

THE BOOK OF HOURS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Albrecht Classen

University of Arizona

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Abstract

Books of hours represent one of the most fascinating textuals and visual genres of the entire Middle Ages. The article offers a survey of the historical development of the books of hours, details the structural patterns, and the religious elements constituting this genre. The focus, however, rests on the correlation between text and image, on the artistic mastery of those who created the powerful illustrations, and also on the relevance of books of hours for the history of women as readers, patrons, art lovers, and religious persons.

The true highlights of medieval art are not necessarily the grandiose Gothic cathedrals, or the profoundly moving sculptures of the Virgin Mary, or wall paintings, such as those in the Nun's Choir of the Cistercian convent of Wienhausen near Celle, Germany, or the marvelous fifteenth-century tapestry with the unicorn motif in the Musée de Cluny, Paris. There is no doubt that they all deeply impress us because of their dazzling beauty, amazing us once we have taken a closer look. Certainly, the famous *Isenheim Altar* by Matthias Grünewald, created in 1512 for the convent hospital of the Antonines (Hospital Brothers of St. Anthony) in Isenheim, today housed in the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar near Strasbourg, leaves us maybe even speechless and inspired, and we could easily cite many other medieval

masterpieces as stunning reflections of their own time, though all comparisons ultimately are doomed to fail.¹ Who would question the artistic brilliance of the Bayeux Tapestry, or the incredible gems of ivory carvings housed in many of the famous museums in the world with a focus on the Middle Ages? Nevertheless, the ultimate mastery might truly rest in the miniature art, the book illustration, as numerous art historians have recently confirmed or reconfirmed, especially because of the intriguing interlacing of the written word and the book, meaning, ultimately, that medieval manuscript illustrations find no adequate comparison in the history of Western Art. Once again, mastery can be found almost everywhere, such as in the Cologne cathedral or the Freiburg Münster, in the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris, or in the extraordinary Wells Cathedral, in the St. Vitus cathedral of Prague or in the Canterbury Cathedral, to mention just a few examples, and each of them contained a treasure of smaller art works, such as the stained glass windows, the altar pieces, sculptures, and paintings.

Nevertheless, the true fascination with medieval art today rests in the medieval manuscripts, many of which were illuminated and have proven to be *l'art extraordinaire* both because of the incredible images and the texts in their calligraphic quality. In other words, we are not only dealing with art, but also with the history of the book, which we might well call the essential icon of

1. The history of medieval art has been discussed from numerous perspectives and by countless authors, see, for instance, Georges Duby, *History of Medieval Art: 990-1440* (New York: Skira/Rizzoli, 1986); Martin Warnke, *Spätmittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit: 1400-1750. Geschichte der deutschen Kunst, 2* (Munich: Beck, 1999). For the incredibly inspiring art work of altarpieces, see Rainer Kahsnitz, *Carved Splendor: Late Gothic Altarpieces in Southern Germany, Austria, and South Tyrol*, with photographs by Achim Bunz. Trans. Russell Stockman (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006).

the entire western world.² As Samuel Ijsseling recently confirmed, “There is something fascinating about the books of the Middle Ages, with their often brilliant miniatures. They are extremely important tracks left by people of times long gone by and they still mean a great deal. Here is writing in the most literal and most elevated sense. . . . The miniatures undoubtedly have a decorative function but they are, in the first instance, punctuation marks, that is, marks that make reading easier and more pleasurable . . . They create distinction and difference, whereby not everything is the same and indistinct. Thus the great books with their fine illustrations, placed on the lectern in the choir of the church, make a significant contribution to the festive joy.”³ The same can be confirmed for the illustrated book in private hands, all of which represented extraordinary beauty, the key to sacred knowledge, and were regarded as the most treasurable items within all of medieval culture.⁴ Illustrations are not only art works, they also respond to and interpret the text, or offer their own interpretation and so have to be taken very seriously by modern critics. As Paul

2. For most recent theoretical discussions on the significance of reading, the book, and the relationship between book and audience, see the Special Topic volume, *The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature*, ed. Seth Lerer and Leah Price, of the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 121, 1 (2006). Unfortunately, none of the contributors, apart from some fleeting references, has considered medieval manuscripts.

3. Samuel Ijsseling, “The Book, the Writing and the Image,” *Medieval Mastery: Book Illumination from Charlemagne to Charles the Bold. 800-1475*, ed. Lee Preedy and William Noel (Davidsfonds and Leuven: Brepols, 2002), 17-23; here 23. For a broad overview, see *Le livre au moyen age*, sous la direction de Jean Glénisson (Paris: Brepols, 1988).

4. Now see the monumental survey by Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts: 1390-1490*. 2 vols (London: Harvey Miller, 1996).

F. Reichardt confirms, the illustrator provided “the first critical judgment of these poems, a medieval mind reacting to a medieval work.”⁵ But the term ‘illustration’ might be misleading, as we have learned in recent years, because they often tell their own story and are not necessarily closely aligned with the texts.⁶ In fact, they often present their own interpretation or offer additional information, and they certainly speak their own iconographic, symbolic, religious, philosophical, and allegorical language.

The medieval *Books of Hours* have long been recognized as some of the most fascinating art objects from the entire Middle Ages, which has led to much scholarship and enthusiasm by experts and lay collectors.⁷ Of course, the purpose of this paper cannot be to discover this genre anew, or to identify the Books of Hours as a unique treasure as if this genre had remained unacknowledged for far too long until today. Instead, this paper intends to introduce Books of Hours once again both in their pragmatic function as liturgical books for pious Christians in the Middle Ages, and as some of the most formidable art objects ever

5. James A. Rushing, Jr., *Images of Adventure: Ywain in the Visual Arts*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); Paul F. Reichardt, “‘Several Illuminations, Coarsely Executed’: The Illustrations of the *Pearl* Manuscript,” *Studies in Iconography* 18 (1997): 119–42; here 120. See also *Visual Culture and the German Middle Ages*, ed. Kathryn Starkey and Horst Wenzel. The New Middle Ages (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

6. *Rethinking The Romance of the Rose: Text, Image, Reception*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Sylvia Huot. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

7. See, for instance, Susie Nash, *Between France and Flanders: Manuscript Illumination in Amiens in the Fifteenth Century*. The British Library Studies in Medieval Culture (London: The British Library, and Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

produced during that time. They are, indeed, some of the best representatives of medieval art and book production at the same time, and so they ideally serve here to demonstrate the enormous brilliance of the Middle Ages, if seen from the right perspective.

I would not even dare to make the naive argument that the Middle Ages were better than our own time or society, or that it would have been preferable to live then instead of today simply because they produced such impressive art work and might have possessed a deeper sense of spirituality. The discussion of the “Brilliance of the Middle Ages” does not serve to discriminate between past and present in order to create any priorities, but instead it aims for a reevaluation of the aesthetic and spiritual values characterizing that age and intends to examine it with fresh eyes as a highly sophisticated, vibrant, and creative culture that deserves our great respect, recognition, and admiration with respect to some of its best products, such as works of art, architecture, music, and literature.⁸

Books of Hours powerfully refute the old stereotype of the ‘dark’ Middle Ages as a world in which brutality, superstition, lack of hygiene, famine, endless warfare, an ever threatening natural environment, low life expectancy, and other nasty aspects dominated and simply made life miserable. Certainly, it is always easy to look backwards and to shudder about the primitivism of the past, or to abhor the failings and shortcomings of people in earlier centuries. The term ‘primitivism’ first would require extensive discussions, and we would have to be extremely careful not to confuse technological advancements with moral, ethical, philosophical, aesthetic, and other esoteric standards of human

8. The term “Brilliance of the Middle Ages” was the motto for a lecture series that I had organized for Special Collections of the University of Arizona Library, February 2006.

life.⁹ Subsequently, and this is the true purpose of this study, any careful analysis of medieval art works and manuscripts would immediately shed all doubts as to the considerable sophistication, intelligence, artistic skills, and literary abilities present in the Middle Ages. Certainly, by now all this amounts to preaching to the converted, but it still deserves to be mentioned once again, particularly because of the flood of misinformation about that period and both its cinematographic idealization and mystification.¹⁰ Regretfully, modern movies with medieval themes are not getting better with respect to authenticity and historical veracity, instead they seem to fall back to naive and erroneous concepts of that past world and so contribute to the continuation, if not creation, of myths about the Middle Ages.

To approach the medieval Books of Hours, which were some of the greatest masterpieces ever produced in the Middle Ages, we need to understand their religious function, their artistic value, and the intriguing relationship between text and image. Finally, we need to be extremely careful in our evaluation of images because medieval art was virtually never a simple reflection of reality, or the product of naive imagination. Instead,

9. Don LePan, *The Cognitive Revolution in Western Culture*. Vol. 1: The Birth of Expectation (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: The Macmillan Press, 1989), argues that the Middle Ages were primitive in a certain sense, but clearly discriminates between the lack of rational thought and lack of moral and ethical standards. It would not require any particular effort to refute LePan's claim that medieval people had not yet the same attitude toward and ability to think in terms of modern rationality.

10. Michel Zink, *The Enchantment of the Middle Ages*, trans. Jane Marie Todd. Parallax (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); *The Future of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Problems, Trends, and Opportunities for Research*, ed. Roger Dahood. Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998).

all medieval art has to be seen in its symbolic, mostly religious symbolism, and the art historian would be well advised to treat the illumination in a Book of Hours as a text, or message, in its own terms.¹¹ This applies, perhaps to an even greater extent, to medieval books, whether illustrated or not, because they enjoyed an almost sacred veneration, they were regarded as repositories of eternal truth and wisdom, they were the safeguard of people's thoughts and ideas expressed in the past, and because the words written onto a parchment remained to last and were almost indestructible, if not deliberately destroyed by fire, water, or a tool.

As the English Bishop Richard of Bury, a strong collector of books, emphasized in his *Philobiblon*: "Once a book is written and as long as it remains in existence, it offers the author the privilege that he, as if *athanatos* (immortal), cannot die."¹² Regarding the role of books, Richard continued: "Books are teachers that instruct us without a rod or a board, without angry words, without noting our clothes or our wealth. When you go to them, they are not sleeping. If you ask them questions or are looking for information, they do not draw back. They do not reprimand you when you err, they do not laugh at you if your knowledge is wanting."¹³ Famous Renaissance writer Petrarch emphasized in his *The Life of*

11. This is best summarized by Michael Camille in his "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literature and Illiteracy," *Art History* 8, 1 (1985): 26-49.

12. Maurits Smeyers, *Flemish Miniatures from the 8th to the Mid-16th Century: The Medieval World on Parchment* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), 10.

13. Smeyers, 10. See also *The Book and the Magic of Reading in the Middle Ages*. Garland Medieval Bibliographies (New York and London: Garland, 1998 (actually 1999)).

Solitude—obviously the best place to sing a song of praise for books—: Books are pleasant and unfailing company. The[y-AC] can appear when you wish or be returned to the shelf. They are always prepared to be silent or to speak. They make themselves at home with you, they accompany you to the woods, they travel with you, they stay with you in the countryside, they converse with you, amuse you, cheer you, console you, advise you, correct you, and support you; they teach you the essence of things, memorable historical facts, standards to live by, contempt for death, modesty when successful,”¹⁴ Of course, considering the enormously complicated and expensive process involved in creating the basic material for medieval books, that is, parchments, which then still had to be prepared as writing material, and keeping in mind the highly work-intensive creation of a manuscript itself, involving a rubricator, the scribe, the corrector, and often also the illustrator,¹⁵ it is little wonder that books in the Middle Ages were regarded with greatest respect and almost with awe. But books were not only highly valued objects for study and meditation, they also represented some of the most expensive objects produced in the entire period.

Books of Hours have come down to us thousandfold, and many libraries, museums, and private collections all over the world pride themselves for owning representative pieces. The name of this genre derives from a key text, fundamental for medieval religious practices, the Hours (or Little Office) of the Virgin Mary. This consists of eight short religious services that mostly lay persons were supposed to recite in their private homes at the

14. Smeyers, 10.

15. Christopher de Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators*. Medieval Craftsmen (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

canonical hours (*horae canonicae*), parallel to those services carried out within the religious community: Matins (midnight), Lauds (three o'clock in the morning), Prime (six o'clock in the morning), Terce (nine o'clock), Sext (twelve o'clock in the afternoon), None (three o'clock), Vespers (six o'clock), and Compline (nine o'clock), which signaled the various times during a twenty-four hour cycle at which prayers were required. This ideal rhythm, however, was often adjusted, particularly the time of matins. Already the Rule of St. Benedict, chapter 16, had stipulated this sequence of prayers, seven times during the day, and one time during the night, based on Psalm 119, verses 164 ("Seven times a day I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments") and 62 ("At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee because of thy righteous judgments"). "Vigils was to commence after midnight and be completed while it was still nighttime. . . . Matins was to be said before daybreak Day offices took their names and original location in time from the unequal Roman hours (Prime, Terce, Sext, None), with no particular importance being attached to a precise correspondence between the 'hora quoad officium' and the 'hora quoad tempus'."¹⁶ The total number of eight hours was, however, established not until the eighth or ninth century, both because the Psalm 119:164 called for prayers seven times a day and because the number seven had a profound religious-symbolic meaning, whether we think of the seven Virtues, the seven Liberal Arts, the seven sacraments, and seven ages of man.¹⁷ But flexibility was also built

16. Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, *History of the Hour: Clocks and Modern Temporal Orders*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (1992; Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 36.

17. Hans Biedermann, *Knaurs Lexikon der Symbole* (Munich: Droemersch Verlaganstalt Th. Knaur Nachf., 1989), 400-01.

into this system because the changes of the seasons required considerable adjustments. In winter, for instance, Terce was often moved to the morning hour prior to the work period, whereas Vespers was to be said at such a time that the evening meal could be completed still during daylight. Compline was said at a point in time shortly before complete darkness set in. Nevertheless, regular prayer according to the Canonical Hours was of prime importance not only for the clergy, but also for a wide range of the lay population, as long as they could afford the leisure to spend so much time on praying.

The Book of Hours was a direct descendant of the Breviary, which the clergy used primarily and which was organized according to the cycle of the Church year. In contrast, the Book of Hours followed only some general guidelines and was often subject to individual requests by the patrons or regional customs, which means that no Book of the Hour is exactly like any other, despite some generic similarities characteristic of this genre as a whole. Apart from the Hours itself, the Book of Hours could contain a calendar for the “church festivals and individual saints’ days, extracts from the Four Gospels, subsidiary Hours of the Cross and the Holy Spirit, the Penitential Psalms and litany, the Office of the Dead, devotions to particular saints and additional prayers in honour of the Virgin. The text is normally in Latin, though some of the special prayers may be in the vernacular and occasionally, particularly in German or Netherlandish areas, the whole book is presented in the daily language of its country.”¹⁸ Books of Hours were normally produced primarily for the highest ranking members of society, and they formed the most precious parts of a king’s or a queen’s personal treasures, particularly their private libraries,

18. Janet Backhouse, *Illumination from Books of Hours* (London: The British Library, 2004), 5–6.

allowing them to combine the aesthetic with the religious, the pragmatic with the artful, the informative with the esoteric in their collections or libraries. But by the end of the Middle Ages the Book of Hours gained much wider popularity, and the falling costs of their production made it possible for them to be sold to ever growing circles of readers, especially women of the upper middle class.

In many respects, the Book of Hour as a work of art was also a whole library, a calendar, often a herbarium, a gallery, and, in a nutshell, the entire Holy Church containing all the essential teachings of Christianity and making it possible for the individual reader to carry out all the rituals essential for a devout person, even though s/he was then mostly all alone and only reenacted the liturgical ritual by dint of reflecting upon the relevant illustrations and reading the liturgical texts. Medieval illustrations generally served five types of ‘reading’, as Maidie Hilmo and Denise Despres have observed: “meditative, mnemonic, self-reflexive, performative, and (sometimes) dissenting. It was the job of, usually, professional readers (artists, annotators, editors, correctors, decorators) to highlight these aspects for their book-consuming audiences.”¹⁹

Even though the term might be inappropriate for anachronistic reasons, still Richard Wagner’s formulation of “Gesamtkunstwerk” (totally self-absorbed work of art) for his own nineteenth-century operas would work surprisingly well to

19. Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, “Introduction,” Maidie Hilmo, *Medieval Images, Icons, and Illustrated English Literary Texts: From the Ruthwell Cross to the Ellesmere Chaucer* (Aldershot, Hampshire, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), xix-xxv; here xxi; see also eadem and Denise Despres, *Iconography and the Professional Reader: The Politics of Book Production in the Douce Piers Plowman*. *Medieval Cultures*, 15 (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 8-14.

describe the basic nature and composition of a book of hour.²⁰ Practically every aspect of the arts and literature contributed to the full development of the essential function of the book of hours, which was, at first sight, limited to the religious aspect. But we will also observe that it achieved, in its myriad manifestations, a multitude of other purposes, not the least of which was the creation of a most impressive art work, then of a artistic medium for individual meditation, moreover to record a wide range of natural objects, such as flowers, birds, butterflies, fruit, etc., and also to illustrate the life of the peasants. Umberto Eco formulated the insightful observation regarding the famous *Très Riches Heures* of the Duc de Berry, illustrated by the highly respected Limbourg brothers since ca. 1404: “The *Très Riches Heures* is a cinematic document, a visual presentation that reveals the life of an age. But no film could ever match the scrupulousness, the splendor, the moving beauty of its reconstruction.”²¹

The eight Hours of Virgin were frequently illustrated with scenes from the Christmas story: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Annunciation to the Shepherds, the Adoration of the Magi, the Presentation in the Temple, the Massacre of the Innocents, and the Flight into Egypt. At times this sequence was crowned with an image of the Assumption or Coronation of the Virgin. Additionally, depending on the provenance of the book of hours, the artists might include scenes from Easter, the Arrest of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, and the Resurrection. Italian

20. Albecht Classen, “The Medieval Monastery as a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk.’ The Case of the ‘Heideklöster’ Wienhausen and Ebstorf,” *Studi medievali* XLIII, Fasc. II (2002): 503-34.

21. Umberto Eco, “Foreword,” *Illuminations of Heaven and Earth: The Glories of the Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*. Text by Raymond Cazelles and Johannes Rathofer (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1984), 8.

artists tended to use additional episodes from the life of the Virgin herself, such as her presentation in the Temple, her marriage to St. Joseph, her death, funeral, and assumption. Occasionally we come across images from the life of King David, the Last Judgment, funeral rites and burial scenes, and numerous scenes showing the Virgin and the Child.²²

Books of Hours are representative of lay devotion, and were often the only book kept in secular households. Until the early fourteenth century most books of this private devotions contained the hundred and fifty psalms, wherefore they are called 'Psalters.' Since then Books of Hours replaced psalters, offering a vast array of new texts and information, often contained more in the rich illustration program than in the actual texts. Psalter had also appealed to the lay Christians, particularly because their message was understood to be an allegorical prophecy of Christ's coming. Psalters were also richly illustrated, but they continued to be the favorite devotional reading for clerics, especially in the convents. However, the Hours of the Virgin, also known as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, began to replace the psalms in these private books of devotion by the end of the thirteenth century, although in monasteries the tradition of the Psalter continued unabated, although the Little Office was added to the Divine Office. For the lay person, the adoration of the Virgin Mary was considerably easier and not so demanding time-wise as the whole corpus of psalms. "Before each hour the *Ave Maria* was recited, and the psalms were supplemented by versicles and responses, and in particular hymns to the Virgin, which praised her as paradigm of virtue and laid special emphasis on her role in human salvation: the Virgin was both worthy of bearing the son of God and, as the mother of God, she was better placed than anyone

22. Backhouse, *Illumination*, 6-7.

to intercede on behalf of a sinner.”²³ The origin of the Book of Hours might be located in the area of Flanders where private devotion was of particular concern and where also the economic situation allowed the rich burghers to dedicate a considerable amount of money to the purchase of such a treasurable art work. Although there was a specific order to the individual scenes depicted in the Book of Hours, many artists varied from it and also resorted to other sequences, such as the Easter cycle. But they consistently tried to paint the circumstances of Christ’s death so as to fall on the third hour of the afternoon, the time when Christ was supposed to have died in reality. On the other hand, Christ’s Agony in the Garden was situated at Matins because the early morning hour, actually still the time of darkness, was most appropriate for it. In other words, the pictorial program was not at all directly related to the texts written on the respective pages, instead they illustrate those parts of the Gospel that seemed to be most appropriate for the veneration of the Virgin Mary.

The texts, originally exclusively in Latin, began to resort to the vernacular since the second half of the thirteenth century because the wealthy nobility and other rich patrons outside of the Church demanded a growing number of Books of Hour for private consumption, especially by women. It had considerable advantages over other devotional manuals because of the relatively small, sometimes even miniscule size, the large script, and the large quantity of illustrations, allowing meditation through visual objects. One of the earliest examples was the Book of Hours produced by William de Brailes for a woman called Susanna in

23. William Noel, “Books in the Home: Psalters and Books of Hours,” *Medieval Mastery*, 57–67; here 60.

about 1240.²⁴ The later Books demonstrate an increasing correlation between text and image, probably also because the readers' level of education had improved, hence their demands on the book production, composition, and the inclusion on more of the liturgical texts.

The calendars that usually introduce Books of Hours also played an important role because medieval concepts of time were intimately connected with the saints and their feast days. To determine a specific date, a reader would consult the calendar which would inform him about the relationship between a specific date and the feast day, instead of telling him exactly what day of the year it was. For instance, according to the Hours of John III Ghistelles (Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Ms. W. 851) from ca. 1299-1300, the Lille fair began on the day of Our Lady in August, and the fair of Mesine began on the day of St. Remi, and the Bruges fair started eight days after the day of Easter. Furthermore, a rich illustration program indicated what activities one could expect at certain times of the year, such as slaying a pig in December, pruning the vines in February, ploughing the fields in March, etc. But we would be entirely mistaken if we regarded these sections in Books of Hours purely as informative. Instead, many artists included delightful scenes of everyday life, of grotesque deformations, of reversed roles of hunter and hunted, of children playing ball games, etc.

It is here where also discover a most important window into the world of medieval mentality because children, for instance, were not simply presented as young adults, as Philippe Ariès still had argued for the entire Middle Ages. On the contrary, we

24. Claire Donovan, *The de Brailles Hours: Shaping the Book of Hours in Thirteenth-Century Oxford* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 23-24.

discover numerous scenes with children doing all kinds of childlike activities, as observed by adults, who apparently were fully accepting this stage in the development of human life as what it was: childhood.²⁵ Many illustrations also shed significant light on women's lives, their activities, and social roles, which has allowed modern feminist historians and art historians to garner much valuable data particularly regarding women in rural and urban societies.²⁶

We must not forget the great concern with death and the funeral ritual, which are regularly reflected in Books of Hours. The Office of the Dead was, however, not celebrated with a Requiem Mass, instead it was realized through readings of psalms and the Book of Job during the night at Vespers, Matins, and Lauds before the Requiem Mass and the burial. Those involved in this reading hoped to achieve two goals, one, to reduce the time that the deceased would have to spend in Purgatory, and, two, the time they themselves would be condemned to after their own death. Medieval Christian mentality was deeply troubled by this fear of the afterlife, which explains the regular inclusion of the Biblical scene of Christ's raising of Lazarus as an indicator that the same

25. *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005).

26. For an excellent collection of written records, see *Women's Lives in Medieval Europe: A Sourcebook*, ed. Emilie Amt (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); and Patricia M. Gathercole, *The Depiction of Women in Medieval French Manuscript Illumination*. *Studies in French Civilization*, 17 (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000).

miracle could happen with the owners/readers of the Books of Hours.²⁷

As to be expected, many Books of Hours also included excerpts from the Gospel, which then are accompanied, once again, with splendid illustrations depicting scenes in the life of Christ. More commonly, however, artists offered images of the four Evangelists portrayed in the act of writing, which served as a medium of admiration and worship. Other scenes focus on the patron of the specific Book of Hours, showing him or her reading the Gospel, which is positioned in such a way as to lead our eyes further into the picture's center, mostly the interior space of a church, where the miracle of the Christ child happens in front of our eyes, such as in the famous Book of Hours for Maria of Burgundy with its *mise en abîme* of the Virgin Mary holding the babe who is looking directly at a courtly lady, who is reading a Book of Hours, through a window into her private chamber (Vienna, Nationalmuseum, Codex Vindobonensis 1857; before 1477). Not surprisingly, numerous images of saints entered the Books of Hours as well because their feast days were regularly celebrated, and most Christians prayed to saints for their intervention in human affairs, which made their function in these books of private devotion extremely important. Nevertheless, the Virgin Mary was of primary importance in practically all Books of Hour, though Saints also enjoyed great popularity as intercessors for the human sinners. Many times we see the owners of these Books kneeling in front of either the Virgin or a Saint, which transforms the entire concept of the Book into a platform for

27. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter: Teufels-, Todes- und Gotteserfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie* (Paderborn, Munich, et al.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996).

personal devotion, ritual, penance, outreach, meditation, and performance.

As art historians have repeatedly commented, the entire structure and composition of Books of Hours were extremely demanding on the user, viewer, reader, or practitioner, and some of the most luxurious volumes, particular those in the possession of royalties, such as the *Rothschild Canticles*, the *Book of Hours of Margaret of Escornaix*, the *Book of Hours of Philip the Good*, the *Book of Hours of Jean, Duke of Berry*, the *Book of Hours of Anne de Bretagne*, the *Book of Hours of Emperor Maximilian I*, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France*, or the *Visconti Hours*, could well have exceeded the spectator's intellectual capacities because of the overflow of information encoded in the visual page.²⁸ But the patrons also left their individual traces and were apparently regularly involved in the production of the Book of Hours, whether they had a portrait of themselves included in one of the earliest pictures, or whether they commissioned a particular selection of local saints, or had a special emphasis placed on female saints, or the Virgin Mary. For instance, in the *Buves Hours* (Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, Ms. W.267), created sometime in the 1450s, the patroness is shown at the opening to Matins of the Hours of the Virgin, and in the middle of an Annunciation scene, where the Archangel Gabriel encourages the owner of the book to give a salute to the Virgin Mary as well. As William Noel observes, for example, the owner of a fifteenth-century Book of Hours, today in the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore (Ms. W.721, fol. 35v), is presented in the role of Lazarus whom Christ raises from his grave: "This figure is not only

28. Most of these exquisite Books of Hours have been studied in great detail by art historians and historians of the book. For the Rothschild Book of Hour, see Christopher de Hamel, *The Rothschilds and Their Collections of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: The British Library, 2005).

Lazarus, who was raised from the dead by Christ, but also the owner of the book, desirous of the same fate.”²⁹

To illustrate the specific content of a Book of Hour, let us look at one of the most intriguing examples, the Book of Hour of Mary of Burgundy. She was the daughter of the famous Burgundian Duke Charles the Bold and married the future German Emperor, Maximilian I, son of Emperor Frederick III, in 1477, which sealed a most significant dynastic connection between the House of Hapsburg and the House of Burgundy, at that time probably the wealthiest dynasty in all of Europe. Not surprisingly, Mary’s Book of Hour belongs to one some of the most sumptuous book art works of her time and dazzles us both with its illustrations and the calligraphic nature of the texts, which was written in its majority by master Nicolas Spierinc, who also created a number of the most important miniatures, especially the famous view from a reading lady into the church interior with the Virgin Mary and the Christ Child. Another artist was Master Liévin van Lathem, whereas the remaining illustrations were created by unknown artists. But we can be certain that they all belonged to the elite of late-medieval Flemish and Burgundian artists, as this Book of Hour powerfully illustrates.

This Book of Hours also begins with a calendar, with one illustration on recto for the month, whereas the verso is reserved for an image of the zodiac. The miniatures themselves consist of the following themes: 1. fol. 14v.: the Madonna with Child in the interior of a church along with a lady sitting at a window 2. fol. 15r: Thomas Becket; 3. fol. 16v: the Virgin Mary Sitting on the Crescent Moon; 4. fol. 19v: the Annunciation; 5. fol. 24r: the Virgin

29. William Noel, “Books in the Home,” 67; see also Lilian M. C. Randall, *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*. Vol. 3: *Belgium, 1250-1530* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

Mary Sitting on the Crescent Moon (but much larger image); 6. fol. 27r: St. John the Evangelist on Patmos; 7. fol. 29r: Luke the Evangelist 8. fol. 31r: Matthew the Evangelist 9. fol. 33r: Mark the Evangelist 10. fol. 35v: the Madonna and Her Child with Angel Musicians; 11. fol. 36r: Celebration of the Eucharist; 12. fol. 43v: Crucifixion of Christ; 13. fol. 44r: the Sacrifice of Abraham; 14. fol. 50v: the Descent of the Holy Spirit; 15. fol. 15r: the Holy Trinity; 16. fol. 56v: Christ on the Mount of Olives; 17. fol. 57r: the Annunciation to the Virgin; 18. fol. 67r: an angel; 19. fol. 74v: Christ before Pilate; 20. fol. 75r: Mary's Visitation; 21. fol. 84v: Christ Crowned with Thorns; 22. fol. 89v.: the Flagellation of Christ; 23. fol. 90r: Christ's Circumcision; 24. fol. 94v: Christ Carrying the Cross; 25. fol. 95r: Adoration of the Magi; 26. fol. 99v: Christ on the Cross; 27. fol. 100r: Presentation of Jesus in the Temple; 28. fol. 104v.: Christ's Descent from the Cross; 29. fol. 105r: Massacre of the Innocents; 30. fol. 111v.: Entombment of Christ; 31. fol. 112r.: Flight into Egypt; 32.: fol. 116r: Saint Michael; 33. fol. 116v Saint Peter; 34. fol. 117r: Saint Christopher; 35. fol. 118r: Saint George; 36. fol. 119r: Saint Sebastian; 37. fol. 120r: Saint Adrian; 38. fol. 121r: Saint Nicholas; 39. fol. 121v: Saint Cornelius; 40. fol. 122r: Saint Anthony; 41. fol. 122v: Flight to Egypt; 42. fol. 123: Saint Bavo (only worshiped in Ghent); 43. fol. 124r: Saint Mary Magdalen; 44. fol. 124v: Saint Catherine; 45. fol. 125r: Saint Barbara; 46. fol. 125v: Saint Ontcomera; 47. fol. 128v: King David; 48. fol. 129r: the Day of Judgment; 49. fol. 146v: Raising of Lazarus; 50: fol. 147r: Office of the Dead.

On the one hand, the illustration program follows a theologically systematic program, on the other, however, the arrangement of themes proves to be rather random. Yet most interesting prove to be the numerous drolleries that populate the margins and include angels, animals, wild men and women, unicorns, frogs, musicians, devils, dragons, fanciful figures, children, centaurs, jongleurs, mermaids, monsters, scatological

figures, insects, monks, farmers, all kinds of people from various social classes and of various age groups, and over and over again flowers and, especially, strawberries.³⁰ Their purposes are manifold and uncertain, but they certainly reflect a considerable playfulness and interest in the fanciful, and also reflect, just as practically all other miniatures and illustrations, the enormous fascination with the detail of all kinds of objects and people. Here the natural world is paired with the world of imaginary, and there is no way to determine which plays a greater role in this incredible late-medieval work of art.³¹

There are many good reasons to identify the Book of Hours as a Gesamtkunstwerk. First, like every other medieval manuscript, a whole team of craftsmen was involved in preparing the basic writing material and to put it together as a bound volume (vellum, the rulings, prickings, foliation). Next a team of copyists and artists had to collaborate to create the actual book with its texts and images. Finally, the Book of Hour had to be bound, which also involved numerous different experts. Last not least, however, the private reader, the owner of the Book, also has to be considered here because s/he was, after all, was the one to utilize it for private meditations. Ultimately, the modern collector and connoisseur deserves recognition as well because we treat this

30. *Das Stundenbuch der Maria von Burgund: Codex Vindobonensis 1857 der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek.* Kommentar von Franz Unterkircher. Glanzlichter der Buchkunst, 3 (Graz Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1993).

31. For further discussions of this phenomenon, see Jurgis Baltrušaitis, *Il medioevo fantastico: Antichità ed esotismi nell'arte gotica*, intr. Massimo Oldoni, trans. F. Zuliani and F. Bovoli (1972; Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1977).

genre as one of the most sophisticated from the entire Middle Ages and the early Renaissance.³²

What do we learn from medieval Hour Books, and how should we approach them as testimonies of a past culture? The answers to this question have already been indicated in the previous discussions, but let us summarize them here one more time. Above all, Books of Hours reflect both the level and degree of religiosity by members of the clergy and the laity, with the emphasis on the latter. These Books indicate how much the laity, above all, closely followed the rituals practiced in convents, but carried out this devotional performance, adapted to their own needs both in terms of spirituality and personal interests or concerns, mostly in private, which also signals an important shift from an oral culture to a written culture, which certainly occurred in the late Middle Ages. In this context, however, the development of the printing press did not have absolutely dramatic consequences for the genre, though its high tide was definitely limited to the late fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century. A number of particularly beautiful Books of Hours ended up in the library collections of high-ranking clergymen, including popes and bishops, but not necessarily because of their religious content. On the contrary, by the end of the Middle Ages the genre itself was generally recognized as an important repository of some of the best art works ever produced, which meant that Book of Hours soon gained in status as highly representative pieces and undoubtedly allowed the collectors to document their wealth, influence, and power thinly veiled behind the possession of such a

32. Eberhard König and Gabriele Bartz, *Das Stundenbuch: Perlen der Buchkunst. Die Gattung in Handschriften der Vaticana* (Stuttgart and Zurich: Belser, 1998); Roger S. Wieck, William M. Voelke, K. Michelle Hearne, *The Hours of Henry VIII: A Renaissance Masterpiece by Jean Poet* (New York: George Braziller Publisher, in association with The Pierpont Morgan Library, 2000);

valuable book. Moreover, Books of Hours reflect the mental-historical conditions of late-medieval society, both in their religious context and with regard to the attention paid to practically every aspect of everyday life. Here we find illustrations of farmer's work, women's daily activities, landscapes, cityscapes, children at play, a wide gamut of illustrations of plants and animals, and then also countless grotesque figures. The Books of Hours were, in other words, not only some of the supreme masterpieces of late-medieval art, they were also extraordinary, today most welcome mirrors of their own time, shedding important light on the perception of nature, urban communities, people, and fantasy objects. Although most of the religious, liturgical, texts were written by anonymous authors, they also contributed in an essential manner to the completion of this *Gesamtkunstwerk*, not to forget the highly important calendars. The wealth of iconographic motifs, the luxuriousness of the marginal illustrations, the realism of natural scenes and human figures, the extraordinary delight in flowers and monsters, and, perhaps above all, the independent function of the illustrations as media for private devotion and meditation, clearly signal that the Book of Hour powerfully demonstrates the "Brilliance of the Middle Ages."