The reconstruction of the Book of Hours of Catharina van Wassenaer*

While in the past the illuminated manuscript was primarily the object of study of art historians who regarded the illumination as a minor form of painting, which served to fill the gaps in the knowledge of ‘superior’ painting, such as panel painting; nowadays the handwritten book is being studied integrally, encompassing all the information which the medieval codex can yield. This type of research was initiated by Delaissé, who introduced the term ‘book archaeology’ for this method in 1967. He observed that knowledge of the material aspects of the handwritten book does not only provide insight into the genesis and the original condition of a manuscript, but also explains the changes it underwent with regard to its original state. From the 1970s the first publications appear in which these new ideas are further developed and put into practice, as a result of which information on codicological aspects begins to form an important feature of the manuscript catalogues compiled by art historians. Since then congresses are being organized where specialists from various disciplines, art historians, codicologists, philologists etc., turn their attention to the different aspects of the handwritten book. By now the branch of codicology has become an

* I am greatly indebted to Dr Anne S. Korteweg, Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, for her comments on the first version of this article.
3 Delaissé, art. cit. (n. 2), p. 78.

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important auxiliary science for art historians who occupy themselves with illuminated manuscripts. We owe this development not least to Peter Gumbert, who as Professor of Western Palaeography in Leiden taught many generations of art historians. Nor could this article, which deals with the reconstruction of a Book of Hours, have been written without the knowledge and insights yielded by Peter Gumbert’s lectures in codicology.

The book of hours of which the original structure and illumination will be explored here is the so-called Book of Hours of Catharina van Wassenaer, which is preserved in the University Library in Leiden. Of this manuscript, which is incomplete, fragments are known which were kept in a private collection until 1933 and have subsequently been spotted in various auction catalogues. Apart from codicological knowledge, the reconstruction of this manuscript also requires knowledge of books of hours and the texts they contain, as well as knowledge of the themes of the accompanying illumination, the so-called decoration programme. This does not only involve an understanding of the decoration programme of the book of hours in general, but particularly the knowledge about the illuminator of this book of hours, a miniaturist who belongs to the Masters of the Dark Eyes, is of major importance for determining the original content and decoration of the Book of Hours of Catharina van Wassenaer. This incomplete book of hours was purchased in 1985 through Sotheby’s in London on account of its Leiden provenance. On one of the fly-leaves at the end of the book of hours the note ‘Dyet boweck heeft towe behort vrow ketelyne va(n) wassenar vrow va(n) cruyninge(n)’ occurs. This early sixteenth-century note explains that a certain Ketelijne or Catharina owned this book. The note ‘Wassenare’ on fo. 15r. refers to a member of the Van Wassenaer family, while the family coat of arms painted on fo. 73r. makes it possible to identify this Ketelijne with Catharina van Wassenaer, daughter of Jan I van Wassenaer, viscount of Leiden, and wife of Joost van Cruijningen. It seems likely that this Catharina van Wassenaer was until her marriage to Joost van Cruijningen in 1514 a nun in the convent Nonnenpoel near Leiden.


6 Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS BPL 3091.


8 Sotheby’s (London), catalogue 25 June 1985, no. 108.

H.G.A. Obreen, Geschiedenis van het geslacht Van Wassenaer (Leiden 1903), p. 46, records that Catharina, Jan van Wassenaer’s daughter, is among the nuns of the convent between 1500 and 1506.