

Flemish Art and Burgundian Dance, c. 1470 to c. 1500

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Art cannot always be taken as a representation of fact; we must allow for artistic ability and, above all, for artistic licence. This paper looked at three miniatures from the last third of the fifteenth century considered to represent the Burgundian *basse danse*.¹ It examined them from six aspects: the musicians depicted; the position of the persons said to be dancers; the direction of movement; the position of the man in relation to the woman; the placing of the hands and finally the placing of the feet.

The text of the first miniature [Plate 1] does not, in fact, mention dancing at all. The second one [Plate 2] names an earlier dance (the *carole*) rather than the one actually depicted. The third one [Plate 3] cites dancing, but is not specific about which dance is being represented. The three, however, have all but one of the cited features in common. The couples are moving in an arc of a circle. They are also moving in an anticlockwise direction. The man is on the left of the woman. The man is leading the woman, in most cases, by placing the palm of his right hand on the back of her left hand. Yet the couples are either standing or walking. Nevertheless, all three miniatures must be showing dancing of some kind, and it is reasonable to conclude that the dance being represented is the *basse danse*--the principal social dance in France, England and Burgundy in the second half of the fifteenth century. In addition, the first and third miniatures include players of shawms - the usual instrumental accompanying the *basse danse* in regal circles, but the second miniature counts, among its three players, one playing a pipe and tabor - the normal

instrumentation in less high status social circles.

If these conclusions are correct, then they provide information that is not supplied by the two fifteenth-century manuals - the Brussels manuscript and the Toulouze printed book, which both date from the 1490s.² On the other hand, it leaves the position of the hands in doubt, as it is more helpful to the man leading his partner to have palm against palm in the modern manner, and, more critically, the feet are unquestionably not shown in a dancing position.

In sum, while the three artists exhibit likely aspects of the *basse danse*, they have allowed themselves some artistic licence, particularly with regard to the feet, because showing a group of dancers all performing the same step at the same time, as would have been the situation in this dance, would have been unacceptable in a picture.

End Notes

1. For further details on the Burgundian *basse danse*, see *The Brussels Basse Danse Book: A Critical Edition*, edited and translated by Robert Mullally, Binsted, Hampshire: Dance Books Ltd, 2015.
2. Brussels, Bibliothèque royale de Belgique, MS 9085 (? between 1495 and 1497); Michel Toulouze, *L'Art et instruction de bien dancier*, (Paris, before 1496), London: Royal College of Physicians, 1936. (unicum).

Plate 1



Plate 2





Plate 3

