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### **Giangaleazzo Visconti—Milanese Superpower**

Giangaleazzo Visconti held numerous official positions in Milan during the fourteenth century: he was Duke of the city, the greatest Italian patron of illuminated manuscripts, and the military and Plague control leader. Specifically, Giangaleazzo is known for establishing Pavia and Milan as major European centers for the production of illuminated manuscripts through the commission of several volumes with variant themes<sup>1</sup>. While he mainly contributed to the public manuscript market, Giangaleazzo also commissioned personal illuminations. Giovanni dei Grassi produced the Visconti Book of Hours for Giangaleazzo in 1395. One page stands out from the rest with its elegant pictures and detailed iconography, giving insight into the life of Giangaleazzo. He was involved in all aspects of Milan in his time, from art commissioning to politics and plague control. Both the commissioning and imagery of this prayer book hold messages pertinent to Giangaleazzo's life and achievements.

The *Visconti Book of Hours* was begun in 1395 by artist Giovannino dei Grassi and finished in the late 1420s by Belbello da Pavia.<sup>2</sup> On one page, Giangaleazzo is pictured at the bottom of it in profile, which is traditional of

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<sup>1</sup> "Facsimile Finder," accessed February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <http://www.facsimilefinder.com/facsimile/115/visconti-book-of-hours>.

<sup>2</sup> Edith W. Kirsch, "Milanese Manuscript Illumination in the Princeton art Museum," 34.

Roman coins. Surrounding him is text from Psalm 118. In the center of the illumination, where the text is, an image with the Visconti coat of arms is featured on each corner. This scene also features King David, traditionally regarded as the author of the psalms. At the bottom and top of the page are scenes of Giangaleazzo's hound dogs attacking other animals. Grassi is known to have done in-depth studies of animals, and these images are likely derived from his previous sketches. Though it is a small achievement, Grassi and others in his field became known for animal depictions with people. All animal depictions eventually became known as "Lombard work".<sup>3</sup>

Giovanni dei Grassi was likely commissioned by Giangaleazzo because of his renowned expertise in manuscript illuminations throughout Lombardy, along with his involvement in providing designs for the Milan Cathedral. The Viscontis, in general, would never commission an artist who was not the best in their discipline. This particular commission, however, was to be seen privately. Therefore, we cannot classify it as broadly as we could for those objects made for the public because of its use: personal devotions on a regular schedule throughout the day. What is notable though is its adherence to the characteristics of manuscripts belonging to Giangaleazzo's patronage: created by an exceptionally gifted artist, unusual fullness and richness of text and illumination, and iconographical use of images to express particular devotions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Paoletti, John T., and Gary M. Radke. *Art in Renaissance Italy*. 195-196.

<sup>4</sup> Anne D. Hedeman, review of *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti*, by Edith W. Kirsch, *Speculum* Vol. 69, January 1994, 189.

Giangaleazzo, born in 1351, inherited much of his power from his father, Galeazzo Visconti, who he died in 1378. With his birth into the wealthy, powerful Visconti family, he became heir to that power and wealth. Unfortunately, the interference of another family member would complicate his inheritance. Bernabo Visconti, Giangaleazzo's uncle, is still characterized as one of the most terrible figures in Italy during Giangaleazzo's time. The death of Galeazzo Visconti left much, but not all power to Giangaleazzo. When he died, relations between the courts of Milan and Pavia were strained due to Bernabo's sons' aggressive ambitions, and his oppressive attitude toward his nephew, Giangaleazzo. This strained relationship was just the beginning of the long-lasting power struggle between Bernabo and Giangaleazzo.

In the years following Galeazzo's death, Giangaleazzo with his hands full of political duties, spent numerous hours quietly plotting the demise of his overbearing uncle. After many years of a quiet political battle between the two, Giangaleazzo murdered Bernabo in 1386, much to the city of Milan's delight. In the years following, Giangaleazzo was elected as Milan's sole ruler.<sup>5</sup> Later, in 1395, the same year the *Visconti Book of Hours* was created, Giangaleazzo purchased the title of Duke of Milan from the King of the Romans. Finally, in 1399, Giangaleazzo took over Plague control. During his reign as Military Leader and Administrator in Milan, he formed a system of very strict protocol for the Black Death that included extreme measures of quarantine throughout the city. Giangaleazzo's program was upheld in the future Plague-affected years, and

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<sup>5</sup> Charles M Rosenberg, *The Court Cities of Northern Italy*. 30.

eventually incorporated into the core program 60 years later for Plague control in Milan.<sup>6</sup>

The year 1395, when the *Visconti Book of Hours* was created, Giangaleazzo experienced many changes in his power and personal life. The most significant change was his long-awaited ascension to power. Being dubbed Duke of Milan with his uncle out of the way was a huge accomplishment. Though he had been commissioning manuscripts in the years leading up to this achievement, it cannot be coincident that he would seek out a personal prayer book in the time his prayers were finally being answered. In addition, the prayer book could also have been very comforting at such a stressful time with the Plague making its way through Italy and into Milan. A religious text such as the Psalm written on the page featuring a profile portrait of Giangaleazzo could have been an intentional plea to God to spare the commissioner of this religious manuscript. Another note-worthy event occurring around the time this was commissioned was the birth of Giangaleazzo's son.<sup>7</sup> The religious imagery throughout the book could hold some significance to the newly born child.

The *Visconti Hours* serves as a mirror of Giangaleazzo's achievements and personal life. In his time, the power and authority he held was not only exhibited through action, but art as well. This illuminated manuscript proves that, what with its abundance of iconography pertinent to Giangaleazzo Visconti's rule

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<sup>6</sup> Ann G. Carmichael, "Contagion Theory and Contagion Practice in Fifteenth-Century Milan," *Renaissance Quarterly* Volume 44 (1991): 213-256.

<sup>7</sup> Anne D. Hedeman, review of *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti*, by Edith W. Kirsch, *Speculum* Vol. 69, January 1994, 189.

over Milan. The page of focus encompasses the importance of his patronage, religious devotion, and the Visconti family. Furthermore, the Visconti Coat of Arms is featured on this page with Giangaleazzo's portrait. Though there was much turmoil within his family, Giangaleazzo still chose to incorporate the coat of arms. The family is a superpower in and of itself, but Giangaleazzo was a large factor in upholding the family's status.

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