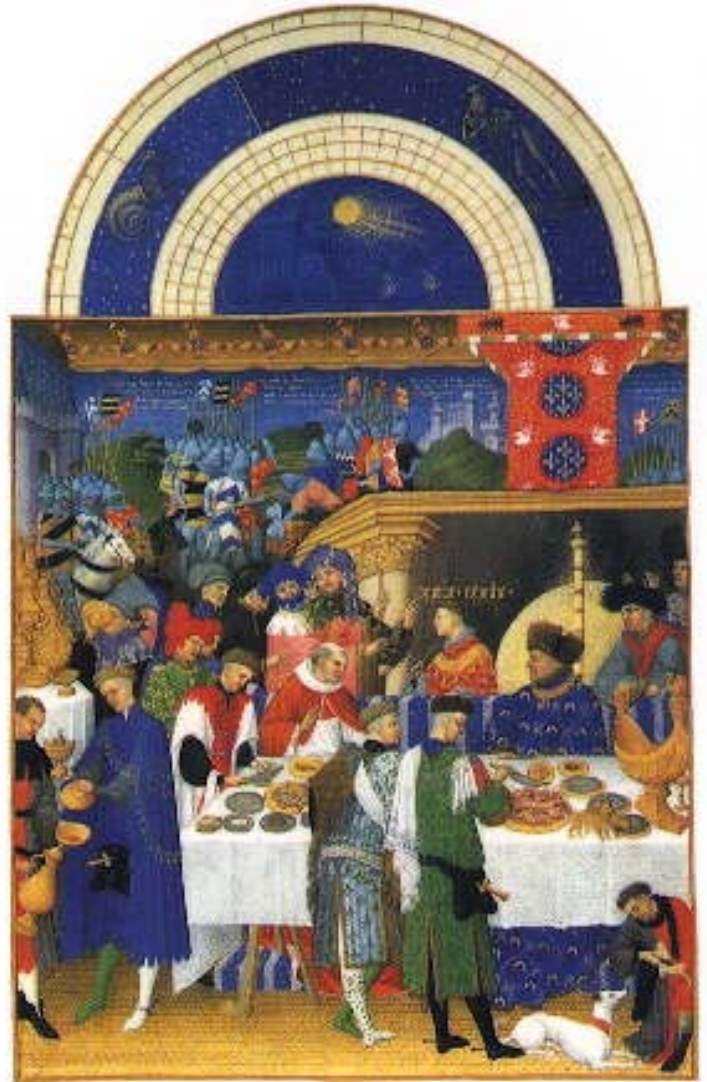


**Les Tres Riches Heures. The Medieval Seasons. Preface and commentaries by Millard Meiss. New York: George Braziller, 1995.**

# January



The duke sits at his table, surrounded by friends. Behind him the blaze of a large fire in the monumental fireplace is guarded by a wickerwork screen. Tapestries hanging behind the canopy depict knights emerging from a fortified castle to confront the enemy. The table is covered with a damask cloth and laid with platters, plates, and a splendid gold saltcellar in the shape of a ship. The duke's little dogs wander freely among the dishes. A prelate with sparse white hair and a purple coat sits on the duke's right, thanking him for this honor. Behind him several figures are seen entering and stretching their hands toward the fire; the chamberlain encourages them, appearing to say "*Approche, approche!*" [Come in, come in!] Other figures complete this lively tableau, which re-creates a familiar scene at the court of Jean de Berry.



# February



The Limbourgs chose a winter scene to represent this month, often the coldest of the year. They have painted it with extraordinary veracity, rendering details with a realism that captures the atmosphere of this harsh season. Details in and around the farm are depicted with meticulous care: the sheepfold, the cart, the casks, the peasants and mistress of the house warming themselves by the fire. In front of the dovecote a benumbed figure clutches a wool coat over his head and shoulders as he hurries home. The severity of the winter is further emphasized by the birds huddled near the house scratching for food, which the snow makes it impossible to find elsewhere. Everything in this picture of winter is noted with care and rendered with skill, attesting to the painters' power of observation and the perfection of their art.



## March

The illumination for this month is the first of the great landscapes favored by the Limbourgs in the *Tres Riches Heures*. It features the majestic Chateau de Lusignan, one of the Duke of Berry's favorite residences. In the upper left of the scene, a shepherd and his dog tend a flock of sheep; below them three peasants trim vines within an enclosure. On the right, another enclosure, with a house seems to surround more vineyards. A small monument known as a *Montjoie* rises at the intersection of paths separating the different plots.

A beautiful picture of plowing occupies the foreground. A white-bearded peasant wearing a surcoat over a blue tunic holds the plow handle with his left hand and goads the oxen with his right. As always, each detail is rendered with extraordinary precision and delicacy.



## April

Nature revives. Flowers spring from the fresh grass. One and all celebrate this rejuvenation and become part of it.

The scene is at Dourdan, the property of the duke of Berry from 1400, improved and fortified by him. The towers and dungeon of the chateau, whose ruins are visible to this day, rise at the top of a hill. In the foreground, two maidens bend to pick violets while a betrothed couple exchange rings before their parents. Expressions are rendered with subtlety: the fiancé searches the face of his betrothed while presenting her with the ring toward which she extends her finger and lowers her eyes. The mother is visibly moved; the father turns to look affectionately at his daughter. The Limbourgs have created a harmony of color, composition, and emotion that is perfectly attuned to the scene represented and to the charm of the new season.



## May

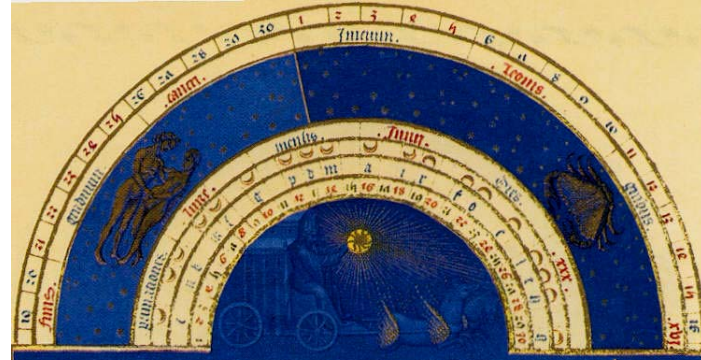
It's May, it's May, the beautiful month of May! As song of old went, so the figures of this merry pageant seem to be saying to one another. On the first of May, young men used to make a light-hearted jaunt through the country to bring back branches. On that day, tradition had it that one wore green, as seen on the three girls riding horses in the foreground (the color in the manuscript is obtained from crushed malachite). The sumptuous dress lined with blue and ornamented with gold flowerwork identifies the girls as princesses. Turning to contemplate the one at center is a rider dressed half in red, half in black and white, the royal livery of France at that time. At the girl's left rides a man dressed in a rich blue brocaded coat strewn with golden flowers: could it be the duke of Berry?

# June



It is harvest time; scantily clad peasants wearing hats mow the wide meadow in unison. Every detail is carefully observed and rendered: the freshly mown area stands out brightly against the untouched grass, and the already fading shocked hay is still different in color. The grace, even the elegance, imparted by the fragility and flexibility of the two, simply dressed, women reapers is typical of the mixture of perception and charm that characterizes the Limbourgs' genius.

The view encompasses the fields on either side of the Seine and the inner facade of the Palais de la Cite. The slate roofs of the Palais rise against a blue sky, providing a large, dignified background for this rustic scene; the minutely recorded details of this interior facade are particularly precious. On the far right is the Sainte Chapelle in all its refined splendor. A boat on the riverbank completes this scene, to which the artists imparted both homely grace and grandeur.



# July

The Limbourgs represent here rustic activities of the Chateau de Clain in Poitiers, which was one of the Duke of Berry's habitual homes. This miniature is a precious document of the chateau, which, sadly, no longer exists. We glimpse a chapel to the right of the chateau amid buildings separated from it by an arm in the river.

In the foreground two peasants wearing straw hats and drawers (called *petits draps*) reap with sickles. Every detail of the wheat is minutely rendered. The heads are more golden than the stalks, and both are speckled with flowers; on the ground lies mown wheat, not yet bound in sheaves but already drier than the rest.

At the lower right a man and woman proceed with the shearing with a kind of shears called *forces*; the shorn wool accumulates at their feet.



# August



The scene is at Estampes, which, like nearby Dourdon, belonged to the Duc de Berry. A richly dressed horseman, wearing a white hood and bearing a falcon on his fist, leads two couples hawking. Leading on foot, a falconer holds two birds on his left fist and drags a long pole in his right hand. Behind him a rider releases a falcon from his right hand. The couple at the rear appear more concerned with an amorous conversation than with the hunt.

In the background, peasants bind into sheaves the newly mown wheat as swimmers frolic in the Juine River. The deformation of the figures' appearance by the water's retraction has been carefully observed and curiously rendered. All of this varied scene recalls the diversions of court life amid the seasonal work of the country. Thus we review, from one month to the next, the daily life of the court of the duke of Berry.



# September



This depiction of the grape harvest features the extraordinary Chateau de Saumur, near Angers, which belonged to a nephew of the duke of Berry, Louis II, the duke of Anjou, who had completed its construction at the end of the fourteenth century. It appears here in all its fresh newness: chimneys, pinnacles, and weather vanes crowned with golden fleurs-de-lys thrust skyward. The chateau stands to this day, although its crowning crenellations have disappeared.

In the harvest scene (actually executed by Jean Colombe), aproned women and young men pick the purple-colored clusters of grapes and fill baskets to be loaded into hampers hanging from the mules or into vats on the wagons. Despite the slightly less refined style of Colombe, this harvest scene is one of the most picturesque and beautiful in the calendar.



## October

October, the month of tilling and sowing, is represented along the left bank of the Seine. The view is from the vicinity of the Hotel de Nesle, the duke of Berry's Paris home. Here, the Limbourgs show the Louvre, the royal residence since the time of Philippe Auguste (reigned 1180-1223). Every detail is so precise that even today, several centuries after the building's destruction, a model of it was made possible in thanks largely to the Limbourgs' painting.

In the foreground, a peasant wearing a blue tunic sows seeds that he carries in a white cloth pouch. At the left, a peasant on horseback draws a harrow on which a heavy stone has been placed to make it penetrate more deeply into the earth. A scarecrow dressed as an archer and strings drawn between stakes both help discourage birds from eating the seeds.



## November

The scene of November showing the acorn harvest was executed entirely by Jean Colombe. The Limbourgs painted only the tympanum, which--as in the other eleven months--crowns the scene with signs centered around a semicircle painted in blue *camaieu* (monochrome), in which a man carrying a brilliant sun is enthroned on a chariot drawn by two horses.

Unlike the other scenes, this does not take place on a famous site that the artists were proud to evoke. The setting seems to be a figment of Jean Colombe's imagination. In front, a peasant dressed in a tunic with gold highlights, draws back his arm and prepares to hurl a stick into an oak tree. At his feet, pigs greedily eat the fallen acorns under the watchful eyes of a dog. On the horizon a sinuous river twists between the mountains.





# December

With the month of December representing the end of a wild boar hunt in the forest of Vincennes, we return to the Limbourgs and the duke of Berry. The scene features the home in which the duke was born on the eve of December (November 30, 1340): the Chateau de Vincennes, with its nine magnificent towers.

In the foreground, the boar has been run down and speared by the huntsman on the left, and hounds are tearing it apart. On the right, a hunter blows the mort on his small horn. The dogs' desperate eagerness is rendered with astonishing realism: the positions, the gestures of their paws, their greedy expressions, all have been observed and noted with care. This scene is perhaps the liveliest in a calendar full of lively images; it completes the year in an appropriate setting and time, recalling the birth of the duke of Berry.

