

# “The proper care & feeding of Drolleries Grotesques in 15th Century Flemish Manuscripts by Mayken van der Alst, OL

## **Introduction**

From naughty to notorious, armed to amorous, beautiful to boisterous - the fantastic life forms in the margins never fail to pique our curiosity or to simply amuse us with their antics and caricature. Sooner or later we all discover them: hidden in the creative chaos of floral borders, they grow ever so elegantly from blooming vines, watch the inhabitants of capitals and miniatures with swords brandished and bows strung or hold a mirror before our eyes with the mockery of our own habits and quirks and as representatives of the chaos outside the borders of medieval rule, tantalizing suggestion of unknown worlds and unthinkable dangers lurking along unfamiliar paths.

Drolleries, also called Grotesques, are miniature decorative illustrations which adorn the margins of illuminated manuscripts, often depicting fanciful or grotesque hybrid creatures. Their popularity lasted from the early 13th century to the end of the 15th century. They appear as mixed creatures, either between different animals or between animals and human beings, or even between animals and plants or inorganic things.

Some of them are reminiscent of the surrealistic creations of Hieronymus Bosch. There are birds with human heads, dragons with demon heads uncurling from a snail's shell, archers growing out of rose-buds and many more. A variation of the grotesques is monkeys mimicking human habits and behavior. More on that in “breeds”.

For me, it all started with the “Croy Hours” also referred to as the “Book of Drolleries” for its many fantastic inhabitants. Created by several great masters of the Ghent-Bruges School – namely Gerard Horenbout, Gerard David and Simon Bening – it marked the end of the era of Flemish grotesques at the beginning of the 16th century. Backtracking through numerous Flemish illuminated manuscripts, it appears that the main lifespan of our fantastic Flemish friends only lasted about 50 years, from the early 1450s to the late 1490s. This class will guide you through the various breeds of Flemish grotesques that I have so far encountered and their natural habitat, as well as give you an easy to follow manual to create your own fantastic life forms in accordance with the Flemish School of manuscript illumination.

## **Natural Habit**

What is now Northern France and Belgium was wealthy Flanders with her artistic centers Bruges and Ghent in the 15th century. Rich through trade, Flanders was also known for its patronage of the arts and especially manuscript illuminations. Flemish illuminators introduced into their works a painterly mastery of light, texture and space and displayed an unsurpassed naturalism in their miniatures, bridging both eras of medieval tradition and modern times. In this class we will be focusing on the illumination of the margins, as that is the natural habit of the grotesques. There are two types of decorated borders that house not only fantastic life forms but also later on birds and insects.

Evolving from the leafed borders of French influence is the foliage border characterized by free form acanthus leaves, flowered or leafed vines interspersed with strawberries etc. Typical for the Flemish School is the preference of predominantly blue acanthus leaves and either red or gold undersides. By the late 1460s/ early 1470s the almost old fashioned foliage border style was slowly replaced by the trompe l'oeil of realistic flowers [cornflower, carnations, roses, lilies, etc.] strewn across the borders, also referred to as “strewn flower border” or “squashed bug borders”. It is in the old fashioned foliage border where we find most of the grotesques whereas the trompe l'oeil borders offer a home to monkeys dabbling in human affairs.

## Breeds

Grotesques come in a wide variety of hybrid forms combining human, animal, organic and even inorganic elements into one fantastic lifeform. Typical for the Flemish School grotesques appear to be the following:

- Flower children  
a human torso and usually human head growing from split acanthus leaves or flower buds
- Animal hybrids  
featuring lion, bear, bird or cloven hoof feet, these are generally humanoid creatures bearing weapons or musical instruments. Might also be demon- or bird-headed
- Dragons  
2-footed and no claws, these charmingly fierce dragons get around with wings or house in a snail's shell. Occasionally demon headed.
- Monkey business  
At home in strewn flower borders, humanoid but furry monkeys dress up in bits of human clothes [hoods, wimple, etc. but in my experience never full dresses and shoes] and mimic or mock human activities.

**Note:** Men and women or the parts of a grotesque that are recognizably female or male are always properly dressed and if they sport a human head do always wear a proper head covering matching the general outfit. The only exception is the female nude who wears her hair open and long [occasionally with a hennin or truncated hennin, but long and flowing nevertheless]!

**Note:** For later ie early 16th century style grotesques you can add inorganic items such as teakettles, mugs, boots, etc. as body parts, usually the base part of the creature.

## Bibliography

Michelle P. Brown (1994), *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*, ISBN 0-89236-217-0

Scot McKendrick (2003), *Flemish Illuminated Manuscripts 1400-1550*, ISBN 0-7123-4805-0

Celia Fisher (2004), *Flowers in Medieval Manuscripts*, ISBN 0-80203-796-8

Michael Camilla (2004), *Image on the edge: The Margins of Medieval Art*, ISBN 0948462280

## Example Manuscripts

Hours of Jacques de Bregilles, Bruges, 1460s MS4

L'instruction d'un jeune prince, Bruges 1465, MS Vespasian

Bible historiale of Edward IV, Bruges 1479, MS 18

Chemin de vaillance, Bruges 1480s, Royal MS 14

Recueil des croniques et anciennes histoire de la Grant Bretagne, Bruges 1480s, Royal MS 15

Fortalitum Fidei, Bruges 1480s, Royal MS 17

The Croy Hours, Bruges, early 16th century, MS 1858









