded here, though they are easily recognizable as bindweed flowers. The leaves and stem are done in penstroke reminiscent of the *rincaux* we saw earlier. These lines are even slighter and more graceful than those of the former border, as if to lessen their weight still further in comparison to the fragile figures of the faded blooms. Here is a scene of triumph, with the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost reunited on the throne of Heaven. Why should the border be of faded flowers of the humblest of blooms? The border makes sense if it is seen as representing the passage of time. The time for humility, depicted so graphically in the scene of Joseph of Arimathea with its blooming border of bindweed, is past. Christ's earthly life is over and his return to glory is complete. Since in this case Heaven is shown as the apse of a very concrete church, and the major figures are shown in human form, only the faded flowers in the borders indicate that this is a scene after the Resurrection and thus there is no need for the symbols of humility. Consequently, in a reversal of images, the flowers of humility bloom when Christ is most dead—most of the earth—between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and fade when Christ is most alive—most of the spirit—in Heaven.

One of the more subdued of the floral images of the borders of the Cleves Hours is a small violet gray blossom, always seen without leaves and usually in the vortex of the *rincaux*. It is not depicted with sufficient detail to identify the flower as anything but a member of the *Cruciferae*. This, as might be suggested from the family name—the Cross-bearer, is enough to indicate its significance. The name comes from the shape of the flowers, with four petals forming the shape of a Cross. The flower is first seen early in the manuscript at G-f 23v at the bottom of the border of the Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple. The color—shadowed with gray to a dull violet—is fitting for a flower suggesting the Cross, and the four petals are shown in the cruciform shape they take in nature.

A saying about this family of plants was that "in Cruce Salus," "Health is in the Cross."⁹ The family contains, along with cabbage and its tribe, mustard and the various cresses, many of which were used medicinally. The saying points out the close relationship between health and holiness seen in the Middle Ages, shedding light on the artist's use of medicinal plants to express spiritual symbolism.

The flower is seen four more times in the manuscript, in the border of God Dispatching the Angel of the Annunciation (G-f 28), in a redder tone at the Flagellation of Christ, possibly reflecting the shed

blood of Christ (G-f 60v), the Buffeting of Christ (G-f 61), and God the Son (G-f 80v). The color is, except for the one noted, consistently a grayed violet. All of the images refer to the coming of the Crucifixion with the exception of the last, which is shown in the top border of the miniature of God the Son. Significantly, this is a scene of Christ after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. There the humble gray flower is shown at the top of the border, indicating humility exalted, a theme typical of this artist. However, the flower is shown not only at the top of the border over the head of Christ, it is also shown spatially reversed. The image is turned, showing us the calyx and stem, and painted from the back, as though the viewer had just moved past the bloom. Such a change in the position of the flower serves to indicate that the suffering of the Cross is past, shown visually in the reversed view of the flower of the Cross. Again, as with the scene of the Trinity Enthroned, this scene of Christ in Heaven contains within itself no clue of time or place. The backdrop and floor of this miniature are identical with the throne of the miniature of Christ before Herod. It is the border, and specifically the unconventional use of a floral image in the border, in this case the physical reversal of the image itself, that identifies the scene as being one in Heaven after the Crucifixion.

We have seen then that the Artist of the Floral Borders used two floral images, both visually simple (one a disk and one a cross) and both symbolic of humility in creating the borders of two important miniatures of Christ after the Resurrection. The artist was familiar with these plants as they grew both in terms of time (blooming and faded) and space (from the front and from the back), and he used this knowledge to build further symbolism from the plants' conventional meaning of humility and the Cross. By means of a series of reversals in time and space, he used these floral images to indicate changes in time and place before and after the Resurrection. This expanded meaning of the floral image in the border is directly related to the miniature, indicating that a change of time and place has occurred between the Passion scenes on earth and the Resurrection scenes in Heaven. Given the tendency of the creators of the miniatures to show Heaven and heavenly beings in terms of earthly architecture and human form, these clues to the change of time and place given in the border are significant for a reading of the miniature, and help us to understand the illumination of this manuscript in its totality.

NOTES

1. W. F. Daems, *Boec van Medicinen in Dietsche* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), p. 320.
2. L. M. J. Delaissé, *A Century of Dutch Manuscript Illumination* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960), pp. 10-11; Lilian M. C. Randall,

"Pea Pods and Molluscs from the Master of Catherine of Cleves Workshop," *Apollo*, 100 (1974), 378.

3. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1953), p. 141.

4. James H. Marrow, "Dutch Illumination and the *Devotio Moderna*," *Medium Aevum*, 42 (1973), 251-58.

5. Elizabeth Haig, *The Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters* (New York: Dutton, 1913), p. 29.

6. Lottlisa Behling, *Die Pflanze in der mittelalterlichen Tafelmalerei* (Cologne: Bohlau, 1967), pp. 56-57.

7. Gosta Frisk, *A Middle English Translation of Macer Floridus* (Uppsala, 1949; Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1973), p. 93.

8. John Plummer, *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (New York: George Braziller, 1966), comment on G f. 67, plate 27.

9. Alice M. Coats, *Flowers and Their Histories* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1956), p. 155.



Fig. 1. Joseph of Arimathea before Pilate. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, Pierpont Morgan Library M. 945, folio 67r. Reproduced by permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library.



Fig. 2. Christ enthroned in Heaven. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, Pierpont Morgan Library M. 945, folio 80v. Reproduced by permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library.