

Books of Hours

DEVOTION AND DECORATION

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Devotional texts were a common type of manuscript throughout

the Middle Ages that included breviaries,

psalters, and books of hours. Books of hours were perhaps the most popular, and because of this many splendid examples have survived over the centuries. Devotional texts were intended to aid worshipers during both the Catholic Mass and their own private devotion. In the High Middle Ages, lay persons tried to copy the religious devotion of the spiritual community. Beginning in the twelfth century, there was a new stress on lay piety as well as a revival of monasticism. By the thirteenth century, books of hours had become the most popular devotional texts.

The books of hours allowed the reader to observe the canonical hours. Every three hours throughout a twenty-four-hour period, the monks, canons, or nuns would recite the Psalms and various prayers that were organized around the time of day as well as holy holidays and saints' days. These eight canonical hours included Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, Nones, Vespers, and Compline.

Books of hours began with a calendar to keep track of important feasts and saints' days.



The Annunciation

Book of hours. Flanders, ca 1500

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Special Collections Department

Gift of Annette Finnigan

Calendars were important because they directed the reader to the appropriate set of Psalms and prayers that corresponded with the particular saint or festival for that day of the liturgical year. Because calendars included saints who were important to all Christendom as well as local saints, these calendars help scholars to figure out the times and places in which the manuscripts were produced. The popularity of saints changed over time, and many saints had only local importance, making the calendar a way of figuring out the approximate date and place of production for particular books of hours.

Books of hours also included various offices, such as the Office of the Dead, which was made up of prayers and other worship material for use in funeral masses and for remembrance of the dead. At the end of the eleventh century, Pope Urban II approved the creation and use of the Little Office of Our Lady, or the Hours of the Virgin, in which the prayers and readings for each of the eight hours revolved around the Virgin Mary. The Hours of the Virgin were nearly always included in books of hours. Commonly, each hour was illustrated with an image representing a story from the Virgin's life that stressed her role as mother of Jesus Christ. These stories and images became standardized so that the same scenes illustrate the same hours in most books of hours: the Annunciation (Matins), the Visitation (Lauds), the Nativity (Prime), the Announcement to the Shepherds (Terce), the Adoration of the Magi (Sext), the Presentation in the Temple (Nones), the Flight into Egypt (Vespers), and the Coronation of the Virgin (Compline).

In this exhibit, the book of hours belonging to the Houston Public Library includes a beautiful image of the Annunciation (Matins) from the Hours of the Virgin. Here the angel appears to Mary as she sits in devotion and announces to her that she is to bear the son of God. The image mirrors the expected behaviors of pious medieval women. Not only is Mary quietly meditating on a book, most likely a book of hours, but there is a second book behind her. This reflects the growing

importance of book ownership as the Middle Ages progressed. The angel is accompanied by a white dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit, which is commonly depicted in Annunciation scenes. The angel's words are captured in yellow-gold ink, a far rarer practice for illustrators.

The Hours of the Virgin were not the only offices in the books of hours. Other popular choices for inclusion were the Hours of the Holy Cross, the Hours of Eternal Wisdom, and the Hours of the Holy Ghost. There are examples of all of these in the Houston manuscripts on display. The books of hours also came to include two special prayers to the Virgin Mary entitled *Obsecro Te* and *O Intermerata*, which venerated Mary and asked for her intercession. The books often had litanies of prayers to various saints who might also be called upon to protect the reader. The rest of the material in the books of hours usually included some of the materials previously found in breviaries, a type of manuscript that contained all of the texts needed for the celebration of the Divine Office and the Catholic Mass.

Just as the Hours of the Virgin had thematic illustrations, many of the other parts of the books of hours had common types of illustrations. The calendar pages were frequently illustrated to show the types of activities or labors usual to that month, such as harvesting. The Psalms were often accompanied by a depiction of King David, who wrote the Psalms. The Office of the Dead often had macabre figures or portrayals of the trials of Job as the office includes readings from the Book of Job.

The patrons who commissioned the books of hours chose what to include from among the various offices, prayers, and other texts. The quality of the books of hours depended on how much money the patron had to spend. Cheaper versions had fewer inclusions and less decoration. Because of these choices, books of hours were very personal. No two were exactly alike. Most of the books of hours in this exhibition were produced for people of some, but not great, wealth.

The first books of hours were made in the early thirteenth century by appending various offices, such as the Office of the Dead, to psalters. Royalty were the first to have books of hours made, but quickly the upper classes and merchants copied their social betters. Originally only the wealthiest of aristocratic women would have been able to patronize book production. By the fifteenth century, the cost of book production had dropped so that even members of the lower bourgeoisie could own books of hours¹.

Illuminations and book covers made the books of hours symbols of wealth and status. By the early fourteenth century, books of hours were well on their way to becoming wildly popular and incredibly fashionable. Women, especially, carried lavishly decorated and personalized books of hours. Some books of hours were girdle books that were worn as fashion accessories. Girdle books were very small and worn at the waist attached to girdles, sashes, or belts. The covers were usually metal and quite ornate, like oversized locket. Since books of hours were tailored for individuals and were not meant for shared use, rich households often had several copies. Some of these texts were wildly lavish on both the inside and the outside. As the demand for books of hours rose, there was an increase in both literacy and book production.

Women frequently commissioned or owned various works of devotion, especially books of hours. Queens were among some of the first owners of books of hours. In this exhibition, there is a facsimile of the book of hours belonging to Jeanne d'Evreux, the queen of Charles IV of France. It appears to have been a wedding present from Charles made around 1324. In addition to being a book of devotion, this book was also a treasure. Jeanne d'Evreux bequeathed the book to her nephew, Charles V, who catalogued the book amongst his jewels and not as part of his library. The book eventually came into the collection of Charles V's brother, Jean Duc de Berry. The size of the book, as well as the use of *grisaille*,

or gray tones, in its decoration, makes this book of hours very unusual².

It is sometimes very difficult to determine the identity of patrons. While dedications alone are not enough to determine that a woman encouraged or commissioned a work, "dedications would scarcely have been made lightly, and works were certainly dedicated to either current or prospective patrons, in hope of continued patronage or in an effort to curry favor or honor a benefactor³." A dedication could reflect, however, a work that someone else had made as a gift to the dedicatee. Sometimes when a man and a woman are mentioned together as patrons, the woman may have actually played little or no role in commissioning the book. In some cases, husbands or fathers commissioned books of hours for the women in their lives, thereby promoting the women's traditional roles and behaviors as those responsible for the piety of the family and the education of the children. In other cases, men who had little to do with the commissions were mentioned in connection with their wives and daughters who were the actual patrons.

Many wealthy and powerful women commissioned devotional works in this period. Marguerite de Bar, abbess of St. Maur at Verdun, commissioned a breviary for her brother Renaud around 1302. The breviary had illustrations of the brother and sister as well as several family coats of arms⁴. It is extremely difficult with books of hours in particular to tell if they were made at the request of women or if they were merely meant as gifts for women. At the very least, it is very clear that women created a high demand for these manuscripts. Matilda of Artois owned three separate books of hours; Isabelle of Bavaria had nine⁵.

Women were also interested in manuscripts that could be used not only for devotion but also for teaching their children. Many noblewomen commissioned copies of Psalters or other books that could be used in learning to read. Alphabet psalters were books of Psalms that were specifically

designed for teaching reading. In the thirteenth century, Blanche of Castile commissioned a psalter for her young son, the future Louis IX.⁶ Isabelle of Bavaria commissioned a book of hours for her seven-year-old daughter Jeanne in 1398 and an alphabet psalter for another daughter, Michelle, in 1403. Michelle was eight or younger at the time it was presented to her.⁷ Anne of Brittany had a primer copied for her daughter Claudia in 1505.⁸ Aristocratic women were also interested in bestiaries as tools for moral lessons. Bestiaries were descriptions of animals, real or imagined, that included Christian symbolism and moral instruction.

The increased number of books of private devotion and the drop in the prices of books coincided with increased literacy. From the earliest periods, royal or highborn women as well as nuns were literate. In the early Middle Ages, nearly all written material was in Latin, which meant that literacy included learning a foreign language. While education was indispensable to highborn families, girls whose parents did not have money for books or tutors, nor the spare time for learning, simply remained illiterate. Just because someone owned or had commissioned the making of a book did not necessarily mean that the owner or patron could read. Illustrations helped even the illiterate find the correct prayers in their books of hours, and many of these prayers had been memorized from early childhood.

Women were often the first to commission translations of important works. For example, Marie de Champagne, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII of France, commissioned the translation of the Psalms into the vernacular.⁹ Matilda of Artois had a number of Biblical translations done as well.¹⁰ By patronizing translations from Latin into the vernacular, women increased the audience for devotional texts and could ease the acquisition of new languages, which was very important for brides who had to move to other lands. The importance of the vernacular increased, Latin's importance decreased.

More women became literate as the number of writings in the vernacular multiplied during the High Middle Ages. The twelfth-century abbess Herrad commissioned a copy of the book *Garden of Delights*, written in both German and Latin. It was intended to teach novices Latin and assumed that they had been taught already to read German at home.¹¹ During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there were more and more translations made. Later books of hours were more likely to be in the vernacular than in Latin. In this exhibition, the earliest books of hours are all in Latin while the later ones are in French and Middle Dutch.

Devotional books were important to many during the Middle Ages, but it was the books of hours that became increasingly popular especially with women. The books of hours were treasured possessions for their devotional text, their lustrous images, and their outer decorations. They were a sign of both piety and fashion.

¹ Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Erler and Kowaleski (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 154.

² http://employees.oneonta.edu/farberas/arth/arth214_folder/jeanne_d_evreux.html

³ June McCash, "The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women: An Overview," in *The Cultural Patronage of Medieval Women*, ed. June McCash (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1966), 3.

⁴ McCash, 8-9.

⁵ Bell, 157.

⁶ McCash, 22; Bell, 163.

⁷ McCash, 22-3.

⁸ McCash, 22.

⁹ Theodore Evergates, "Aristocratic Women in the County of Champagne," in *Aristocratic Women in Medieval France*, ed. Theodore Evergates (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 79.

¹⁰ McCash, 21.

¹¹ Bell, 165.