

## Medieval Prayer: Studying a French Book of Hours

in the night), Lauds...Prime, Terce, Sex

<sup>2</sup> The Psalter was

accessible to some laity, but only the wealthy and literate.

prayers in eight sections meant to be said at regular intervals throughout the twenty-four-hour

day, is called the Hours of the Virgin, and is the basis for the term *book of hours* Eamon

Duffy notes how the lay people grew more interested in their own devotional life in the early

thirteenth century, perhaps due to the devastating effects of the Black Death, or due to growing

prosperity and means of leisure (Duffy, 6). The book of h the physical

embodiment of a remarkable medieval laicization of clerical forms of prayer, the adaptation of

and women from many walks of life, and of many

levels of education

Until the sixteenth century and the advent of the Reformation,

the book of hours remained a best seller and the most commonly owned book among laity.

Compared to the intricately detailed books of hours that were often owned by royalty, the French book of hours within the Dunham Bible Museum collection is simple in its decoration.

The margins alongside the text are blank rather than covered in detailed designs. The frames surrounding each miniature are painted like wooden columns and

unlike the ornate borders found in other books of hours. Royalty and nobility often

commissioned elaborately decorated devotionals for themselves or a family member, and the

resulting book of hours would be seen as a prized possession signifying their wealth and elevated

available and thus owned only by highest ranks of society. Gradually, through the fourteenth and

into the fifteenth centuries, ownership broadened, and

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<sup>2</sup> Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5.

(Reinburg, 21). This French book of hours was probably owned by a lesser nobleman and created for the practical use of daily prayer, unlike the extravagant versions collected by royalty.

Following the usual structure of books of hours, the 1460 manuscript opens with a twelve-month calendar of feasts and anniversaries of saints, written in red and gold lettering. After the calendar, a full-page miniature of John the Apostle on the island of Patmos opens the readings from the four gospels. John wears red and writes on a piece of paper in his lap with a feather pen. An eagle, the symbol that represents John, rests beside the gospel writer and holds a

(Backhouse, 12). After the reading from John, half-page miniatures of Luke, Matthew, then Mark accompany the text from their gospels. Each of the three writers sit within an orderly study

-page miniatures are little more

than an inch wide, the images have depth and layer, which is accentuated by the tiled floor receding into the background and the angles of the walls.

After the gospel readings, images from the life of the Virgin Mary accompany the canonical prayers which are at the heart of every book of hours. An angel appears to Mary and announces the birth of Jesus in a full-page miniature that begins the opening words of Matins:

<sup>3</sup> Golden streams reach down

essence of God. The annunciation is

followed by full-page miniatures of the nativity, the visitation of the Magi, the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and the flight into Egypt. Each image from the life of the Virgin opens a new



## Bibliography

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[http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hour/hd\\_hour.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/hour/hd_hour.htm) (June 2017)