

Publisher's note:

The interpretation of paintings – especially of Old Masters – has occupied art historians for generations. Rarely however have they attempted to place the subject of their research in its wider political and international context. So what can we learn, for example, about the state of 15th century Europe by studying some of the great paintings of the time?

In this innovative work, Abolala Soudavar examines seven paintings by some of the great masters of the 15th century and demonstrates how we can better understand the state of international relations and the political rivalries of the time by decoding the figures, their postures and gestures, the background scenes, the compositions and much else in these paintings. The result offers some extraordinary solutions to long-standing puzzles, which illuminate both the paintings and our understanding of the period. By placing each painting in its historical and international political context, Soudavar reveals their hidden messages and breathes life into the characters represented in them. This is a period of geopolitical turmoil, with the Muslim Turkish assault on Europe causing much distress within the Christian World. Yet it is also a time of unprecedented courtly opulence and Shakespearean drama, with murders and vendettas, wars and crusades, intrigue and treachery dominating contemporary life. Many of the paintings presented in this book are well known masterpieces of the Renaissance period but despite extensive analysis by art historians no one has previously offered any satisfactory elucidation of their composition and the hidden messages they contain. For example, with the Procession of the Magi at the Medici Palace in Florence the author demonstrates how its complex composition was based on two different time frames twenty years apart. He also shows how its main theme was inspired by celebrating political events involving their commissioners, Cosimo dei Medici and Palla Strozzi. In his analysis of the Fountain of Grace of the Prado, long thought to be the work of Jan Van Eyck's atelier, Soudavar establishes it as a precursor to Van Eyck's famous altarpiece of Ghent, and a painting of high documentary value which reflects the key players in the alliances that enabled Henry V of England to become the regent of France in 1420. By decoding these paintings, Soudavar has altered the landscape of our understanding of 15th century Art and opened the door to a kind of political and historical analysis of high culture which will affect how we study the history of art in future generations.

Scholarly opinion

"A stimulating and innovative study...Abolala Soudavar's conclusions are based on solid historical facts as well as on a very interesting comparative study. His book invites us to adopt a new approach in regards to works of art produced under Burgundian patronage and to seek meanings other than those which readily jump to the eye." --Bertrand Schnerb, Professor of History, University of Lille

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Introduction

The 15th century was undoubtedly an age of princely sophistication. From the Dukes of Burgundy to the Medici of Florence, or the Timurids of Iran,¹ princes and aspiring rulers who lacked kingly legitimacy tried to dazzle their constituencies by combining opulence with sophisticated manners and by emphasizing the patronage of artists as well as intellectuals and *littérateurs*. At the center of this activity was the written word, which, on the one hand, had to educate the prince and, on the other, by its translation into manuscripts, constituted proof of erudition. Thus manuscripts were written, illustrated, and embellished to advertise a high level of princely sophistication.

Manuscript illustration often required painters to combine several sequences of the same story in one illustration. Simon Marmion (1425-89), for instance, represented in one painting (fig. 1) several stages of the *Story of Roland*: Charlemagne receiving the gifts of Marcile of Saragossa brought by Ganelon, in the bottom left; above it, the battle of Roncevaux; further up, the duel between Marcile and Roland; under the tree, Roland dying with his horn besides him; while further to the right, Charlemagne is dissuaded by Ganelon to come to Roland's assistance; top right corner, Ganelon being drawn and quartered by four horses; bottom right and top, the vision of Turpin, Bishop of Reims, in which the



Fig. 1 - Multiple episodes of the *Story of Roland* depicted in one painting by Marmion

¹ The Timurids were the descendants of the conqueror Timur (r. 1370-1405). In the 15th century, they ruled over present-day Iran, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan; for more on Timur, or Tamerlane as he was to be known in the West, see section G.2 and note 222 *infra*.

Archangel Michael carries Roland's soul to Heaven, while those of the Saracens burn in Hell.²

The passage from a multistage representation to a multilayered one was a further step in the same direction, and naturally led to the production of complex illustrations with several layers of meaning embedded in allegorical representations and innuendos. Thus, when a courtier of Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy wanted to flatter his prince, he commissioned (as we shall see in D.2) the production of an illustrated copy of the *History of Alexander the Great* in which every painting was chosen to juxtapose a feat of Alexander with that of Charles the Bold and convey the impression that the latter was destined to conquer the world as Alexander did. At the same time, it was meant to educate the Duke in the virtues of good government and justice.

The production of such a purposeful manuscript with double-layered illustrations was not restricted to Western courts alone. Similar conditions in both East and West would naturally generate the same type of sophisticated material. Thus, when Amir Alishir Navai (1441-1501), the vizier and chief counsel of the Timurid ruler of the eastern Iranian world, Sultan Hosayn Bayqara (r. 1470-1506), had grievances about another vizier, he would couch his complaint in a double-layered illustration of the *Rose Garden* of the Persian poet Sa'di (fig. 2) to allude to the perfidy and disloyalty of his rival.³ While the composition reflected Sa'di's story of the *Two Wrestlers*, the figures were actually painted in the image of the Timurid



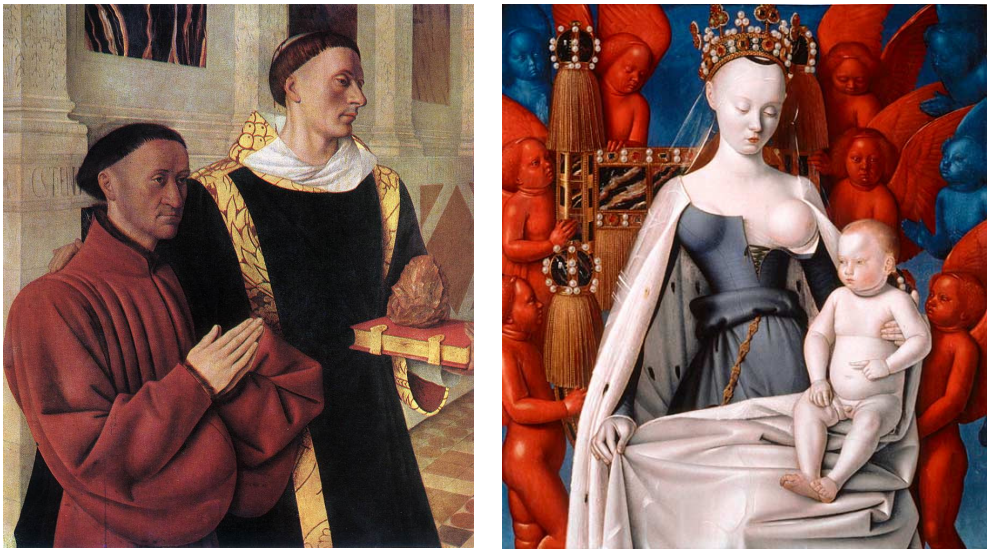
Fig. 2 - The allegorical use of the story of the *Two Wrestlers* (from the *Rose Garden* of Sa'di) by one vizier to accuse another of perfidy and deceit, c. 1486

² Voronova and Sterligov 2003, p. 124.

³ Soudavar 1992, pp. 101-05. In essence, the story of the *Two Wrestlers* is about an ungrateful younger wrestler trying to claim the position of his master. It was used to remind the Sultan how a newcomer (the white-bearded vizier) was trying to usurp the position of the Sultan's childhood friend and chief counsel (depicted closest to the ruler and on his right).

ruler, sitting in the presence of his viziers and courtiers.

And when manuscript illustrators such as Marmion or Jean Fouquet (1420-81) painted full-size panels, it was only natural for them to embed allegorical layers into their paintings as well. Thus, in the *Melun Diptych* that Fouquet painted for the Treasurer of France, Etienne Chevalier (1420-74), the Virgin Mary appears in the image of the voluptuous Agnes Sorel (1421-50), the mistress of Charles VII, whose premature death in 1450 was a source of great sorrow for the King (fig. 3). While Chevalier is portrayed praying in the left panel under the protection of his patron saint, St Etienne (St Stephen in English), his prayer is in reality directed toward Agnes Sorel, his protector in real life.⁴ Fouquet had no qualms on superimposing the face of a living person on the sacred image of the Virgin. Sophisticated patrons expected to see intricate images, and artists responded by producing them.



Figs. 3a, b - The *Melun Diptych*: Etienne Chevalier and his patron-saint on the left, and the Virgin Mary in the image of Agnes Sorel on the right.

In what follows I shall try to explain a number of enigmatic and multilayered paintings by artists who had practiced, in varying degrees, the art of manuscript illustration as well as panel painting:

⁴ Etienne Chevalier's relationship with the king's favorite was such that he was even appointed to be the executor of her testament; Avril 2003, pp. 128-30.

- A) A large *Lamentation* scene, attributed here to Simon Marmion (fig. 4) and painted circa 1465, in the possession of this author.
- B) The *Procession of the Magi* fresco at the Medici Palazzo in Florence (figs. 71, 78, 88, 89), conceived circa 1459 and painted by Benozzo Gozzoli (1420-1497).
- C) The *Medici Virgin* in the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, painted by Roger Van der Weyden (1400-64) and dated here to circa 1461 (fig. 95).
- D) The small *Lamentation* of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, attributed to Simon Marmion (fig. 109) and dated here to 1468.
- E) The Philadelphia Museum of Art painting of *St Jerome and a Donor* attributed to Marmion (fig. 127) and dated here to 1473.
- F) The *Fountain of Grace* of the Prado in Madrid (fig. 131), tentatively attributed here to Hubert Van Eyck (c. 1366-1426) and dated to circa 1420-22.
- G) The *Adoration of the Magi* of the Uffizi in Florence (fig. 153), painted by Gentile da Fabriano in 1423.

The above mentioned paintings are well-known masterpieces of the Renaissance period, yet no satisfactory explanation has ever been presented about the purpose of their composition and the hidden messages that they contain. They speak in riddles and allegories, and as such, they are enigmas that need to be solved. The explanations that I provide in this study, try to solve them by placing each painting in its right historical context, and by giving life to the characters represented in it. I suggest that all seven paintings pertain to the Dukes of Burgundy and their courtiers, or their rivals and neighbors, in a period when the assault of the Turks on European lands was causing much distress for Christianity and there was a desire to bring unity within the Church. In addition, the study of the magnificent *History of Alexander the Great* manuscript of the Getty, in support of my findings about Painting D, provides not only a better insight into the level of sophistication of the court of Burgundy but also how parallel situations, in both East and West, gave rise to the same type of enigmatic illustrated manuscripts and paintings. If looked upon individually, each painting sheds a new light on events of the 15th century, but if looked upon as a whole, this work can be construed as a short illustrated history of the Dukes of Burgundy.

Preliminary methodological remarks

Essential to solving enigmas in complex paintings is the detection of oddities, since they often point to a layered and allegorical meaning. Once an oddity is detected, one has the duty to explain it with a plausible scenario rather than sweep it under the rug. The more this scenario is correlated by other indicators, the more valid it becomes.

In the task of explaining oddities, pointers and signs play a pivotal role. Because it was difficult for miniature painters to create a realistic portrait in small size, they often used characteristic signs to identify the main personas. As we shall see, in most of the above-mentioned paintings, the painters carried this practice from miniature to panel painting, and they used identifying signs for the main figures, especially when a figure was supposed to have a double personality.

Equally important for this task is the identification of portraits through establishing likenesses with other paintings or works of art. Yet, many art historians shy away from it. A prominent art historian even warned me that one should not propose such identification unless “one is one hundred percent sure about it.” But when we encounter a person who has features similar to those of a high-school friend that we haven’t seen for a long time, we don’t ask for his ID card before saying hello. The choice between being impolite and wrong strongly favors the former. The same is true in art history. The merits of a *plausible* identification outweigh silence on the subject. Uncertainty exists in all scientific endeavors but mathematics. After all, even nuclear physicists construe and propose theories that only subsequent experiments can support, or discredit. In the same vein, many of my identifications here rest on previous tentative proposals by others, without which I could not have approached the subject; those tentative proposals are in turn strengthened by the added information generated in this study. The objective in art history should be to reach a step-by-step conclusion by the preponderance of the evidence at hand, and not to insist on a conclusion that is above all doubts.

Stating the obvious, when a patron is commissioning a work of art, it is primarily to enhance his own glory, or project a political message to justify his actions or political stance. The more sophisticated the patron, the more one should expect to find a complex but well-constructed allegory embedded in a painting. The paintings that I intend to analyze here are prime examples of such complex and enigmatic imagery. They are historical documents with much information to reveal. Scholars tend to believe that text provides documentary proof while the interpretation of imagery is speculative. I believe that the reading of text often needs interpretation, and is speculative as well. Like any other historical document, images may reveal the truth, exaggerate a situation, or even alter facts. Interpreting them should be subject to the same cautionary approach applicable to the reading of a text.

Finally, since the study of our first painting (A) covers features that are shared with the rest, the rather lengthy explanations of its various aspects shall also serve as background for the study of the remaining ones. More generally, the paintings under investigation are not introduced in chronological order but are presented in a sequence that allows the reader to get gradually more acquainted with historical events of the 15th century and the roles of various players in each.