Fragments of a Spanish prayerbook with miniatures by Simon Bening*

Introduction
Simon Bening (1483–1561) was among the last and greatest Flemish manuscript illuminators. Active in Antwerp and Bruges in the first half of the sixteenth century — Simon received his mastership in 1508 and produced his last known work in 1558 — he and his shop illuminated luxurious manuscripts for an international and often aristocratic clientele. Although a relatively large number of Simon's manuscripts survive, a distressing number are not preserved intact. Several of them are missing individual miniatures or whole sections; others have been dismembered and their miniatures mounted in frames; some have had the miniatures removed and mounted separately; and still others have been reduced to groups of detached miniatures or single leaves whose texts and bindings have long ago disappeared. Although there are more detached miniatures attributable to Simon Bening than to any other illuminator, few efforts have been made to study these leaves systematically, to ascertain if the manuscripts from which they were excised are still extant, or to determine if the leaves can be organized into groups recognizably coming from the same manuscript.

The subject of this study is four groups of detached leaves and trimmed miniatures attributable to Bening. Reproductions of several of the folios and miniatures have been published, and the existence of all but one has been known for many years, but scholars have not previously recognized that all of them come from the same book. The ensemble consists of two detached leaves, catalogued as M6:1 and M6:2, in the collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia (figs. 2 and 10); a further group of four detached leaves that were formerly in the collection of Count Paul Durrieu in Paris (figs. 3, 4, 6 and 7); a third group of five detached and trimmed miniatures formerly in the Albert Figdor Collection in Vienna, presently untraced (figs. 1, 8 and 9); and an attached pair of trimmed miniatures, previously unknown, now in the collection of Peter Sharrer in New York City (fig. 5). As will be shown, these miniatures are all from the same manuscript and are, furthermore, among the earliest works attributable to Simon Bening.

A comparison among these four groups makes clear that they were all once part of a single prayerbook executed for a Spanish patron. The borders of the Durrieu and Philadelphia leaves all display the same decorative arrangement: a gold or silver ground strewn with illusionistically painted flowers, fruits, birds and insects. The versos of the two leaves in Philadelphia and the two miniatures owned by Mr. Sharrer contain portions of prayers in Spanish, written in an identical script, and the Philadelphia and Durrieu leaves display the same coats of arms; according to Durrieu, they are the arms of the Enriquez and Ribera families, members of the highest level of the Spanish aristocracy. The Philadelphia and Durrieu leaves are also nearly identical in dimensions and page layout.
Sharrer miniatures have been trimmed and the borders of the leaves do not survive, the miniatures have the same illusionistic gilt wood frames as the Philadelphia and Durrieu miniatures. Comparisons confirm that they are stylistically identical to those in the Philadelphia and Durrieu groups and the measurements of the miniatures correspond to those of the Philadelphia and Durrieu miniatures as well.  

All but one of the twenty-five images and events from the life of Christ and his followers portrayed in these Spanish Prayerbook miniatures can be identified, and they can be provisionally placed in a narrative sequence. The one scene that resists conclusive identification (fig. 1) nevertheless appears to be a miracle of Christ performed during his ministry and is therefore chronologically the first of the surviving scenes. The leaf containing miniatures of the Last Judgment (fig. 2) need not have been at the very end of the codex. Since the last of the four scenes on this leaf is the Parable of the Fig Tree, the leaf could also have been part of a portion of the manuscript that contained a cycle of illustrations of Christ’s earlier life and ministry. The remaining miniatures consist of three scenes of Christ Washing the Disciples’ Feet (fig. 3), two scenes of the Last Supper (fig. 4), a Crucifixion paired with the Rending of the Veil of the Temple, (fig. 5), four scenes of post-Resurrection appearances of Christ to the remaining eleven disciples (fig. 6), two moments in the episode of the incredulity of Thomas (fig. 7), four episodes of Christ’s post-Resurrection appearance at the Sea of Tiberias (figs. 8 and 9), one scene of Pentecost, one of the mocking of the disciples, and one of St. Peter preaching (fig. 10). This suggests that the original manuscript must have been very densely illustrated and would have contained an unusually complete cycle of miniatures illustrating (at least) the Ministry, Passion and Resurrection, Christ’s post-Resurrection appearances, Pentecost and the post-Pentecostal activities of the disciples. If the manuscript also illustrated the Infancy, no trace of this cycle remains. It is difficult to ascertain precisely the type of manuscript to which these leaves and miniatures originally belonged. Both the legible portions of text and the nature of the narrative sequence of the miniatures argue against the identification of the work as either a Rosary Psalter or a Book of Hours. The prayer fragment on the verso of Philadelphia M6:1 (transcribed in an Appendix to this article) is unrelated to the devotions found in any of the Spanish language Rosary Psalters produced by Simon Bening and his shop, and does not appear to be a part of the prayers normally found in a Book of Hours.  

The relationship between text and image seen in Philadelphia M6:1 (fig. 2) was probably typical of the original manuscript. The verso displays three scenes of the