

**The Dunois Master (Jean Haincelin?)  
Lancelot with the slain giants, from *Le Livre du Lancelot del Lac*  
France, Paris  
c. 1440**



*90 x 92 mm; illuminated on vellum, laid onto a card surround leaving text visible, tiny loss at left border, two small holes at left border, one minute hole beneath horse's head*

*Provenance*

1. Part of an album bound in Paris in c. 1850, subsequently owned by Joachim Napoléon, 5th Prince Murat (1856-1932);
2. By inheritance to his widow, Marie (d. 1960), daughter of the duc d'Elschingen;
3. Purchased at her estate sale by W. R. Jeudwine

*Exhibited*

*Early Fifteenth Century Miniatures, Alpine Club Gallery, 22 May-2 June 1962*

*Description and Iconography*

Lancelot appears at the centre of a wooded landscape, clad in shimmering steel armour atop a pale grey steed liveried in a tasseled red bard. He appears to be greeting two men, one riding a chestnut horse and the other shown on foot with a foal or fawn in his arms. Behind Lancelot on the right, the corpses of two slain giants wearing fantastical armour lie across the ground, their bodies bounded by trees. On the reverse of the miniature are 14 lines of text in black ink in a textualis bookhand.

This beautifully preserved and jewel-like illuminated miniature is one of 152 (of which only thirty-two are now known) excised from their parent manuscript apparently as early as the sixteenth century. It illustrates Book III, 206.40 of *Le Livre du Lancelot del Lac*, in which the valiant knight Lancelot is victorious over two giants who had for seven years kept captive a castle of innocent maidens. According to early versions of the story, Lancelot came across ‘two great giants, well armed all save the heads, with two horrible clubs in their hands’. With his shield (slung over his shoulder in our miniature and picked out from the rest of his armour in imitation of gold), he deflected the blow of the first giant before cleaving his head from his body with a single stroke of his sword. When the second giant tried to flee, Lancelot chased him down and sliced the foe’s torso in two (see fig. 1 for a representation of this earlier moment in the narrative). The two men visible on the left of the scene in our miniature should also be interpreted as knights: Ywain who gives his horse to Lancelot to replace that killed by the giants (perhaps the man holding up an animal as the result of an ambiguous instruction to the illuminator) and Lancelot’s former adversary, behind whom Ywain now has to mount. The text on the recto is from Book III, 205.28.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 1  
Lancelot slays the two  
giants  
Lancelot du Lac  
Northern France, Saint-  
Omer or Tournai  
c. 1316  
London, British Li-  
brary, ms. Add. 10293,  
fol. 323v

#### *Attribution and Dating*

Our miniature was painted along with its thirty-one surviving counterparts in around 1440 by an artist known today as the Dunstable Master, a painter who enjoyed noble patronage during a career that flourished in the second quarter of the fifteenth century. He succeeded his teacher

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<sup>1</sup> For the most part, the text preserved on the reverses of the surviving miniatures closely follows that documented by H. O. Sommer in his *The Vulgate Version of the Arthurian Romances*, 8 vols, 1909-1913, but a different version was used for the central section of Sommer's Book IV.

the Bedford Master as the leading painter of Parisian illuminated manuscripts, and built on the Bedford Master's legacy with an incredible compositional inventiveness that he applied to both secular manuscripts and devotional books, including the manuscript for which he is named, the Hours of the Count of Dunois (London, BL. Ms Yates Thompson 3). At their best, his compositions are so carefully considered and well-balanced as to appear like carpets of colour, with next to no dead spaces or unresolved passages. They have an expansive sense of space (with an inventive use of cropping and framing) that routinely fools the viewer into thinking of them as something more akin to large-scale paintings or tapestry, rather than miniatures of the most diminutive and precious scale. The painter is also celebrated for his use of a soft palette and smoothly blended gradations of colour (as is visible in his rendering of the sky in our miniature for instance). Crisp, fine outlines lend his compositions a startling legibility even in the most delicately toned and shaded areas, while mass and form are modelled with incredible subtlety. Details in our miniature such as the metalwork attachments on the bard of Lancelot's horse, and the elaborate decorative motifs of the giants' armour, are picked out in an unburnished liquid gold (produced by crushing gold leaf to a powder before combining it with an adhesive medium), while the enclosing frame around the miniature is made with gold leaf burnished to a rich shine. The combination of the two uses of gold allows light to be caught and reflected in subtly different ways as the miniature is moved in the hands, showing how cleverly the painter considered his imagery in the context of a moveable book that was to be experienced under candle light. It is for all of these reasons that the Dunois Master has come to be known as one of the leading lights of French courtly manuscript illumination in the middle of the fifteenth century.

The famous *Livre de Lancelot del Lac* from which our miniature was removed is thought originally to have formed a pair with the *Guiron le Courtois*, which is now preserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Ms. fr. 356-57). The two manuscripts are believed to be those for which Prigent de Coëtivy (born c. 1399) Admiral of France from 1439 up to his death at the siege of Cherbourg in 1450, paid the painter Jean Haincelin in 1444. In this light, they are crucial to the argument identifying the Bedford Master with Haincelin de Hagenau, perhaps the father of Jean Haincelin, the Dunois Master, named from the book of hours of Jean, comte de Dunois, in the British Library.<sup>2</sup>

### *Context and Significance*

The twelfth century saw the rise of secular literature centred on the lives and deeds of heroes. First documented by Chrétien de Troyes (1177-80) in his prose on the abduction of Queen Guinevere (the wife of King Arthur), the narrative of the ordeals and heroic deeds of a knight called Lancelot quickly took root at the centre of this literary movement, and would eventually come to displace the earlier teleology of the story of King Arthur from which it emerged (as first laid down by authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth) entirely.<sup>3</sup> In the early thirteenth century Lancelot's popularity began to spread further through compilations of prose such as

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<sup>2</sup> F. Avril and N. Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France 1440-1520*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, 1993, pp. 37-8.

<sup>3</sup> Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, 'Reconstructing Arthurian History: Lancelot and the Vulgate Cycle', in *Memory and the Middle Ages*, edited by Nancy Netzer, and Virginia Reinburg, Boston College Museum of Art, 1995, especially pp. 57-60.



*Le Livre du Lancelot del Lac*, and by the time our miniature was being painted in Paris in the early 1440s Lancelot had long represented the very epitome of romantic courtly ambition, and the chivalric ideal of gallantry and bravery in the face of personal danger.

Lancelot's expedition to free Queen Guinevere from the castle of her abductor Meleagant included such heroic feats as crossing a razor-sharp Sword Bridge, on which his hands and legs bled profusely (fig. 2), but the victory over two fierce, club-wielding giants captured in the present miniature can be seen as amongst his greatest achievements and displays of fearlessness.



Fig. 2  
Sir Lancelot crossing the Sword Bridge  
Lancelot du Lac  
Hainaut  
1344  
BnF, Français 122,  
fol. 1r

Visual illustrations of the key elements in Lancelot's chivalric saga took centre stage within the manuscript from which our illumination comes, disrupting our reading of the text in a purely discursive vein, and instead encouraging us to follow Lancelot's narrative in serried moments of vivid, idealised action. Indeed, the refocussing of attention from text to image in Lancelot manuscripts like ours marks one of the great moments of medieval manuscript illumination anywhere in Europe. We are no longer looking at long, dense texts interspersed by small images, but rather something more approaching a flip book of luscious, richly textured images accompanied by text.

Our miniature was displayed as part of the *Early Fifteenth Century Miniatures* exhibition at the Alpine Club Gallery, London, in 1962, where it was recognised as being one of the most important of the surviving group and along with only one other was reproduced in colour in the accompanying catalogue.