

# The Isabella Breviary

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M. Moleiro Editor presents the exact replica of the *Isabella Breviary*, a lavishly illuminated manuscript of the last decade of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and one of the British Library's most valued treasures.



## ISABELLA I OF CASTILE

The only daughter of King John II of Castile and Isabella of Portugal was born in 1451. Being only three years old, her father died and her half-brother Henry IV came to the throne. The death of his younger brother Alfonso in 1468 placed her in direct line of succession to the throne of Castile.

From that moment on, Isabella became a desirable political prize, in a time when royal marriages were driven by international and ambitious political alliances and territorial expansion intentions. Many attempts of marriage were carried away – Charles IV of Navarre, Alfonso V of Portugal and Pedro Giron, Maestre de Calatrava or Louis XI's brother Charles, Duke of Berry, among others.

On 19<sup>th</sup> October 1469 Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella married in the city of Valladolid. Some years later, in 1479, and after King Henry died without issue, Isabella proclaimed herself Queen of Castile.

Isabella and her husband established a highly effective co-regency under equal terms. In addition to her sponsorship of Columbus' travels and starting a Golden Age of exploration and colonization, Isabella was

also the principal sponsor of Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, the greatest military genius and innovator of the age. Along with the physical unification of Spain, Isabella and Ferdinand embarked on a process of spiritual unification. As part of this process, the Inquisition became institutionalized. A structure designed to ensure the purity of Christian faith all throughout the territories and directed by Friar Thomas de Torquemada, Isabella's personal confessor before her accession to the throne. The conquest of the Moorish Kingdom of Granada in 1492 by the army of Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 was celebrated throughout the Christian World – in London a singular service of thanksgiving was held in St. Paul's cathedral and celebrations took place for more than two weeks.

The papacy gave Ferdinand and Isabella the complimentary title of Catholic Kings. An embryonic united Spain had set all the conditions for becoming a major European power in the XVI century.

Isabella died in 1504 in Medina del Campo. She is entombed in Granada in the Capilla Real, which was built by her grandson, Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor (Carlos I of Spain), alongside her husband Fer-

dinand, her daughter Joanna and Joanna's husband Philip; and Isabella's 2-year old grandson, Miguel.

### THE ISABELLA BREVIARY

The *Isabella Breviary* is the British Library's most highly prized treasure. This amazing manuscript was conceived of as the most luxurious Flemish breviary. Each of its pages has been masterfully illuminated by the finest Flemish painters, resulting in a lavish manuscript of peerless beauty.

The originality and impact of the miniatures in the *Isabella Breviary* make this a unique codex. Having more texts than a book of hours, a breviary offers illuminators a wider range of themes and consequently more artistic license and a greater variety of images. The six masters who worked on the *Isabella Breviary* paid particular attention to the scenes depicting the building, destruction and reconstruction of the temple and city of Jerusalem and also the celebration scenes with musicians and singers led by David. No other contemporary manuscript features a similar series.

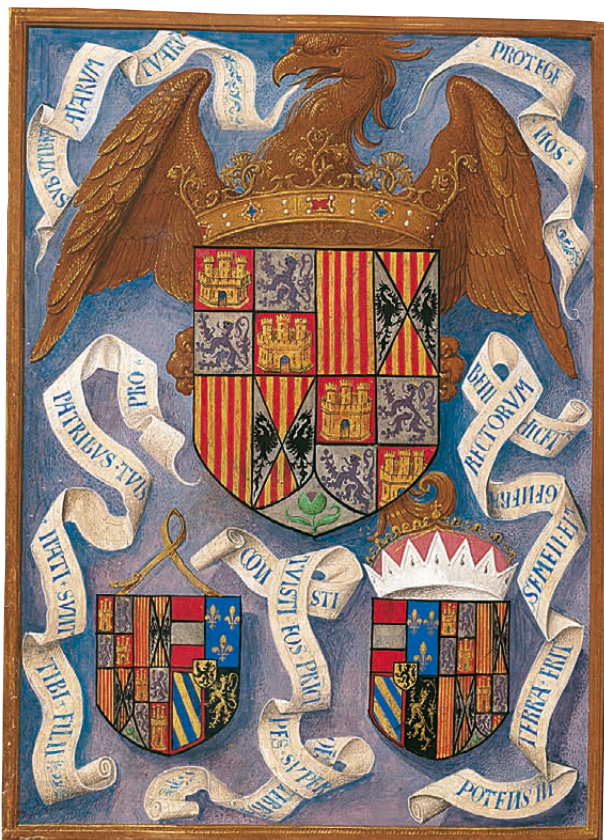
The main painter in the *Isabella Breviary* is the

Master of the Dresden Prayerbook, an artist remarkable for the narrative expressiveness of his images and his ability to breathe life and movement into his scenes. His skilful portrayal of gestures and facial expressions, underlining the main action of each episode, is astounding.

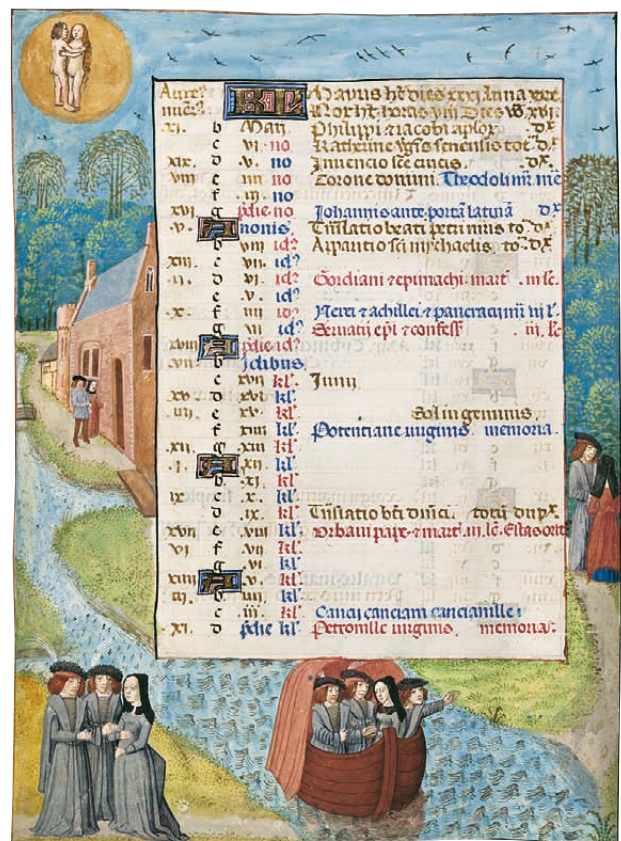
Gérard Horenbout, also known as the Master of James IV of Scotland, is the second greatest illuminator in the *Isabella Breviary*. This brilliant miniaturist, also the creator of the *Hours of Joanna of Castile*, was one of the first Flemish illuminators to incorporate elements characteristic of the Renaissance into his miniatures. The scenes Horenbout painted for this marvellous breviary are noteworthy for the brilliant use of colours and masterful representation of textures and fabrics.

Some other important miniatures in this breviary, including the Nativity, the Adoration of the Magi, St Barbara, among others, are the work of Gérard David's privileged hand.

The exuberant marginal decoration in the *Isabella Breviary* deserves special mention. It fea-



Coats of arms of the Catholic Monarchs, f. 436v



Calendar: May, f. 3v



*The Tree of Jesse, f. 354r*

tures an unusual combination of modern borders giving the impression of strewn flowers, acanthus leaves and branches interwoven with a type of margin that was already rather uncommon around 1490 with blue and gold acanthus leaves, flowers, insects and birds.

Isabella the Catholic was given the manuscript shortly before 1497 by her ambassador Francisco de Rojas to commemorate the double marriage of her children, Infante John of Asturias and Infanta Joanna, to the children of emperor Maximilian of Austria and duchess Mary of Burgundy, Margaret and Philip. A full-page miniature shows the joint coat of arms created by Isabella and Ferdinand with a large eagle, the symbol of St John the Evangelist, and the coats of arms of the two new couples underneath.

The *Isabella Breviary* is of great historical importance because it reflects not only the artistic context but also the great political unrest in late-fifteenth-century Europe, a time when royal marriages meant inter-

national political alliances, territorial expansion etc.

Queen Isabella died in 1504 and it is not known what became of the codex in the following three centuries. It may have been plundered from El Escorial during the Napoleonic invasion. It appeared in England in the early 19th century, in the collection of John Dent, a bibliophile, banker and Member of Parliament. The British Library acquired it from another private collector in 1852.

### THE M. MOLEIRO EDITION

For the first time, the *Isabella Breviary*, currently kept in the British Library has been integrally and identically reproduced. The result is an exact replica that can be considered as a new original.

The techniques employed in reproducing this codex, combined with the wisdom and skilled craftsmanship of our trade, enable us to remain very faithful to the original. Bound in leather tanned used the methods of years past and reproduced on special, handmade paper designed to match the thickness, feel and smell of the original vellum, this edition reproduces all the nuances of the paintings, parchment, gold, etc. This codex is, therefore, a new original barely distinguishable from the ancient manuscript owned by the great queen Isabella the Catholic.

This edition is unique, unrepeatably and limited to 987 copies individually numbered and accompanied by a notary's statement confirming its exclusive nature.

This amazing « quasi-original » of the *Isabella Breviary* will be accompanied by a comprehensive and fully illustrated commentary volume written by experts in medieval history, the history of art and other relevant areas enabling the codex to be fully understood.

The original manuscripts to which we have access are housed in private and national libraries throughout the world including the British Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pierpont Morgan Library, the National Library of Russia, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Biblioteca Casanatense, the Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, etc... During the whole process we work closely with representatives of each library to produce a codex that is extremely faithful to the original.



*The Isabella Breviary and its protective bookcase*

Hence we must not be surprised that the best libraries, institutions, bibliophiles and art collectors of the world are our clients. Our volumes have also been offered as presents to great personalities of the political and cultural world – His Holiness Pope John Paul II, His Majesty the King of Spain, Her Majesty Rania of Jordania, Nobel Prize José Saramago among many others.

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