Patronage, Audience and Ownership of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile

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PATRONAGE, AUDIENCE AND OWNERSHIP OF THE PSALTER OF BLANCHE OF CASTILE

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in The School of Art

by

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Acknowledgments

I discovered my passion for art history during my undergraduate studies at Southeastern Louisiana University, under the guidance of Dr. Irene Nero and Professor Timothy Silva, who recognized my potential long before myself. Dr. Nero encouraged me to pursue my passion despite personal setbacks with a single question she directed at my entire undergraduate survey class. As she was expressing frustration regarding a lack of effort on the part of her students she rhetorically asked, “Why would anyone choose to be mediocre?” It was this question that helped me push myself further than I ever before imagined.

Under the spectacular guidance of Dr. Nero, I was accepted into the graduate school at Louisiana State University where I encountered incredible instructors, interesting peers, and new challenges. Most importantly, I found myself surrounded by individuals who encouraged me to open my mind to new perspectives and ideas within the field of art history that I had never considered. I cannot thank everyone who played a role in my academic journey, but there are a few individuals whose impact on my education deserves enormous recognition.

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................ ii

List of Figures .............................................................................................................. v

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... vi

Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter 1. The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* .......................................................... 3
  In the Beginning ...................................................................................................... 3
  The Fall of the Rebel Angels ................................................................................. 4
  The Creation of Man ............................................................................................. 5
  The Tree of Jesse .................................................................................................... 7
  Other Scenes from the Prefatory Cycle ............................................................... 9
  Christ Enthroned .................................................................................................. 10
  Coronation of the Virgin ..................................................................................... 11
  Beatus Page .......................................................................................................... 13
  Psalms .................................................................................................................... 15
  The End Times ..................................................................................................... 17
  Last Words ............................................................................................................ 21

Chapter 2. Literature Review: Elizabeth Hudson’s Dissertation.............................. 23

Chapter 3. Patronage, Ownership, Provenance ....................................................... 33
  Patronage .............................................................................................................. 34
  Audience and Ownership ..................................................................................... 37
  Provenance ........................................................................................................... 39
  Iconographical Evidence and Interpretations ...................................................... 40
  Speculation ........................................................................................................... 43

Conclusion ................................................................................................................ 46

Works Cited ............................................................................................................... 48
  Manuscripts ........................................................................................................... 48

Vita ............................................................................................................................. 49
# List of Figures


Abstract

The so-called Psalter of Blanche of Castile (Psautier latin dit de saint Louis et de Blanche de Castille, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Paris, MS 1186 réserve) is a well-preserved illuminated manuscript made in Paris in the first half of the thirteenth century. As a devotional book, it witnesses the concerns of a thirteenth century individual of high rank, most likely a woman. As its modern name indicates, scholars link its existence to the Queen of France Blanche of Castile (4 March 1188 – 27 November 1252; r. 1226-34, 1248-52). No firm documentation, however, attests to the circumstances of its making, nor to its patron, intended audience and first owner. Scholars have studied the text and the miniatures in the hope of finding some clue as to who commissioned it, who created it, and the reasons behind a choice of miniatures and format atypical in comparison with other Psalters made in Paris over the course of the thirteenth century.

In studying the Psalter of Blanche of Castile, I find myself intrigued by issues of patronage and context, and unconvinced by some of the arguments and conclusions put forward by scholars who have studied this manuscript. In the following pages, through close examination of the miniatures and comparison with other Psalters, as well as consideration of both the evidence and its interpretation by a number of scholars, I draw new conclusions – some firmly based on the existing evidence and some of a more speculative kind – about the patronage, audience, and ownership of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile.
Introduction

In the High and Late Middle Ages, aristocratic and wealthy patrons commissioned and gifted illuminated Psalters. An illuminated Psalter was usually designed to contain a liturgical calendar and the Psalms, as well as prayers and litanies. Some Psalters also contain image cycles of the life of Christ, the Life of the Virgin, and other popular biblical stories. The creation of Psalters for laypeople allowed for a more personalized touch on this devotional book, which resulted in these commissioned manuscripts to differ vastly from one to another. The unique qualities of certain Psalters serve almost as a time machine, giving us the opportunity to speculate on the concerns and the lives of their patrons and owners, who would otherwise remain unknown to the world. While a Psalter did not serve the same function as a diary or journal, the decisions made by the patron, the artist and the owner reveal information that is both useful in our understanding of history, and intriguing in imagining life in the Middle Ages.

Even the best-preserved medieval manuscript typically offers more questions than answers; the Psalter discussed in the following pages is a case in point. The focus of my research on the Psalter of Blanche of Castile revolves around the importance of factual evidence versus speculation in identifying the patron, audience, and owner of this Psalter. The topic has been discussed by several scholars. In the majority, they have concluded, based on both provable evidence and likely scenarios, that the Psalter belonged to the Queen of France Blanche of Castile, who would also be responsible for its creation. In reassessing the evidence, I find myself in disagreement with some of these scholars and their conclusions.

Identifying the patron of a work of art and the intended audience is vital to understand the artistic choices made in its creation. The patron would be responsible for both financing the
making of the work and selecting the artist or workshop producing it. The patron of an illuminated manuscript is often also the intended audience and first owner of it. However, extravagantly designed devotional books were also used as gifts. It is possible, even likely in fact, that the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* was commissioned by a patron in order to be given as a gift to the recipient and first owner of the manuscript. In this scenario, the artistic decisions taken in the production of the manuscript might reflect the relationship between patron and intended recipient of the gift. Lacking any documentary evidence, the only data available to identify patron and possible recipient and first owner of the manuscript comes from interpreting the visual evidence in terms of artistic decisions motivated by specific reasons, intentions and objectives. It should be clear from the outset however, that despite all attempts, the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* remains an elusive work of art: patron, artist(s) and first intended owner remain unknown.
Chapter 1. The Psalter of Blanche of Castile

In the Beginning

The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* follows most, but not all, of the iconographic and textual standards seen in Psalters from the first half of the thirteenth century.¹ The Psalter opens (folio 1v) with a full-page illumination representing three figures understood to be astronomers. They appear on a vivid gold background in front of two unnaturally depicted trees. Under a night sky, the figures gaze at the stars. They are awkwardly seated on what appears to be a staircase. The two outermost figures step out of the red frame of the miniature.

Fig. 1. *Astronomers, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 1v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235.
*Source:* https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j

¹ The entire Psalter has been digitized and is available online through Gallica, the Bibliothèque nationale de France (from now on BnF) digital library, at: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j. The entry on the Gallica website refers to the Psalter as: Master of the workshop of Blanche of Castile, *Psalterium (Latin Psalter of Saint Louis and Blanche of Castile)*. Manuscript. Paris, 1225-1235, MS-1186, National Library of France, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal.
The central figure holds an astrolabe in his left hand and a scroll in his right hand, while the figure to his right documents his findings. The figure on the left holds an open book. The three figures are dressed in red and blue clothing. All three figures appear to have a tonsured head. The thirteen pages that follow consist of a liturgical calendar written in Latin, which includes a series of decorated initials and roundels with the Labors of the Months and astrological signs. The three astronomers at the beginning of the Psalter can be read as the authors of the following calendar.

**The Fall of the Rebel Angels**

The next full-page miniature, directly after the calendar (folio 9v), depicts the fall of the rebel angels. Within a red and blue frame, Christ sits enthroned in Heavenly clouds among eight righteous angels. As common in depictions of Christ, he is portrayed as a slender, middle-aged man with long, dark hair and beard. Below the clouds, six rebel angels are seen falling from Heaven into the mouth of Hell, which is depicted as a large, grey, demon face with an open mouth full of at least eight beastly creatures of different sizes and colors. It remains inexplicit whether the beastly figures in the mouth of Hell are demons already there at the time of the fall of the rebel angels, or if they represent the damned rebel angels following their fall from grace and transformation into demons.

The realm of Heaven is separated from that of Hell: Heaven is depicted with a brilliant gold background while Hell is full of smoke and flames. Christ is larger in size than the other figures. He is pictured making a sign of benediction with his right hand and holding a book in his left hand. Christ, the righteous angels, and the rebel angels are dressed in randomly chosen color combinations of red, green, blue, and white. Beyond placement within the frame, there is little differentiation between the righteous and the rebellious angels as all of them are shown with
halos and wings. The rebellious angels appear to be in agony and immense fear with clenched jaws, squinted eyes, and worried expressions. The righteous angels, as well as Christ, appear mournful.

Fig. 2. Fall of the Rebel Angels, Psalter of Blanche of Castile, fol. 9v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235. Source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j

The Creation of Man

The subsequent pages offer illustrations in the same style depicting scenes from the Bible in chronological order, starting with the creation of mankind (folio 10r). The full-page illumination features a colorful scene within a lapis and red-orange frame. Beneath a night sky, God stands on a gold background within a garden. Adam rests in the nude on the foreground, while God lifts Eve from his body by pulling her up by her wrist. Two trees frame the figures. God is clothed in blue and red garb. A crossed halo of warm-colored light that surrounds his head identifies him as Christ. He is pictured with long, dark and curly hair, and beard. He is a
slender figure with large eyes and rosy cheeks. He appears older and possibly wiser, due to the linework resembling wrinkles on his forehead and under his eyes.

Fig. 3. *Creation of Man, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 10r, Paris, ca. 1225-1235.  
*source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j*

The ground has a dark shade. It appears to be a mountainside, as the curvilinear line between the background and the actual ground is inclined from the center to the right. Various animals are depicted on the left and right bottom portion of the miniature. Beneath Adam is a pale green section with linework indicative of water. Within the water swim numerous fish. A bird and other animals appear at the edge of the water and two swans swim in it.

The artist uses linework as a means of separation. In a wave-like pattern, a line separates the sky from the gold background, the gold background from the rocky mid-ground, and the rocky mid-ground from the watery foreground. The same method of separation by means of linework is repeated in the figures, the animals and the vegetation. Indeed, the same method is found in the miniatures throughout the manuscript.
The following folios (11v, 12r, 13v, 14r) illustrate in two roundels per page various episodes from Genesis. On each page, the two roundels are depicted within a red or blue rectangular frame decorated with birds (fol. 11v) or vegetation. The background in each roundel is brilliant gold. The following scenes are found:

Folio 11 verso: God forbids Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam and Eve, pictured with the serpent who tempts them, disobey God.

Folio 12 recto: Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden. Eve spins and Adam digs with a spade, as animals stand in witness to their plight.

Folio 13 verso: Noah’s ark saves animals and Noah’s family from the Great Flood. Abraham is tested by God as an angel stops him from sacrificing Isaac.

Folio 14 recto: God gives Moses the ten commandments. The Israelites participate in idolatry as they worship a golden calf.

**The Tree of Jesse**

On folio 15v, we find a full-page miniature of the Tree of Jesse with the ancestors of Christ. Jesse lays down on a bed at the bottom of the miniature and acts as the roots of a family tree. He appears to be asleep, on his belly, with his head resting on his right hand. From his backside springs the tree trunk. The second figure from the bottom is King David, wearing a crown and holding a string instrument which references his role as the biblical psalmist. Above David is the Virgin Mary. The figure at the top is Christ with long, dark hair, a beard, and a crossed halo. His right hand is raised in a sign of benediction, and he holds a closed book in his left hand. Surrounding Christ are seven alternating blue and red circles. Within each circle is a white bird, likely a dove, flying toward Christ.

Framing the center of the composition is a blue arch, while a rectangular red frame encloses the rest of the illumination. Eight semi-circles, four on the left and four on the right, are
attached to the outside of the blue arch. Each semi-circle frames a different male figure, each holding a scroll. Three of the semi-circle scenes also feature a bird, likely a dove, looking over the shoulder of the man, as if to read the scroll. The letters on the scrolls are too tiny to be decipherable. All eight figures stand with one foot within their semi-circular frame and one foot coming out of the frame. All eight figures stand on a gold-leaf background and are depicted with halos of color behind their heads. Between the eight semicircles and the outside frame is a blue background with alternating red and white fleur-de-lis decoration. On the two sides along the base of the miniature, an architectural structure with bricks and crenellation is reminiscent of a medieval fortress. The remaining background is made of gold-leaf.

Fig. 4. *Tree of Jesse, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 5v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235. *source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j*

A pattern of vines and floral designs fill the space between the figures that make-up the tree. Here, the artist uses highlights to give volume to the tree branches and vines, something unique to this page and not found elsewhere throughout the whole manuscript. This tree does not
resemble the trees, landscapes, or vegetation seen in the other miniatures in the Psalter. The Tree of Jesse is symmetrical and patterned, three dimensional with shadows and highlights, and acts like a shelf, storing figurines. Illustrated with red, green, and blue inks, this full-page miniature is comparable to stained glass windows. The thick and dark outlines of each detail resemble that of the metal used to define shapes in stained-glass windows. The red, green and blue tones are rich and consistent throughout.

**Other Scenes from the Prefatory Cycle**

The following miniatures in the prefatory cycle, in two roundels within a rectangular frame, depict scenes from the Life of the Virgin and Life of Christ. The figures maintain a similar style throughout including thick linework and the same color scheme of gold, red, blue and green. The miniatures and their locations within the Psalter are as follows:

- **Folio 16 recto:** Gabriel announces to Mary that she is pregnant with the son of God. Elizabeth visits her cousin Mary.
- **Folio 17 verso:** Christ is born in a manger. Gabriel speaks with the shepherds.
- **Folio 18 recto:** The Magi present Christ with gifts. Christ is presented in the temple.
- **Folio 19 verso:** Mary and Joseph flee to Egypt as King Herod of Judea massacres the Innocents;
- **Folio 20 recto:** Christ is baptized. Christ is tempted in the wilderness.
- **Folio 21 verso:** Christ raises Lazarus from death. Christ is celebrated entering Jerusalem.
- **Folio 22 recto:** Christ washes the feet of his disciples. Christ and his disciples partake in the Last Supper.
- **Folio 23 verso:** Judas betrays Christ and is shown kissing him. Christ is flogged by soldiers.
- **Folio 24 recto:** Christ is crucified. Christ is removed from the cross.
Folio 25 verso: The holy women visit Christ’s tomb. Christ rescues the souls of the righteous from limbo.

Folio 26 recto: Mary Magdalene recognizes Christ. St. Thomas touches the wound in Christ’s side.

Folio 27 verso: Ascension of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit descends on the apostles marking the first Pentecost.

**Christ Enthroned**

The full-page miniature found on folio 28 recto depicts Christ enthroned. Christ sits on a throne within a golden background in an enclosed frame. His right hand is raised in a sign of benediction, while his left hand holds a closed book. He has long, dark hair and beard. He is slender and shows a stern expression on his face. He is dressed in flowing garbs and has a warm-colored crossed-halo behind his head. Behind the clover shape which frames Christ is a blue, rectangular frame. In the uppermost corner on Christ’s right is a winged man; on the left, an eagle; on the bottom right, a winged lion; and on the bottom left, a winged ox. They are the four symbols of the evangelists: Matthew, John, Mark, and Luke. Their presence confirms that this is a representation of the second coming of Christ, and that Christ is seated here in judgment as described in the Book of Revelation.

A few details are worthy of note: the small white flowers on the red background, the fleur-de-lis in the center top and center bottom of the frame, the floral decorations of the throne are all decorative additions that are specific to this miniature. In all other respects, it follows the standard iconography.
Coronation of the Virgin

Folio 29 verso depicts the earthly burial of the Virgin and her Heavenly Coronation occurring simultaneously. The two roundels – the top symbolizing Heaven and the bottom earth – are framed within a red rectangle featuring gold lions on a blue background. Within each roundel, on gold background, each figure wears drapery of blue, red, or green. In the top roundel the Virgin is seated at the right hand of Christ. She is dressed in red drapery. She tilts her head toward Christ as he places a red crown onto her veiled head. She holds her left hand up, palm out, while in her right hand she holds a scepter. Attached to the scepter is a green pennon flag with black and white details.\(^2\) In the bottom roundel, the crowd of the Apostles watches in despair as the Virgin’s body is carried away by two sorrowful, holy men. The Virgin lays on a

\(^2\) In coeval depictions of this same scene, I did not find the inclusion of a flag. Elizabeth Hudson draws a connection between this miniature and the representation of Ecclesia (personification of the church).
stretched blanket, dressed in blue and white, with a golden halo. Her hands are clasped together, as if in prayer, and her eyes closed.

Fig. 6. Coronation of the Virgin, Psalter of Blanche of Castile, fol. 29v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235. source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j

The miniatures of the prefatory cycle tell the story of the life of Christ and the life of the Virgin using conventional iconography common in 13th-century France. Many of these miniatures are similar, almost identical, to miniatures in other Psalters of the period. The iconographical representation of these stories was standardized by the time this Psalter was created. Some features were especially popular, like the Byzantine-inspired gold backgrounds meant to reference the Heavenly realm, and the classically inspired drapery. Also expected in manuscript illuminations of the thirteenth century are elements reminiscent of stained glass, perhaps the most striking achievement of the Gothic architecture from this time. The repetition of the fleur-de-lis and lion motifs along the margins of some of these miniatures can be read as a
reference to the specific individuals that were involved, as patrons or intended owner, in the making of this manuscript. Specific references to patrons and owners are not uncommon in Psalters from this time.³

**Beatus Page**

The prefatory cycle ends with the death and coronation of the Virgin. The text of the Psalms begins with a historiated initial “B”, acting as a split-page illustration of King David dictating the Psalms in the upper half, and David admonishing fools in the lower half of the letter. The letter “B” is made up of interlocking blue, red and green vines. The background behind the letter is red and is decorated with white fleur-de-lis. It is framed with red and gold, and in the right and bottom margins, in blue and gold, begins the text of the first Psalm: “Beatus vir qui non abiit,” that is: “Blessed is the man that walketh not [in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful].”⁴

Within the letter, the background is painted with gold-leaf. The top circle, forming the inside of the B, depicts two seated figures, who represent King David on the left, and a scribe on the right. King David wears a crown, holds a staff in his left hand, and looks older and bearded. He points with his right hand toward the scribe, indicating that he is dictating what the scribe is writing. The scribe is writing the psalms that David dictates. Interestingly, the figure representing the scribe mirrors David; they are dressed the same, with blue over red drapery. They are seated face to face on opposite sides of a writing desk.

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³ Personalization in Psalters of the thirteenth century can be seen in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons, The Ingeborg Psalter, and many more.

⁴ Psalm 1:1 (KJV).
Within the bottom half of the letter B, a group of four figures face King David. King David stands to the left of his throne. He is dressed in the same garb as above, but wears a different crown, and is pictured with a blue halo around his head. His beard appears fuller, and his staff has turned from blue to green. With his right hand, David touches the shoulder of the man in the center of the group. The four men appear of different ages. They wear different colors and each wear a pointed hat, believed to be a Judenhut, a hat worn specifically by Jewish men. The expressions on their faces are hard to read: they appear unhappy, but a distinction between anger and sadness is difficult to make, and they might be angry more than unhappy.

Psalters from this period often feature a Beatus page with a historiated B. Common Beatus iconography includes scenes of Kind David dictating the psalms or playing an instrument. Popularly illustrated is also the story of David and Goliath. Yet, instead of illustrating a more common iconography, the artist or patron decided to represent a more ambiguous scene
involving David. The four men in the group are represented as Jewish. David speaks to them, and they appear unhappy. This miniature appears to refer to Psalm 14:1, that recites: “The fool hath said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.”

**Psalms**

Unlike the standard eight-fold divisions of French Psalters from the thirteenth century, the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* has a ten-fold division more commonly found in English Psalters. Each of the ten divisions start with an intricately designed historiated initial. After the Beatus page, the Psalms that start with a historiated initial are as follows:

- Folio 51 verso, Psalm 26: The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the protector of my life: of whom shall I be afraid?
- Folio 65 recto, Psalm 38: I said, “I will keep to my ways, so that I will not offend with my tongue.” I posted a guard at my mouth, when a sinner took up a position against me.
- Folio 77 verso, Psalm 51: Why do you glory in malice, you who are powerful in iniquity?
- Folio 77 recto, Psalm 52: The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.”
- Folio 89 recto, Psalm 68: Save me, O God, for the waters have entered, even to my soul.
- Folio 105 verso, Psalm 81: Exult before God our helper. Sing joyfully to the God of Jacob.

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5 Psalms 14:1 (KJV)


7 The text in translation is taken from the Latin-English Study Bible online at [http://www.sacredbible.org/studybible/OT-21_Psalms.htm](http://www.sacredbible.org/studybible/OT-21_Psalms.htm)
Folio 120 verso, Psalm 97: Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has performed wonders. His right hand has accomplished salvation for him, with his holy arm.

Folio 122 verso, Psalm 101: O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my outcry reach you.

Folio 136 verso, Psalm 109: The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

The large historiated initials at the beginning of each of those psalms feature red and blue framework on gold background. The figures in the scenes are ambiguous. Some scenes depict David, Christ, or God the Father, while other scenes depict people, who are not easy to identify. The figures are created using thick contour lines and simple shading techniques. Each scene references the verse starting with the initial. For example, when the psalm speaks of singing there is a scene depicting music being played on an instrument or sung at an altar. In the same way, any mention of a fool results in a figure that is represented as Jewish by the pointed hat that he wears.

Only one of these historiated initials has gained scholarly attention. It may offer insight on the patron or intended first owner of the Psalter. On folio 122 verso, the historiated initial of Psalm 101 shows a woman – dressed in clothing typical of a French noblewoman from the thirteenth century – kneeling at an altar. This is the only illumination in the entire Psalter in which this unknown female figure is portrayed. On the gold background, above the praying woman, Christ looks down from Heaven approvingly. In itself, the depiction of a woman in prayer is nothing extraordinary in Psalter iconography, especially considering that the psalm being illustrated is “O Lord, hear my prayer, and let my outcry reach you.” However, the identification of the woman in prayer has been the focus of some scholarly attention. Every other female figure in the Psalter can be easily identified as either Eve, the Virgin, or another holy woman from the Bible.
The End Times

Following the Psalms, four full-page miniatures illustrate scenes from Revelation. The iconography is standard for this period, but they seem out of place within a Psalter. These miniatures were obviously included intentionally by request of the patron. The meaning of this inclusion is not immediately clear.

The miniatures begin on folio 168 recto with a full-page illumination that stands for a representation of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse: Conquest, War, Famine, and Death. It consists of four semi-circles surrounding one central roundel on a red background framed in blue. Within the central roundel, two eyes of a beast peer out; his upper teeth are exposed, and many tongues of fire lick at the surroundings, escaping the barrier of the frame and entering the scene in the lower semicircle. The beast is clearly meant to represent the devil.
The scene on the top likely represents conquest. A group of seven figures stand outside city-walls on a gold background. Three of the figures wear a judenhut. The one female figure wears a crown. The seven figures appear concerned as they follow the lead of a figure dressed in red. The scene on the left side of the page may represent famine as the figures look emaciated. A male figure stands on a balcony addressing a crowd, with an expression of grief. To his left and right are two figures dressed in monks’ robes. Below the balcony the crowd appears weak and disappointed. Across the page three figures represent war. Two male figures lay on the grey, rocky ground. They are presumably dead as their eyes are closed and what looks like blood stains the sword held by a figure who stands above them. The standing figure looks down at the bodies of those killed by his hand and looks sorrowful. The bottom semi-circle depicts death. One male figure lies on the ground, almost certainly his gravesite, as two beastly demons
manipulate his face. A third beastly figure carries the body of a nude male, upside-down, on his back.

Within a red rectangle framing two, interlocking circles, the following page shows the awakening of the dead from their graves and the Archangel Michael weighing souls. In the top circle we see large, winged figures blowing trumpets, as smaller, nude figures push out of their coffins. In the bottom circle Michael stands central, gazing at the humans on his right while he holds a scale. Three beastly figures stand to his left, one of which attempts to pull the scale down. Both scenes are on gold backgrounds within the circles, while the background between the circles and the rectangular frame is the same floral pattern seen on previous pages.

The third apocalypse scene is simple. It has a blue frame and red background with a patterned design of interlocking foliage in white. The top circular scene shows a large figure, Christ, on a throne. He wears loose drapery to reveal his wounds. He holds both hands up, palms out, to show the wounds in his hands. Blood drips from the wound in his side and on both feet.
An angel on his right holds a green cross, and an angel on his left holds a spear and crown of thorns. Christ is much larger in size compared to the angels. All three figure are against a gold-leaf painted background.

The lower scene depicts a demon who leads sinners into Hell, and an angel leading the righteous to Heaven. On the left side, a winged Angel lead a group of figures, some of them wearing crowns and holding scepters. On the right side of the page, another group is led by a beastly figure. The group is wrapped in chains and their clothes appear dull in color, compared to those in the other group.

Fig. 11. *Leading the Souls of the Righteous and the Damned, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 170r, Paris, ca. 1225-1235.

source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j

The final Apocalypse scene in the cycle is framed in bright red. A patterned foliage decoration of red and white, on a blue background, fills the space within the frame behind the two roundels. The upper roundel depicts the Bosom of Abraham. A large figure in the center of the disc is seated on a throne. He appears older than the figure representing Christ on the
previous page. He has grey hair and wrinkles. In his hands, he holds a cloth in the shape of a hammock in which five, small nude figures appear. On either side of him, Angels stand in profile each holding up another small nude figure. The bottom scene depicts tortured souls in Hell. A large, beastly mouth is open wide. Within the mouth numerous demon-like creature manipulate nude human figures. The figures are surrounded by red flames.

Fig. 12. *Bosom of Abraham and Devil in Hell, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 171v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235.  
source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j

**Last Words**

Folio 172r to folio 190r are taken by various prayers and litanies, but the final pages of the manuscript were left blank. There is an intriguing and possibly telling inscription on folio 191r, that reads “C’est le psaltier monseigneur Sainte Loys… le quel fu a sa mere.” (“This is the Psalter of Saint Louis, which belonged to his mother”). Following the inscription, on folio 191v, appears the signature of Charles IV. A few other markings in these last few pages include library stamps and information regarding where the Psalter has been held over the centuries.
There is no further information, aside from the inscription on folio 191r, about its making, patron and intended owner.

Fig. 13. *Inscription, Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, fol. 191v, Paris, ca. 1225-1235. 
*source: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b7100723j*
Chapter 2. Literature Review: Elizabeth Hudson’s Dissertation

The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* is a well-known illuminated manuscript that has been studied extensively. One aspect that makes this illuminated Psalter unique is how wonderfully it has been preserved over the centuries. Scholars credit its excellent condition to its placement in the treasury of the *Sainte-Chapelle* around the fourteenth century. It remained there until the French Revolution in the 18th century. Because of its excellent preservation and the ambiguity surrounding its patron, the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* has piqued the interest of many. A PhD dissertation by Elizabeth Hudson, presented to the University of North Carolina in 2002, is among the more recent pieces of scholarship on this manuscript.\(^8\)

The extensive bibliography taken into consideration by Elizabeth Hudson includes primary sources such as inventory records from the treasury of the *Sainte-Chapelle*. She references scholars such as Robert Branner, Alexa Sand, and Harvey Stahl. Hudson has explored many avenues of investigation to gain a more precise understanding of the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile*. However, newer scholarship offers more information and different perspectives that were not available to Hudson in 2002. For example, Harvey Stahl’s *Picturing Kingship: History and Painting in the Psalter of Saint Louis* came out in 2008. Stahl discusses the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* extensively. In 2017, Lindy Grant published *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France*, a complete account on the life and rule of Queen Blanche. Another publication that I found helpful came out in 2011: Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception & Performance in Western Christianity*. Elizabeth Hudson’s dissertation remains relevant, but it does not offer a complete understanding of the

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In her abstract, Hudson describes the Psalter as a medieval treasure. She explains that her objective is to “link the manuscript to Blanche of Castile” as more than an object of devotion, but, in fact, as a means of validating her power as queen. Hudson discusses a number of aspects of the Psalter in connection with the life of Blanche of Castile, such as the provenance and patronage of the manuscript as well as Blanche’s reign as regent and themes common to medieval queenship. Using as evidence the ways in which female rulers managed to validate and maintain power in the Middle Ages, Hudson argues that the Psalter functioned as both a means of devotion and a source of justification for her role as queen. Hudson connects female imagery in the Psalter – references to Eve and the Virgin as well as scriptural interpretations – to the role of Blanche as queen. She also reads the opulence of the Psalter as further evidence of a royal patron. Through the use of evidence and deductive reasoning, Hudson concludes that Blanche of Castile was likely both owner and patron of the Psalter.

Most scholars have no qualms identifying Blanche of Castile as an early owner of the Psalter. In terms of patronage, however, the evidence is not sufficient, in my opinion, to name Blanche as patron. Hudson argues for the likelihood of Blanche as patron by referencing other works of art, architecture, and illuminated manuscripts commissioned by Blanche as connecting her to the visual arts. Undoubtedly, Blanche was a patron of the arts. Hudson offers numerous examples of works commissioned by Blanche, such as the North transept stained-glass rose window at Chartres Cathedral. Many manuscripts, including a Latin Bible dedicated to the

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Abbey of Saint Victor and an illuminated Psalter given to the Abbey of Maubuisson, name Blanche as patron. Hudson references inventory records, which lists manuscripts purchased and manuscripts gifted by Blanche of Castile. Hudson also explains a connection between the four earliest Moralized Bibles and Blanche of Castile.11 Indisputably, Blanche of Castile enjoyed and commissioned illuminated manuscripts for personal use and as gifts. However, there is no evidence suggesting that the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* was commissioned by Blanche herself.

Hudson, once she was convinced that Blanche was the patron, argues that because the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* was owned by Blanche of Castile, and because the iconography and themes within the Psalter resemble the themes in other manuscripts commissioned by Blanche, she was probably both owner and patron of the Psalter. Hudson supports this argument with deductive reasoning, naming but then rejecting other figures as possible patrons:

In the early thirteenth century, there are several possible owners or patrons: Philippe Augustus, Louis VIII, Blanche of Castile, or Ingeborg of Denmark. The latter seems least likely; although Ingeborg reconciled with Philippe Augustus in 1213, she did not reside at court. As visual evidence discussed below will show, a female viewer is most likely ruling out both Philippe Augustus and Louis VIII as intended owners, but not as patrons. Philippe Augustus, although powerful and active, was not known for his art patronage. Louis VIII was celebrated for his learning, and it is possible he acted as patron. However, he died in 1226 and in the years leading up to his death he was frequently engaged in military action away from Paris. Of the members of the royal family at the time, Blanche of Castile is most frequently associated with manuscript ownership and art patronage of this level.12

Hudson’s use of deductive reasoning to suggest Blanche was the patron of this manuscript is logical, but Hudson fails to consider a handful of other people who may have been close to Blanche of Castile. Blanche’s sister, Berengaria, queen regent of Castile and queen consort of Leon, had the means of commissioning a Psalter. It is possible that Adela of Champagne, the

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grandmother of Louis VIII, played a role in Blanche’s life until she died in 1206. Agnes of Meran, Phillip’s disputed wife and queen consort of France from 1196-1200, could have also had the means and desire to commission a Psalter.13 These members of the royal court are only a few possible patrons of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile; through deductive reasoning, some may indeed be ruled out.14 It is possible that Hudson did not consider these people as possible patrons due to evidence not discussed in her dissertation. It is also possible that Hudson, placing the creation of the Psalter between 1225 and 1235, did not see the need to consider these earlier members of the French court.15 However, the date of the Psalter’s creation is not certain, and scholars disagree about it.16 Hudson also fails to consider Blanche’s Iberian family members, who she may have remained close to, as well as other French aristocrats who may have known, loved, and supported Blanche of Castile.17

Further in her discussion, Hudson examines the possible artists associated with the Psalter. Hudson compares Robert Branner’s analysis to the conclusion made by Mary and Richard Rouse in their book Manuscripts and their Makers. Branner suggest Master Alexander

13 Lindy Grant, Blanche of Castile, Queen of France (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 11-15, 41-42. Members of the royal court are mentioned in Grant’s book as having connections with Blanche of Castile.

14 This is used as a means of expressing the endless possibilities of the Patronage, and for the sake of time has not been further examined. It might be possible to rule these people out as patrons, but the point remains that there is no evidence to suggest a specific person as patron.

15 Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 44. Hudson explains the debate regarding the date of the Psalter. Ultimately, Hudson seems to believe it was created after Blanche was crowned.

16 The disputed date of creation of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile plays a major role in determining the patron of the Psalter. Some scholars date the Psalter before 1225, other date the Psalter after 1225. If the Psalter was produced before 1225, then members of the royal court such as Agnes of Meran and Adela of Champagne might be considered possible Patrons. However, if the Psalter was created after 1225, then it is impossible either member of the French Court commissioned the Manuscript as they died prior to 1225.

17 Lindy Grant describes on page 43 an “early 13th century royal court” was “fluid.” The French court of the thirteenth century was continually changing. It is not unlikely that Blanche of Castile’s social sphere was large, making it possible that any person, with the financial means to do so, could have commissioned the Psalter as a gift for Blanche.
as the artist responsible. The Rouses’ argue Herbert the Parchmenter created the Psalter of Blanche of Castile, and that Herbert had close ties with “Alexander the Parchmenter;” they argue that Master Alexander and Alexander the Parchmenter might be the same person.⁴⁸ Hudson disputes the Rouses’ argument on the basis that there is little evidence to support it. Hudson also implies dissatisfaction regarding the Rouses’ argument, because they assume Blanche was the patron without offering any indication as to why they believe Blanche was the patron.⁴⁹ Hudson does however credit the Rouses with offering other conclusions that aid in the understanding of the Psalter, such as documenting the relationships Blanche had with numerous manuscript illuminators, as well as narrowing down the timeframe in which the Psalter was created.⁵⁰

Hudson discusses several other topics scholars have debated in regard to this Psalter, such as the issue of style. Branner suggests that it is a transitional style, not quite gothic yet, whereas Larry Ayers’ understanding of the Gothic style would suggest that the Psalter can be categorized as Early Gothic.⁵¹ In truth, the Psalter is a combination of styles and innovations seen throughout illuminated manuscripts from the thirteenth century. Considering the number of unknowns regarding this Psalter, such as date, patron, and artist, it is difficult to place it into any categorized style or school. Hudson goes on to describe the marginalia in the Psalter’s calendar, minor decorations, historiated initials, and the prefatory cycle under the assumption that the Psalter was created c. 1220, reasoning that the illuminations and the iconography relate to aspects and events of Blanche’s life in the1220s.⁵²

⁴⁹ Curiously, Hudson struggles to accept the Rouses argument due to a lack of evidence in the same way I struggle to accept Hudson’s argument of Blanche as patron due to insufficient evidence.
⁵⁰ Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 36-37
⁵¹ Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 42.
In discussing the illuminations, Hudson reiterates the likelihood of a royal patron and owner. Hudson also discusses the possibility of influence from England, while using Psalters of other origins as comparative material.\textsuperscript{23} Hudson briefly describes the calendar, noting the inconsistencies in the selection of saints: both feast days of English and French Saints are included in the calendar. Hudson remarks on the lack of personal information, such as obituaries, in the calendar; information that could have helped identify the patron or intended owner.\textsuperscript{24} Following the description of the calendar pages, Hudson describes the historiated initials within the Psalms.\textsuperscript{25} Most notably, Hudson discusses the historiated initial beginning Psalm 101, which depicts a woman kneeling in Prayer. Hudson explains that a depiction of a woman in an illuminated Psalter is unusual, but not unique to this Psalter.\textsuperscript{26} She compares this historiated initial with others, before offering a summary of Joan Diamond Udovitch’s reading of this illustration as being indicative of English origin. Hudson disagrees with this conclusion: she sees the comparative material as either contemporary with or later in date than the \textit{Psalter of Blanche of Castile}. Hudson argues that this historiated initial is an innovation meant to personalize the Psalter to make it suitable to its intended audience: Blanche. Hudson interprets the text of Psalm 101 in support of this idea:

Replacing the image of David praying with a woman shifts the interpretation of the Psalm. Of course, the Psalm maintains its meaning as a prayer for divine aid. The final verses, however, can perhaps be understood as not only referring to the afterlife, but to

\begin{itemize}
\item[] \textsuperscript{22} Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 45.
\item[] \textsuperscript{23} Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 48-53. Whether one may detect or not influence from England, the Psalter is undisputedly French. Manuscript culture in the thirteenth century was growing throughout Europe; as with many other styles, influence and innovation go hand in hand.
\item[] \textsuperscript{24} Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 51. Hudson states that the inclusion of English saints would be acceptable for Blanche of Castile because of her family heritage, connecting her to English Royalty.
\item[] \textsuperscript{25} Hudson skips the prefatory cycle first, only to circle back to it later in her dissertation.
\item[] \textsuperscript{26} Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 58.
\end{itemize}
earthly genealogy as well. As queen, Blanche of Castile had a vested interest in lineage – medieval queens’ positions depended upon the production of an heir. Moreover, the Capetians were perceived as specially chosen by God, and, through Louis VIII, the heirs of the Carolingians. The final verses would carry significant meaning for Blanche of Castile, due to her responsibility of bearing a male heir to continue the Capetian dynasty and Carolingian heritage. The personalization of Arsenal MS 1186, through the representation of ‘Blanche of Castile’ praying at Psalm 101, pictorially reinforces the significance of the psalm verses and marks the manuscript as belonging to Blanche of Castile.27

Hudson’s interpretation of Palm 101 as relating to Blanche’s need to produce an heir is understandable. However, Louis IX was born in 1214. Hudson’s argument that the historiated initial to Psalm 101 was personalized to Blanche as a means of relating the text of the Psalm to her need of producing an heir is only relevant if the manuscript was created prior to the birth of Louis IX.28 If the Psalter was created ca. 1220, as Hudson herself maintains, then Blanche had no reason to feel anxious or under pressure about producing an heir to the throne: she had already given birth to Louis IX and three more sons.29 Another topic of debate among scholars studying this historiated initial is that the woman in prayer is not wearing a crown. If the Psalter was created after the coronation of Blanche of Castile on August 6, 1223, then the figure in the initial could not possibly represent Blanche.30


28 It could be argued that Blanche faced anxiety about producing an heir even after the birth of Louis IX due to previous infant deaths experienced by Blanche. However, Blanche went on to have three more sons and a daughter between 1216 and 1226, securing the royal lineage beyond doubt.

29 It is more likely that the Psalter of Blanche of Castile was created prior to 1214. This date puts its production before the birth of Louis IX and before the coronation of Blanche of Castile. If it was created after 1214 it is still likely that it was created prior to her coronation in 1223, or that the figure in the historiated initial of Psalm 101 is not intended to depict her. One cannot say with certainty which of these scenarios are true, if any. Regardless, Hudson’s explanation of this historiated initial regarding a male heir, coupled with her belief that this Psalter was created c. 1220, is not a logical scenario given the birth of Louis IX in 1214.

30 The depiction of a queen in a manuscript would include attributes that explicitly indicate her role as queen. If Blanche of Castile is indeed the woman kneeling in prayer, then the miniature depicts her prior to her coronation.
The historiated initial to Psalm 101 is certainly the most notable in the Psalter. This is presumably the reason Hudson deals only briefly with the other historiated initials and quickly moves on to discussing the prefatory cycle, which she reads as resembling stained glass windows.\(^31\) Hudson notes that the opening scene with the astronomers, which prefaces the calendar, is atypical, but dismisses its inclusion as a specific reference to astronomy and the perpetual calendar.\(^32\) She essentially implies that the choice of subject and its treatment is devoid of specific meaning.\(^33\)

Hudson offers a description of each scene of the prefatory cycle, explaining that most of the miniatures follow standard iconography.\(^34\) She pays special attention to scenes that strike her as bizarre and telling, such as the Fall of the Rebel Angels, the Tree of Jesse, and the Coronation of the Virgin. Hudson suggests that the subjects of these miniatures relate directly to Blanche and her role as queen, stating that the Fall of the Rebel Angels could serve as a reminder to Blanche of the rewards for supporting and punishments for not supporting a ruler.\(^35\) Hudson believes that the Tree of Jesse connects Blanche to the Virgin, as providing an heir to the throne would be similar to giving birth to the Savior.\(^36\) The Coronation of the Virgin is not difficult to connect to

\(^{31}\) Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 64.

\(^{32}\) Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 64. Hudson argues that the inclusion of the astronomers is insignificant and simply meant to increase the originality of the manuscript.

\(^{33}\) I believe that the inclusion of the astronomers, unexpected as it is, speaks directly to the patron of the Psalter and the intended recipient and first owner. It also refers to a scientific understanding of the calendar and its role in the thirteenth century.

\(^{34}\) Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 65.

\(^{35}\) This connection strikes me as unconvincing. Blanche of Castile did have to face powerful people who refused to bow to her rule because she was a woman. However, I do not believe that the Fall of the Rebel Angels could be placed in a devotional book to encourage Blanche and reassure her that those who did not support her would fall. Blanche, a pious woman, would have trusted in God to secure her seat on the throne.

\(^{36}\) I am not convinced of this connection either. The need to provide an heir to the throne was certainly great, but I do not think that Blanche, or any Christian monarch at the time, would have equated this with the birth of the Savior.
a queen: as the Virgin reigns as Queen of Heaven, Blanche was to reign as Queen of France.\(^{37}\)

Hudson links these miniatures together beautifully with Blanche of Castile:

The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, on the other hand, concentrates on presenting the Virgin in her role as reproducer, as part of a sacred lineage. The illumination provides a counterpoint to Eve and presents a heavenly role model of queenship. At the beginning of the cycle, the concentration on Eve cautions women to beware of their nature and suggests the origins of women’s reproductive role. The ‘Tree of Jesse’ transforms women’s sin into sanctity, through the Virgin’s reproductive role in the holy lineage. Although never able to achieve the Virgin’s status, earthly queens nonetheless emulate the Virgin as an unattainable role model. Finally, the ‘Coronation of the Virgin’ pictures the rewards of her dynastic role. The Virgin is crowned by her son, becoming queen by virtue of her relationship with him. Likewise, many earthly queens, including Blanche of Castile, realized their greatest power upon their sons’ ascension to the throne.\(^{38}\)

Overall, Hudson’s reading of the cycle is understandable, even probable. I will not argue with the theme of femininity, or of sin, reproduction, sanctity, and rewards: this portion of Hudson’s argument is in line with the mindset of people like Blanche of Castile and other women of high rank in the thirteenth century. The issue I take with Hudson’s argument does not concern her thematic reading of the miniatures, but instead the way she connects these themes to Blanche of Castile, while maintaining that the manuscript was made ca. 1220. The central theme discussed by Hudson is one of anxiety. It concerns potential motherhood and potential queenship. These two aspects are contradictory, as the theme of the image cycle – motherhood, piety, and queenship – are themes which would not have been a major concern to Blanche of Castile in or after 1220. Only prior to the birth of her children, and certainly prior to her coronation in 1223, they could be relevant to her, not after. I would argue therefore that, if these

Furthermore, Blanche had already given birth to at least 4 sons by the time the Psalter was created. The argument connecting anything in this manuscript to the expectation that Blanche gave birth to an heir contradicts Hudson own dating of the manuscripts.


\(^{38}\) Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 75-76.
are indeed the concerns portrayed in the cycle of miniatures, then the Psalter was either created prior to 1220, or the intended audience was not Blanche but a different aristocratic woman.

I would not say that Hudson’s interpretation of the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* is unfounded. However, it seems to me that Hudson does not consider all the available evidence, and, more importantly, much of her argument is based on deductive reasoning and speculation, rather than on provable fact. Deductive reasoning and speculation leave room for error, especially in instances such as this. Deductive reasoning and speculation are the foundation of the scholarship produced by Robert Branner, Mary and Richard Rouse, Harvey Stahl and others. Despite their insights and arguments, the exact date, artist(s), and patron of the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* remain unknown.
Chapter 3. Patronage, Ownership, Provenance

In the thirteenth century, Psalters were created for several reasons. James McKinnon (1932-1999), a musicologist who specialized in Medieval and Renaissance music, wrote a short article for *Musica Disiplina* which explains the different types of Medieval Psalters and their uses. One of the Psalters he discusses in his article is a gift-Psalter. The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* easily falls into this category: the extravagance of the decoration and the excellent state of preservation suggest that it was designed to be a gift and that it was never used during the liturgy. According to McKinnon, “there can be little doubt that the majority of the late medieval Psalters which are well-known to scholars and connoisseurs today were not real liturgical books, but rather gifts presented to wealthy individuals and members of the nobility.”

Medieval Psalters were consistent in terms of text – mainly that of the Psalms – yet additional prayers, calendar specifications, and picture programs were often added, personalizing the manuscript for the specific patron and/or the recipient and intended owner. Many Psalters of this kind contain image cycles of the life of Christ, the Life of the Virgin, and other popular biblical stories. The choice of iconography may tell us something about the intended audience of the illuminated manuscript.

Patronage

The patron of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile remains unknown: no text, inscription or colophon in the manuscript tells us who commissioned and paid for it. There is also no mention

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40 James McKinnon, “Late Medieval Psalter,” 133-34.

41 For famous examples, see the *Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, and the *Ingeborg Psalter*.
of the name of the artist or artists who made it nor the intended audience and circumstances of its creation. These questions linger in the mind of the scholars who study this manuscript centuries after its creation. The following pages are an attempt to address them.

We could assume that the patron of the manuscript was not recorded because he or she was of no importance. This option closes many avenues of investigation though, and risks that crucial details of the miniatures are overlooked or misunderstood. Another option would be to assume that the patron and initial owner were one and the same. Whatever the case, in the absence of further evidence, we need to explore all of the clues offered by the Psalter of Blanche of Castile to try to gain a better understanding of who might be its patron. The visual clues, along with further historical evidence, can offer more information than initially expected. This investigative process of studying a work of art can be trying, but the knowledge gained is often worthwhile.

The identification of the context in which a medieval work was made helps us to understand it in historical terms. Knowing who ordered the creation of this manuscript would make it possible to figure out the range of choices the artists who created it had at their disposal. While there is no clear documentation concerning the patron and authors of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile, a few factors narrow down the possibilities. First and foremost, comparative evidence indicates that the Psalter is Parisian in design and dates from the early thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{42} Scholars do not dispute place of origin and date as the technique and style of illumination and text firmly place its creation within early-thirteenth century Paris. The quality and material of the text and illustrations imply that the patron was wealthy. Such a Psalter was an

\textsuperscript{42} Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 34.
expensive luxury item affordable only to the very highest rungs on the social ladder. On the basis of this evidence, Elizabeth Hudson lists several possible patrons: Philippe Augustus, Louis VIII, Blanche of Castile, and Ingeborg of Denmark. However, she proceeds with objections to any of these possible patrons but Blanche, and, in the end, maintains that Blanche, a known patron of the arts and a religious person, remains the most likely patron of the Psalter. Hudson considers probable that Blanche was also the intended audience and first owner of the Psalter, and that she might have commissioned it for her own personal use. It is not impossible for Blanche to have commissioned the Psalter for herself, but it is a questionable assumption for a number of reasons.

The patron of this Psalter chose not to specify the first intended owner. If the patron and the owner were one and the same, one would expect text and illuminations to be more personalized. For example, the calendar could include dates important to the patron-owner such as anniversaries of births, deaths and marriages. The calendar in the Psalter of Blanche of Castile is a straightforward liturgical one with no specificities. It would also not be out of the question for the patron-owner to include identifying information such as a descriptive portrait in the illuminations, a focus on one or two major patron saints important to her family, and other familial markings of heraldry or ancestry.

Another 13th-century Parisian Psalter, the *Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, includes clear indications of Yolande of Soissons as possible patron and definitive first owner. She is depicted twice in the manuscript in explicit portraits, and the heraldic shields throughout identify her family. The first miniature in the manuscript is that of the family of Yolande of Soissons. The miniatures that follow are two patron saints – Francis of Assisi and Firminus of Ameins –

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43 Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 47.
followed by four scenes of Christ. None of these illuminations are unusual in Psalter-Hours from 13th-century France. Opening with a portrait of the owner, followed by scenes of saints and Christ, is quite typical, in fact. The Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons differs greatly from the Psalter of Blanche of Castile. It is a slightly different type of devotional book as it is both a Psalter and a Book of Hours. It was also created later than the Psalter of Blanch of Castile. Regardless of the differences though, the point remains: if Blanche was both patron and owner of the Psalter, the obvious expectation is that it would have identifiable information included within its pages. This does not exclude the possibility that Blanche was the patron, nor the possibility that she was the intended owner; it simply makes it implausible that she was both patron and owner, as maintained by Hudson.

A more likely scenario is that this was a gift-Psalter, either commissioned by Blanche to be gifted to someone else or commissioned by someone else to be offered to Blanche. The lack of identifiable information in the Psalter could be explained, then, by an impersonal relationship between patron and intended owner. Medieval Psalters varied by type including personal devotional books, Psalters for liturgical use, and gift Psalters characterized by their exquisiteness. James McKinnon argues that gift-Psalters are easily identifiable, as they are typically high-quality manuscripts that are elaborately and ostentatiously decorated. Personal devotional Psalters are small scale manuscripts, often with only simple illuminations. The text would typically include a calendar, the Psalms and a handful of liturgies. Devotional Psalters were often small enough to be portable and easy to carry in one’s pocket. Liturgical Psalters were typically larger, as the text needed to be visible to an entire choir group, and had musical

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notations. The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* has the characteristics of a gift Psalter: the size (cm 28 x 20), the quality of the materials, the detailed designs and sophisticated illustrations. In conclusion, either Blanche commissioned the Psalter to give it as a gift or was offered the Psalter as a gift by some other patron.

**Audience and Ownership**

The intended audience and first owner of the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* is not specified in the manuscript. However, the miniatures in the Psalter give a clear picture of who she was. Specifically, unexpected iconography – such as the opening miniature with the astronomers, the illumination depicting the fall of the rebel angels and the apocalypse scenes following the psalms – suggests what type of person this Psalter was intended for. All of these miniatures seem, to me, to make a statement.

Most scholars accept that Blanche of Castile was the first owner of the Psalter. Lindy Grant does not even question this assumption in her book *Blanche of Castile, Queen of France*. Throughout the book, Grant refers to the Psalter without ever mentioning the lack of concrete evidence of Blanche as owner. This is not the case with Harvey Stahl, who, in presenting the Psalter in *Picturing Kingship*, declares, “…the content of the manuscript cannot be directly connected with Blanche or with royal patronage.” As previously stated, there is no specific illumination or text within the Psalter that explicitly identifies Blanche as intended audience and first owner.

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45 James Mckinnon, “Late Medieval Psalter” 135-138.


It is also often accepted that the depiction of a woman praying before an altar on fol. 122v is a portrait of Blanche. While the woman in the initial is dressed as a noblewoman, she is not crowned. If this is a representation of Blanche, then the Psalter must have been created prior to her coronation on August 6, 1223. However, Gallica, and most scholars of illuminated manuscripts from 13th-century Paris, date the Psalter from sometime between 1225 and 1235, that is at least two years following her coronation. In other words, the Psalter was either created before 1223, or the woman praying before an altar on fol. 122v is not Blanche of Castile, but, instead, someone else, that is the real person the Psalter was made for.

As mentioned in chapter one, the most compelling evidence to suggest that Blanche was the intended audience and owner of the Psalter is the inscription found on fol. 191r. It translates as: “This is the Psalter of Monsignor Saint Louis… which was his mother’s.” The inscription, without any background knowledge, would be convincing enough. However, it is known that the inscription was added almost a century after the Psalter was made. It seems also that the inscription initially only referred to Saint Louis as the owner; Blanche was acknowledged as owner only later, by adding a reference to her at the end. While it is possible, even probable, that Blanche became the owner of the Psalter at some point, the inscription alone is not enough evidence to conclude that Blanche was the intended audience of the miniatures. The inscription only states that the Psalter once belonged to Blanche. There is no statement determining the

48 Ashely Holt, email correspondence, January 21, 2020. Ashely Holt is a PhD candidate in the French Department at Louisiana State University. She identified the inscription as Middle French and explained it in these terms: “The inscription reads 'C’est le psautier Monseigneur Saint Loys.... lequel fu a sa mère.' Modern French: "Ceci est le psautier de Monseigneur Saint Louis.... lequel fut de sa mère." (“This is the Psalter of Monsignor Saint Louis...which was his mother's”) … it is using the passé simple of être which is "fut" for 3rd person singular.”

circumstances or the date in which the Psalter came under her ownership. It is possible that Blanche did own this Psalter secondary to its intended owner.

The intended audience of the Psalter was, as the evidence of the miniature on fol. 122v suggests, a French noblewoman of high rank. This is made clear through the illuminations previously discussed and the emphasis on the Virgin Mother in the illustrations at the end of the prefatory cycle. The ownership by a woman is also made clear by a prayer on fol. 190r, which is written in the feminine form. We know that the woman was French because of the substantial amount of design, such as fleur-de-lis, that is found throughout the Psalter. The wealthy status of the woman is made clear by the lavishness of the Psalter and her nobility by the clothing she wears in the initial on fol. 122v. This is the only visual evidence that the Psalter provides: any further interpretation relies on a combination of educated guesses and speculation.

**Provenance**

A possible way to discover the patron and original owner of a work of art is to establish its provenance backwards through history. The *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* is presently housed at the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, in Paris, where it has been preserved since 1798. Prior to the French Revolution, the Psalter was kept in the Treasury of the Sainte-Chapelle. Inventories of the Treasury suggest that it entered the Sainte-Chapelle sometime before 1336. There are no records prior to its entrance in the Treasury. Shortly after it was recorded in the inventories of the Sainte-Chapelle, King Charles V (1338-80, r. 1364-80) had a cloth cover made for the Psalter, as a way to pay homage to Saint Louis, who had been its owner.

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The lack of information available on the provenance of *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* in the period from its creation in the thirteenth century to its entry into the Treasury of the Sainte-Chapelle in the fourteenth century is disappointing. There are countless possibilities concerning its whereabouts during the first century after its creation. The lack of evidence on the early provenance casts further doubts on its origin, patron and owner.

**Iconographical Evidence and Interpretation**

Visual analysis of the miniatures in the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* offers a variety of interpretations and insights into the Psalter. Another avenue of exploration focuses on the historical context, that is on the conditions and circumstances that characterize the production of illuminated manuscripts in the first half of the thirteenth century.

Astronomers are not a common subject in miniatures preceding the calendar in 13th-century Psalters. Scenes juxtaposing religion and astronomy were common in other manuscripts, though. Dr. Stephen McCluskey, in a lecture at Loyola University in New Orleans, explained the connection between religion and astronomy in the Middle Ages as necessary for teaching, learning, and understanding the concept of time. Astrological signs were connected to the labors of the month, and the position of stars aided in the understanding of time and space.51 While astronomers are uncommon in Psalter illuminations, their placement before the calendar is appropriate. Furthering the connection between religion and astronomy, the figures in the miniature are depicted as having tonsured heads, an attribute indicating that the astronomers are religious monks.

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In reading this illumination, Hudson argues against it being indicative of Blanche of Castile’s ownership of the Psalter. Hudson cites Joan Diamond Udovitch, who has argued that the astronomers on folio 1v are related to the 1210 controversy at the University of Paris that effectively banned Aristotelian astronomy from the curriculum. Hudson argues against this idea and asks: “Why would the Queen of France desire a miniature related to a banned practice?” The answer being simply that she would not. Harvey Stahl offers a fascinating, although brief, reading of this miniature. Aside from its obvious astronomical implications, Stahl connects it with the depiction of the Fall of the Rebel Angels on folio 9v, explaining that the astronomers look up to the sky in the same direction that Christ appears to face in the miniature of the Fall. Stahl suggests that this design is meant to create a logical timeline of biblical events within the Psalter from the beginning of time to the end. Stahl’s interpretation takes into consideration the miniature of the astronomers in the context of religious beliefs from the thirteenth century.

The interpretations of this miniature are speculative. Without documented proof, it cannot be determined precisely why the astronomers are included or what they are meant to imply. However, Stahl’s interpretation is most logical within the historical context of the thirteenth century. The Psalter not only tells the story of the past within its illuminations, but also that of the future as understood in 13th-century Paris.


53 Hudson, “The Psalter of Blanche of Castile,” 64.

54 If there is any connection between the banned practice of Aristotelian Astronomy and the Astronomers on folio 1 verso, then the Psalter must have been created prior to the controversy of 1210. It is more likely, however, that the astronomers simply reference the calendar pages that follow, symbolizing nothing more than the beginning of the calendar pages.

55 Harvey Stahl, Picturing Kingship, 145-146.
Harvey Stahl discusses the astronomer as the first miniature of the prefatory cycle, but he does not offer a perspective on the Fall of the Rebel Angels and its relation to the rest of the Psalter illuminations. The consensus is that this is an unusual scene to include in a Psalter, but there is disagreement regarding its specific interpretation. Stahl states that the rebel angels are transmogrified into demons. Hudson suggests that the rebel angels are simply falling into the mouth-pit of a demon. Regardless of which is more accurate, the gates of hell are often depicted as a devil-mouth. In terms of iconography, the miniature is fairly standard and straightforward. It is its placement in a Psalter that is puzzling.

Hudson explains the Fall of the Rebel Angels as directly related to Blanche of Castile on a secular level, that is as a reminder of the fate of those who do not support her. They will face similar consequences as the angels who did not support God and fell into Hell. As suggestive as this interpretation might be, I do not agree with it. Hudson’s interpretation seems over-reaching to me. It is likely, as Stahl suggested for the Astronomers, that the scene was included as a means of forming a logical timeline of important biblical events. In fact, most of the unexpected iconography within the Psalter was likely included because it was part of a cycle, making the Psalter of Blanche of Castile not only a Psalter, but a kind of picture bible.

Speculation

Each scene included in the prefatory cycle follows the Bible chronologically, starting with the astronomers, which reference the creation of Heavens and Earth, and continuing with the events as they appear in the Bible:

56 Stahl, Picturing Kingship, 142.


58 See the tympanum of the Church of Saint Foy, manuscript illuminations of the Last Judgement, and illustrations of Dante’s Inferno.
Fall of the Rebel Angels, Creation of Man, The Great Flood, The Sacrifice of Isaac, 
Moses Receiving the Commandments, Christ’s Lineage, The Annunciation and 
Visitation, The Birth and Infancy of Christ, the Baptism of Christ, Christ’s Temptation, 
the Raising of Lazarus, the Entrance into Jerusalem, Christ Washing Feet, the Last 
Supper, Judas’ Betrayal, Christ’s Flogging, Crucifixion, Deposition, New Law, Holy 
Women at Christ’s Tomb, Christ Overcoming Death, Doubting Thomas, Ascension, 
Pentecost, Christ in Heaven, Death and Coronation of the Virgin.

These scenes are standard in the thirteenth century. The Psalms separate the past, a suggested by 
Stahl, from the future. Following the Psalms are the Apocalypse scenes. The *Psalter of Blanche 
of Castile* functions as both a Psalter and a picture bible, highlighting the important events of the 
Christian faith as they happened in the past and will happen in the future.

This interpretation of the illuminations in the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* seems almost 
too simple to be accurate. However, taking into consideration other works commissioned by 
Blanche of Castile, the idea seems compelling. For example, Blanche of Castile is credited with 
commissioning for her son, Louis IX, the innovative *Bible Moralisée*. *Moralized Bibles* were a 
sort of picture Bible, in which scripture and interpretation were written in the margins of the 
folios, next to miniatures illustrating Biblical passages. *Moralized Bibles* became popular in the 
French Court under Blanche of Castile.\(^{59}\) It is hardly a coincidence that the *Psalter of Blanche of 
Castile*, made in the early thirteenth century, resembles so closely the *Moralized Bibles* created 
only a few years later. The similarities among the manuscripts are evident.\(^{60}\)


\(^{60}\) The roundels used in the illuminations of the Psalter are identical to those in the *Moralized Bibles*. However, 
illuminations within roundels may be seen in other manuscripts as well. The iconography and techniques used in the 
*Moralized Bibles* are similar to those in the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile*. Both the Psalter and the *Moralized Bibles* 
are linked to Blanche of Castile.
Despite a lack of documentary evidence, a few basic facts regarding the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile* are uncontroversial: the Psalter dates from the early thirteenth century, and it was made in Paris. Patron and artist(s) remain unknown, and there are uncertainties concerning intended audience and first owner. The Psalter was linked to Saint Louis and Blanche of Castile by the early fourteenth century. The illuminations, that often include roundels, resemble stained glass windows.

The early *Moralized Bibles*, specifically the Toledo Bible, offer more firm evidence on their conception and early history. The Toledo *Moralized Bible* was commissioned by and created for Blanche of Castile and Louis IX between 1227 and 1234 in Paris. The illuminations are formatted as eight roundels within a rectangular frame with text written in the margins. The illuminations resemble stained glass due to thick, dark outlines, rich colors and the iridescent gold background. Both manuscripts are linked to Blanche of Castile. Both were created in Paris before 1235. Both are luxuriously decorated with rich colors and gold leaf. Both offer biblical illustrations within roundels. Their illustrations are stylistically akin to stained glass.

There is evidence to suggest that Blanche was the patron of the Toledo Bible. As my thesis demonstrates, there is not enough evidence to be sure that Blanche of Castile was also the patron of the Psalter. The similarities between these two 13th-century manuscripts can be brought in support of the thesis that Blanche was involved in the creation of the Psalter. However, I do not find the evidence convincing enough to change my opinion and weaken my skepticism for the following reasons. The Toledo Bible includes a portrait of Blanche, crowned and seated on a throne. The Psalter includes only a portrait of a woman in prayer. How is it that Blanche, who

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managed to get a portrait of herself included in the Toledo Bible, would choose not to have her portrait also painted in the Psalter? If the praying woman in the Psalter was meant to portray Blanche, why is it that she is not wearing a crown? In short, the very reasons that confirm Blanche of Castile as the patron of the Toledo Bible, make me doubt that she was also the patron of the Psalter. Can we read the similarities between the two manuscripts as coincidental or as an indication of the style and popular themes common to devotional books made in Paris at this time? Were these manuscripts made by the same artists, and therefore similar, but commissioned by different patrons for different audiences? Or, in fact, was Blanche inspired by the Psalter to commission the Toledo Bible in a similar style? I did not find a convincing way to answer these questions accurately. Simply put, despite the many clues that it offers, the Psalter of Blanche of Castile remains a mystery. Its connection to other manuscripts commissioned by Blanche of Castile is hardly coincidental, and yet the reasons behind those connections are potentially too many to offer firm ground for a definitive answer.
Conclusion

As I began my research on the *Psalter of Blanche of Castile*, I was hoping to discover more clues regarding the patron of the Psalter. I also hoped to find more evidence to identify Blanche as the original and intended owner of the Psalter. However, the more I studied this topic and looked at the evidence, the less I was convinced of the thesis of Blanche as patron and, in fact, the more I found reasons to doubt it.

Indisputable are only the following facts. The manuscript bears an inscription that identify it as the Psalter of Saint Louis, which belonged to his mother, Blanche of Castile. Inventories confirm that it entered the Treasury of the Sainte-Chapelle in the fourteenth century, and that it remained there until the French Revolution. The style of text and illuminations proves that the Psalter was made in 13th-century Paris. The manuscript contains a liturgical calendar, the Psalms, prayers, litanies, and a set of beautiful illustrations of biblical events.

The high-quality of the materials used in the Psalter, the overuse of blank folios and the vast amount of gold leaf, as well as the intricate painting style of the illuminations, allow us to believe in its royal ownership, as specified by the fourteenth-century inscription on folio 191r. The Psalter conclusively belonged to Blanche of Castile at some point in its early history. However, the evidence does not confirm that Blanche was its intended audience. The portrait on folio 122v features an uncrowned woman, bringing into question either the date of its creation or the identity of the woman. The lack of personalized information within the calendar, as well as an absence of specifically royal iconography raises questions as well.

The Psalter contains standard iconography and text common to 13th-century Psalters, but the unique qualities and unknown history of this manuscript continue to fascinate scholars of different backgrounds, including Elizabeth Hudson, who defended her dissertation on the Psalter.
in 2002, and, Harvey Stahl, renown historian of gothic illumination, and, Lindy Grant, a historian of high-medieval France. The inclusion of atypical iconography, such as the Astronomers preceding the calendar, the Fall of the Rebel Angels, and Apocalypse miniatures, along with its unexpected format, urges us to dig deeper into its history. Ultimately, this brilliantly illuminated manuscript was a tool of devotion that intimately connected its owner with God and the spiritual aspects of life in 13th-century France.

Despite doubts concerning the original patronage, intended audience and early ownership of the Psalter of Blanche of Castile, the manuscript did belong to Blanche of Castile and Louis IX at an unknown point in their lives. Created within the first 30 years of the thirteenth century, it was intended for a wealthy female owner. Uncertainty regarding the patron makes it difficult to speak of intentions, implications and allusions. Hudson convincingly interprets the miniatures as concerning lineage, queenship, and devotion. It remains unproven, however, that this was the original intention of the patron and artist(s) involve in its making. Harvey Stahl’s interpretation of the frontispiece as implying a concern with time seems logical but remains unclear.

Overall, the miniatures in the Psalter of Blanche of Castile act as a condensed picture bible, offering illustrations of major events in Christian history. This is both intentional and somewhat standard. Regardless of patron and intended audience, the Psalter was made for a female owner of high-rank and wealth. It worked as a means of studying scripture and reciting prayers. Any uncertainty about its early history does not detract from my fascination and interest for this illuminated manuscript.
Works Cited


Manuscripts


Vita

Blair C. Gallon, born in Metairie, Louisiana, received her bachelor’s degree in art from Southeastern Louisiana University in 2018. She continued her studies in Art History at Louisiana State University the following semester. Upon completing her master’s degree, she plans to find work teaching art or art history at the middle or high-school level. Blair ultimately intends to apply for a PhD program.