

Claire Kehoe

Reading Analysis

Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry

1. Upon reading the introduction on the Duc de Berry and viewing work he had commissioned for his vast collection of works, it was evident that he wanted the artwork to represent himself, his properties or wealth, and the scenery that surrounded him. He had broad tastes “interested in exotic animals and, since he owned ostriches, dromedaries, chamois, and bears, the representation of camels in the *Tres Riches Heures* is not surprising” (17). Lots of his work included items that came from the earth, many of his jewels were rare containing rubies and emeralds, and much of the medium used to create his art was also made of natural substances. By taking a closer look at the introduction to the Duke and his *Tres Riches Heures* we can find out just what kind of man he was and what it was like to live during his time as either a wealthy man or a peasant in the field. The *Tres Riches Heures* has a piece of artwork to go with each of the 12 months, showing the seasons change, what types of harvests happened during each months, the hardships suffered by those who tended to the fields during hard months, and showing what went on outside and inside the walls of the homes of the Duc de Berry.

I think that it is important to note the Duke had a wide collection of art and commissioned “worked of all kinds; he loved sumptuous buildings, rare jewels, and richly illuminated books” (16). His love for all of these things is depicted in the 12 months in the *Tres Riches Heures*, either his buildings, his banquets, or activities that he would enjoy are shown. The Duc was very involved in all the art work that he had made or restored for his collection and

had close relationships with the artists themselves. The three brothers that are responsible for most of the art shown in the *Tres Riches Heures* “enjoyed the intimacy and esteem of the Duc de Berry” (21), and the older brother Paul was thought to have been head of the workshop. Familiar themes in the *Tres Riches Heures* are “the conventional architectural settings, the conical mountains, and the indistinct background monuments” (22). The brothers gave a realistic feel for the countryside and affirmed the luxury of court life in one, and their work is considered “the king of illuminated manuscripts”(23).

One of the reasons that the artwork is considered so vibrant is the use of color, which was mainly used from natural substances such as plants and minerals. The used many different colors:

“ten shades of blue, green, red, yellow, and violet (26).....green was obtained from wild irises by mixing newly crushed flowers with massicot...the brightest of the reds from cinnabar..darker red was made from an earthly substance, red ocher, a kind of red mineral. Pink was extracted from the decoration of red dyewood. The two yellows were obtained from minerals...Violet was a vegetable color extracted from the sunflower..Black was obtained from either soot of r from ground charcoal” (27)

The fact that most of the colors were pulled from or mixed with substances from the earth goes hand in hand with the stories that are depicted in the artwork. The art work shows peasants in the fields farming, harvesting the crops, gathering food for the Duc to have at his banquets, using nature to sustain life for both the peasants and the courtlier people. Each month has a different scene from nature that shows how the people of this time survived and used the land to get what they needed and gave back to the land to begin the cycle again next year.

— In the month of February there is a great deal of realism that lets the viewer see just how hard life could be in those cold months, working on the land. “The severity of winter is further emphasized by the birds huddled near the house, scratching for food which the snow makes it

impossible to find elsewhere”. This scene shows a peasant taking his donkey to town to sell goods in order to survive the few harsh months, bee hives, barrels for storage, grain or hay under cover, and wood being chopped down to fight the cold. This month is important because it gives us a real sense of what life was like, instead of the ideal life.

— In the month of March we get a look at the “year’s first farm work”. Several scenes of country life are contrasted with each other here, the sowing of seeds in the fields, plowing, a Sheppard watching his flock, and trimming of vines. The plow up at the front “penetrates earth covered with faded winter grass, churning it into furrows that are distinctly marked by already dried blades of grass”. The scene here is essential because it lets us know the importance of planting for the months ahead. People are busy, getting the land ready so that when the harvest comes, the crops will be good and ensure their survival and health.

— In the month of June we see the harvest time and the result of the hard work put in during March. “The freshly mown area stands out brightly against the untouched grass, and the already fading shocked hay is still different in color”. This month is depicted by life, everything is lush and green and at it peak, ready to be taken by the farmers to use as they need. They harvest the grass (I assume) for the hay that will keep them warm in the colder months and for feeding their animals that will in turn feed them. The building in the background show in contrast with the fields to give us a sense of how large of an area is being harvested. There is a river that runs along the outer wall that helps complete this scene of nature and life interacting.

— The activities shown in the month of July are that of Harvesting and sheep shearing. “Every detail of wheat is minutely rendered. The heads are more golden than the stalks and both are speckled with flowers; on the ground lays the mown wheat, not yet bound in sheaves but

already drier than the rest”. The scene has the conical mountains in the background that are a familiar theme with the artists as mentioned before. Like June, this picture depicts the everyday lives of the peasants of this time that would work for the Duc in his fields. The shearing of the sheep’s wool in order to prepare for winter and the reaping of the wheat that will be produced into a variety of foods for both people and animals give insight into how people of this time were able to sustain themselves using the land and nature.

— The month of September represents the grape harvest. Again, in the background is shown the fantastic nature of the Duc architecture he had commissioned and the hillside landscape below. We see many workers in the field picking the grapes and loading them into baskets attached to the wagon. Yet another scene of the people working the land, an example of sustainability in those times. “This harvest scene is one of the most picturesque and beautiful in the calendar”.

— Finally, in the month of October, described as “the month of tilling and sowing” we see just that. The people of the land completing the cycle – all year long they have taken what they needed from the land and now they are giving back. We see the interaction of nature, land and people – the bird pecking at the newly sown seeds that the people have put there to keep the land in a condition that will allow it to be used again and again. “This scene of country life in the shadow of the royal residence gives us a vivid image of the outskirts of Paris at the beginning of the Fifteenth century”

Many of the other months in the *Tres Riches Heures* depict the same scenes, harvesting, country life, harsh winter months, etc.

2. The major point in this artwork is that throughout history people have been using the land to get what they need, using it for sustainability. These pictures are a clear example of how in

each month there are important factors in farming and what needs to be done in order to reap those benefits. In AVM it is brought to our attention that we are using up all of our resources that we need in order to sustain life, however, in the *Tres Riches Heures* a more cyclical representation of sustainability is shown. We are shown the hardships of living a lifestyle that involves farming, harvesting, and any other aspect of country life, and we are also shown the results and rewards that it can give. In the month of January, which I did not discuss, we are shown a banquet, which ties nature to humans and that all the farming that takes place during the year can be enjoyed when trying to get through those harsher months, and that the reward for farming is living comfortably during that time. The introduction also gives us an insight to the man who commissioned all of these paintings and that he obviously wanted to show the interactions that went on in everyday life and contrast the country life with the court life.

3. Before seeing the pictures that went along with this reading assignment it was hard to see the relevance of the introduction, basically a biography of the Duc de Berry, to sustainability. All I could really pull out was that he could possibly be considered greedy, taking more than he really needed to in order to satisfy his wants and not his needs, a topic that has been discussed during the first week of class with AVM and the End of Suburbia video. Another topic in the introduction was that of the materials used to create the artwork, most coming from the earth in some way – as mentioned earlier about the paint colors and some of the finishing touches on the book. The Duc clearly had an interest in nature that was evident from the types of things he collected and his “zoo” of animals, however, I am not sure that he himself knew too much about farming and harvesting, only what he viewed. The painters themselves may have had more experience with lower to middle class work seeing as they started out as goldsmith’s apprentices and other fields alike. However, upon seeing the actual artwork, there is a clear relationship to

sustainability. Without repeating myself too much, we can see that in the scenes there are always peasants, either up front harvesting, farming, surviving, or in the background of a more upper class, court life activity. These paintings are relevant because they give us a year round look at what is done on the land in order to be sustainable. Instead of a look at a single family like in AVM we get to see the story of an entire working class through these scenes.