

THE DUNOIS MASTER (c.1466 Fl. c.1430 -)

Sir Gawain and his Nine Companions in Search of Lancelot

Illuminated manuscript on vellum, with framing lines in brown ink.

The verso with fifteen lines of French text in Gothic script in brown ink, from the Livre du Lancelot du Lac.

87 x 92 mm. (3 3/8 x 3 5/8 in.)

This beautifully preserved cutting is thought to have come from an illuminated manuscript once owned by the Breton nobleman and soldier Prigent VII de Coëtivy (1399-1450), who served King Charles VII as Admiral of France from 1439 to 1450. In 1444 Prigent de Coëtivy paid 'Hancelin' – assumed to be Jean Haincelin – the large sum of ninety livres, seventeen sous and six deniers tournois for three illuminated manuscripts; a Roman de Tristan, a Roman de Guiron le Courtois and a Livre du Lancelot du Lac. The present sheet comes from the last of these, which is part of an early 13th century French literary cycle of Arthurian chivalric episodes of unknown authorship that is known in modern terms as the Vulgate Cycle or the Lancelot-Grail Cycle. Although the manuscript of the Livre du Lancelot du Lac commissioned by Prigent de Coëtivy contained over 150 miniatures, it seems to have been broken up as early as the 16th century, and only thirty-four of the miniatures are known today. The extant miniatures from the Livre du Lancelot du Lac are very similar in style, technique and appearance to those which decorate the companion volume of the Roman de Guiron le Courtois, also commissioned by Prigent de Coëtivy from Haincelin, which remains intact and is now in the collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

The scene from the Livre du Lancelot du Lac depicted here shows the Arthurian knight Sir Gawain and his companions, who, having met a weeping damsel on a horse, are led by her to a nearby valley where a brave knight is fighting against ten soldiers. The knight has collapsed onto the ground, and Gawain's companions take on the attackers, who eventually run away.

By the middle of the 19th century, thirty-four miniatures from the Livre du Lancelot du Lac, including the

present sheet, had been bound into an album, with an unidentified coat of arms on the cover, which later belonged to Joachim Napoléon Murat, 5th Prince Murat (1856-1932). The album remained with his widow, Marie Cécile Ney d'Elchingen (1867-1960) until her death, and was purchased from her estate by Wynne Jeudwine (1920-1984), a London dealer in drawings, prints and books who showed all thirty-four miniatures in a selling exhibition at the Alpine Club Gallery in London in 1962. The present sheet was probably acquired at that time by the noted collector of maps and atlases Christopher Henry Beaumont Pease, 2nd Baron Wardington (1924-2005), who purchased fourteen of the Livre du Lancelot du Lac miniatures.

Less than a quarter of the miniatures by the Dunois Master from the manuscript of Lancelot du Lachave survived to this day. One of the miniatures is now in the McMullen Museum of Art at Boston College, while three others are in the collection of the Museo Civico Amedeo Lia in La Spezia and a further three are in the Beinecke Library at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Other examples are today in the Liberna (Draiflessen) Collection in Mettingen and in a number of private collections. Four miniatures on vellum from the same manuscript were offered for sale by Maggs Bros. in 1966, while several others have appeared at auction in recent years.

Exhibitions

London, W. R. Jeudwine, Early Fifteenth Century Miniatures, 1962, no.21.

Artist description:

Formerly known as the Chief Associate of the Bedford Master, the Dunois Master was a Parisian illuminator active in the middle of the 15th century, whose name derives from a book of hours made for Jean d'Orléans, Count of Dunois, which is now in the British Library in London. The Dunois Master is regarded as the finest pupil and assistant of the Bedford Master - named for his illumination of two manuscripts commissioned by John of Lancaster, Duke of Bedford - and succeeded him as the leading manuscript illuminator in Paris after the departure of the English from the city in 1436. Like the Bedford Master, the Dunois Master was familiar with the work of such Flemish artists as Jan Van Eyck and Robert Campin, whose influence can be seen in his illuminations. Not long after the recapture of Paris by the French, the Dunois Master began receiving commissions from important patrons at the court of King Charles VII, including the aforementioned Jean de Dunois, Jouvenel des Ursins, Simon de Varie and Etienne Chevalier. He is also thought to have also painted a large altarpiece for Notre-Dame. Regarded as one of the leading figures in the field of 15th century French courtly manuscript illumination, the Dunois Master enjoyed a relatively long career until the 1460s. Recent scholarship has posited that the Dunois Master was one Jean Haincelin, who is recorded as an 'enlumineur' in Paris in 1438 and 1448. Haincelin may have been the son of the early 15th century Alsatian illuminator Haincelin von Hagenau, who has in turn been tentatively identified as the Bedford Master.