Missal case and lid
Place of origin: France (probably, made)
Date: about 1450 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Moulded leather, tooled, incised, carved, stamped and painted; with the arms of Châtillon impaling Vergy
Credit Line: Bequeathed by George Salting
Museum number: W.120-1910
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 10a, The Françoise and Georges Selz Gallery, case 2

Public access description
This case may have contained a missal or prayer book. The high value of personal possessions such as books, documents or knives encouraged the use of protective cases which could be carried on a belt for convenience. These were moulded and stitched in leather, and were close-fitting and light-weight. They are exceptionally durable, and have often outlasted the contents. Integral loops allowed the lids to be secured with a cord or thong. Such cases are sometimes depicted in 15th-century paintings and manuscript illuminations. They could be intricately decorated with fashionable ornament, personalised inscriptions and colour.

Descriptive line
Missal case and lid, moulded leather.

Physical description
CASE FOR A SERVICE BOOK. Thin wood stiffening covered with sewn leather of brown colour, with tooled and coloured (red and white) decoration. With a thin red leather lining.

Rectangular form. Shut-over cap and embushment (opening) with thumb cut-outs by which to grip the volume for which the case was made.

On top of the cap, paired lilies enclosed within spirally coiled stems. At the ends of the cap, paired lilies enclosed within spirally coiled stems. At the ends of the cap, a pair of loops corresponding with eyes on the container, for a missing strap.

On obverse and reverse, within a Gothic cartouche, shields of arms identified as Châtillon impaling Vergy, all enclosed within a pattern of six spirally coiled stems, each enclosing a flower, alternately lily and sunflower.

On the ends, formal patterns. On the base, diagonals, and compartments each containing three cinquefoil leaves.

Interior of cap, and of container, including both sides of the embushment lined throughout in the original soft red leather (considerably worn).

Traces of red sealing wax. A pasted label [red printed numerals] '1542'

EDXRF analysis (October 2006) by Dr Lucia Burgio: Red and white paint traces on various areas of the missal case were analysed non-destructively and in situ by EDXRF. The elements found (mercury and lead) are in agreement with the use of traditional pigments such as vermilion and lead white. No metals suggesting the presence of modern pigments (such as cadmium, chromium, titanium and zinc) were detected.

Dimensions
Height: 19 cm, Width: 15.5 cm, Depth: 10 cm, Weight: 0.44 kg

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Object history note
Illus. in Gall, Leder in Europäischen Kunsthandwerk, p.108, fig.77 where this case is related to a book case and a container for ivory objects (both formerly Spitzer collection, fig.76) and a knife-case in Berlin (fig.75) on account of its hanging blossom motif, and treatment of a coat of arms - which are attributed to the same workshop in France or Burgundy, even though the ivory object contained in one of the group originated in Italy.

Notes by W.A.Thorpe c1959:
W.120-1910

CASE FOR A SERVICE BOOK. Wood covered with boiled and sewn leather of brown colour, with tooled and coloured decoration.
Rectangular form. Shut-over cap and embushment.

On top of the cap, paired lilies enclosed within spirally coiled stems. At the ends of the cap, paired lilies enclosed within spirally coiled stems. At the ends of the cap, a pair of eyes corresponding with eyes on the container, for a strap, long wanting.

On obverse and reverse, within a Gothic cartouche, shields of arms identified as Châtillon impaling Vergy, all enclosed within a pattern of six spirally coiled stems, each enclosing a flower, alternately lily and sunflower.

On the ends, formal patterns. On the base, diagonals, and compartments each containing three cinquefoil leaves.

Interior of cap, and of container, including both sides of the embushment lined throughout in the original soft red leather (considerably worn).

FRENCH; 15th century.

General Remarks
In 1925 the late Albert Van de Put, Deputy-Keeper of the Library, whose knowledge of confidential heraldry was without rival stated that the arms of the Châtillon impaling Vergy were not represented by any alliance between these families. The suggestion was in consequence made that this case was a forgery. The exterior surface of the leather and its workmanship and condition, as well as the fabric and worn (not distressed) condition of the lining, put it beyond question that this suggestion was erroneous. It is, however, possible that the cartouches, originally left blank for legend or device, were subsequently completed by an adventitious coat of arms.

Salting Bequest
Museum Negative: 55597 (frontal elevation)
George Salting and leather

Only one reference to leather was found among Salting’s (incomplete) papers at the Guildhall Library. It is possible that he bought most of his leather from auction sales (the papers for which have not all been checked, 12/2006)

George Donaldson, 106 New Bond St, IMPORTER OF HIGH CLASS WORKS OF ART: 8 July 1895 ‘£40 asked’
“Cuir-bouilli” case for book (Italian) A leather box (Castellani Coln) £21 ‘fetched £48 at that sale’. It is possible that this refers to this object?

It is possible that his interest in leather began, like his interest in renaissance furniture begins during 1884 (after the Spitzer sale, 1883 at which he was said to have spent £35,000, and the Fountaine sale, 1884).

Historical context note
The Secular Spirit (Exhibition catalogue, New York, Metropolitan Museum 1975)
The high value of medieval books led to the creation of fitted leather cases to protect them. This case may have contained a missal or prayer book, while other similar cases are recorded likely to have contained a medical text of some sort (catalogue no.190). The integral loops on the case and lid of this one would probably have been used to fasten them together, and by which to carry it on a belt.

P81. Etui in medieval inventories and accounts was a general term for storage or travel containers of various materials and sizes... A large leather case, ordered from a coffret-maker and referred to as an etui de cuir bouilli, was purchased to hold a painting by Jehan d'Orléans, painter to King Charles VI of France...References are also made to small etui of cuir bouilli which were designed specifically to be attached to one’s costume. Used to carry quill pens, ink wells, books, cutlery, and other personal possessions, these objects are frequently depicted in 15th century paintings and manuscript illuminations.

Notes on the manufacture of medieval leather containers:
Waterer (and following him, Cherry) summarise the medieval techniques for making leather containers for dry-goods:

Stitching is the most common technique, with holes made in leather by awls. Thread is made from flax or hemp yarn rolled with beeswax. The other principal assembly technique is sticking to a wooden structure. The traditional adhesive for box covering is hot animal glue, which was often created as a by-product of the fleshings taken by the tanner from the skins or hides.

Leather objects can also be created by moulding. The traditional medieval term was cuir bouilli, though Waterer suggests that boiling could not have been used. The technique is quite simple, and consists of soaking the (vegetable-tanned) leather in cold water until it is thoroughly saturated. The leather is then very plastic and can be modelled over formers in moulds of plaster, wood or metal. If the surface is to be ornamented by tooling, stamping or punching, this must be done while the leather is damp. The leather is then dried gradually (to avoid brittleness), supported by its mould or filling which can be removed later.

The most common processes of decorating smooth-surfaced leather are:

Incising with blunt or sharp tools
Punching to give a texture to the background of incised designs, using a variety of small iron or bronze punches (also used in book binding).
Modelling, to leave important features in low relief
Embossing, performed with a ball tool from the flesh side of leather that has been previously dampened.
Carving, which is done from the grain side with a special knife that can be inserted more or less horizontally and partially raises up a thin layer until the form appears to lie on the surface

Finally the object is decorated with coloured dyes, usually with some paint (tempera). Red seems a common colour (little work on medieval dyes). Some leather was gilded using glaire (white of an egg) or gold size to attach gold leaf which adhered under the heat and pressure of book-binding tools.

However, Davies argues that the multiple techniques of cuir bouilli have never actually been very clearly established. Cuir bouilli differs from other supported leathers in that after treatment it is rigid (without a support) and water resistant, indicating that the structure of the leather has been altered through a chemical reaction. Otherwise leather would remain flexible unless coated with a stiffening medium or mounted on a backing material. She suggests that all true cuir bouilli was made by taking vegetable-tanned leather and saturating it with water, then heating it to a temperature just before it starts to shrink, removing it from the hot water and moulding it immediately, and if necessary stitching it while wet. In this way the molecular bonding of the leather is weakened but not fully released allowing limited realignment of its molecular structure to take place in a more controlled manner. Alternatively, if the heat source application is limited to only the surface of the wet leather then it is possible that the shrinkage solely occurs in the outer layer of the leather, producing a surface hardening effect and reinforcing the structure. She speculates that by impregnating oils, resins and waxes, it may be possible to mould the structure of the leather when hot, and to produce more detailed surface decoration because otherwise this decoration would be distorted by shrinkage after tooling.

Bibliography
Conservation of Leather and related materials (ed. Marion Kite and Roy Thomson, 2006), ‘Cuir Bouilli’ chapter 10 by Laura Davies, pp. 94-102

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O112851/missal-case-and-unknown/