treasuring the Medieval Past

A primer on collecting Books of Hours

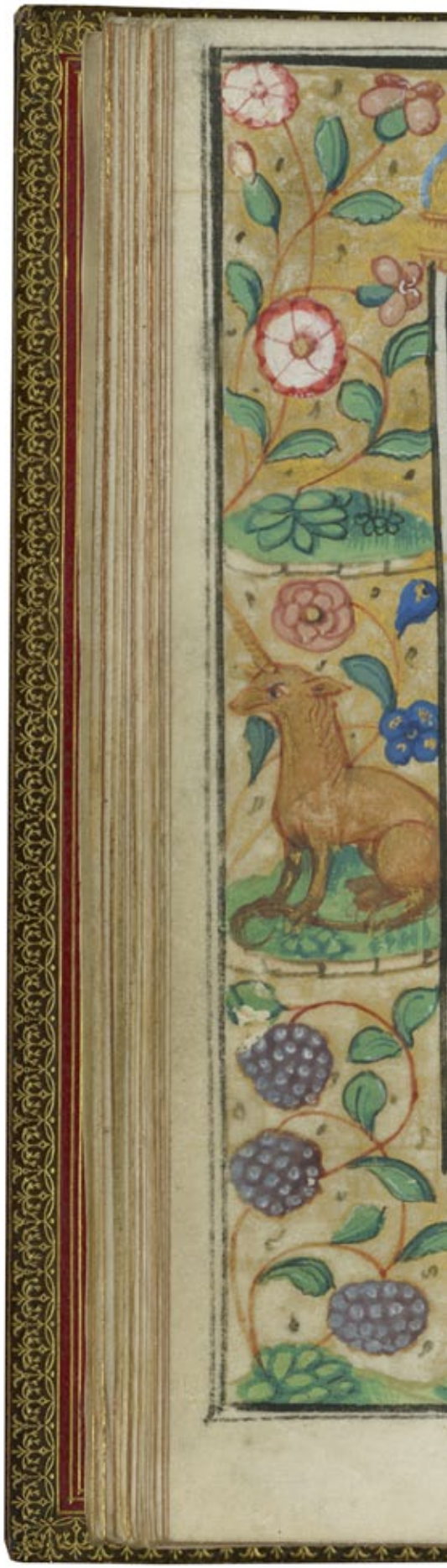
By Sandra Hindman

Nearly everyone familiar with the world of rare books has heard of the Book of Hours, the so-called best-seller of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. However, few people, except specialist librarians, scholars, book dealers, and some collectors can define precisely what comprises a Book of Hours. This is really not so surprising. Unlike the Bible, which remains more or less standard today as codified in the thirteenth century, or a great literary work by Dante, Chaucer, or Shakespeare, Books of Hours are remarkably varied not only in their pictorial content but also in their text. Every Book of Hours is truly unique.

So what is a Book of Hours?

A Book of Hours may travel under many names. Often called the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, it might also be designated as a prayer-book, or even (erroneously) a missal. Whatever the name, a Book of Hours consists of a set of prayers to be recited at home eight times (hence "hours") a day: matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, compline, and vespers.

Throughout medieval Europe, hooded monks and nuns chanted prayers at these hours, making their devotions at dawn in chapel, between meals, before retiring to bed in the dormitory, and even while in town, with country bells tolling the changing hours. Sporadically from the thirteenth century and frequently by the fifteenth century, laypeople at home—kings and queens, princes and princesses, doctors, lawyers, schoolteachers, even tradesmen—began to use the Book of Hours to imitate monastic life as "armchair monks." These treasured volumes were touched, kissed, cradled, admired, read from, scribbled in. They were often given as wedding gifts (see figure 1); they held



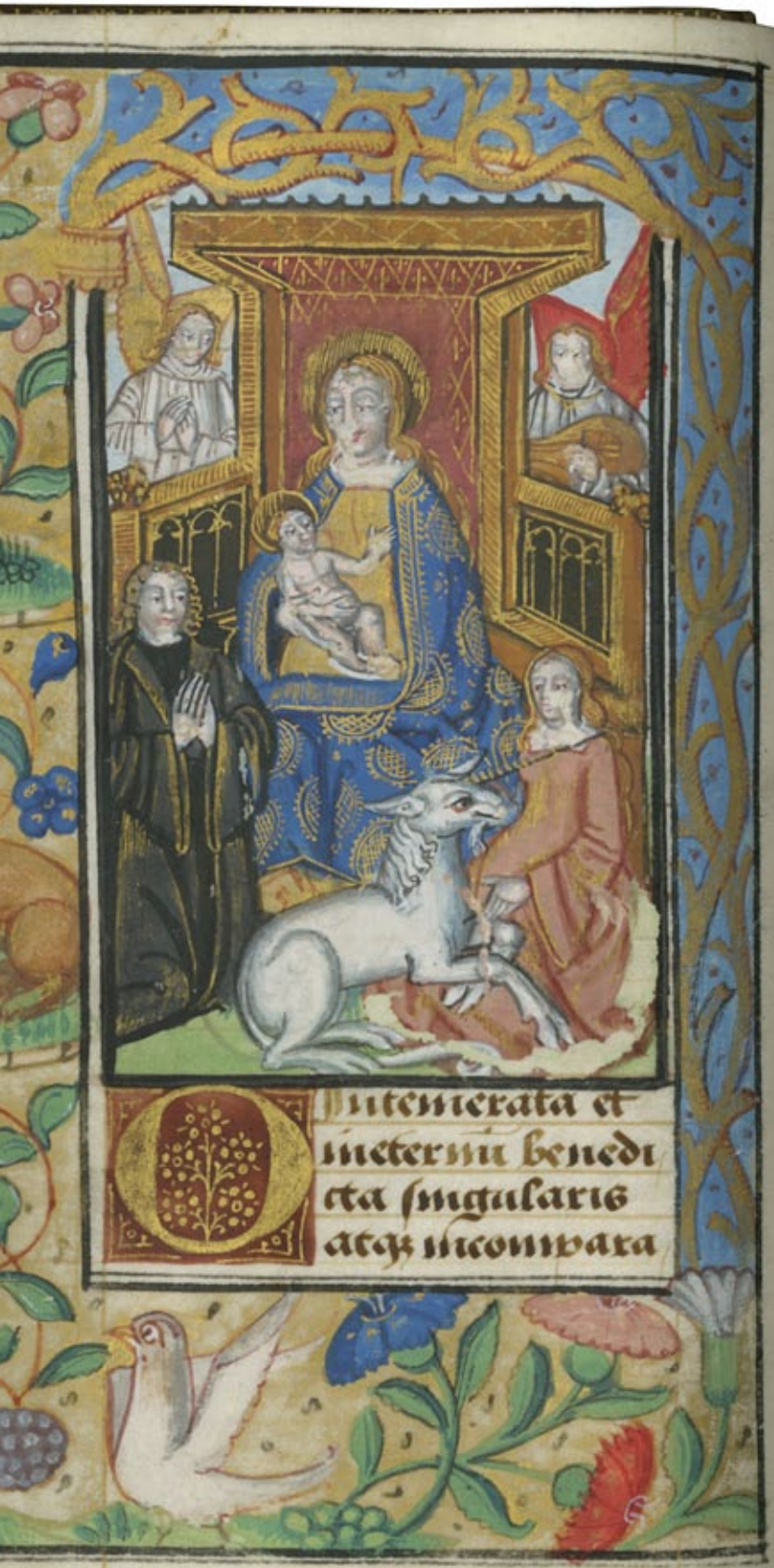


Fig. 1: On the occasion of their marriage the judge and his wife, accompanied by a unicorn, must have received this Book of Hours. ***Virgin enthroned, holding the infant Christ in her arms, while at her feet the donor and donatrice kneel, accompanied by a unicorn, f.28v - f.29, Douville Hours (Use of Amiens), France, Amiens, c. 1480-90, Private Collection.***

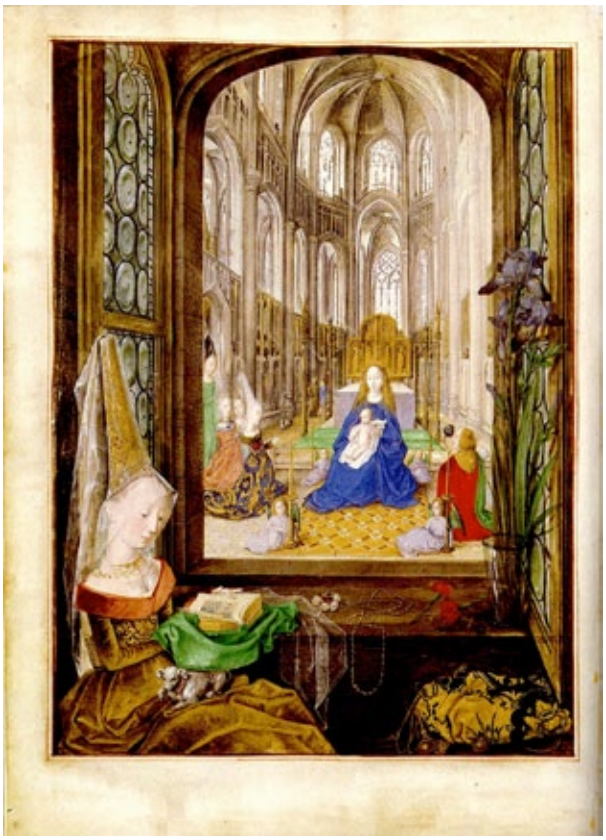


Fig. 2: The Princess Mary of Burgundy reads from her Book of Hours housed in precious cloth which rests unwrapped in her lap. ***Mary of Burgundy with the Virgin and Child, f. 14v, Hours of Mary of Burgundy, Flanders, c. 1475. Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Codex Vindobonensis 1857.***

family records of births, deaths, and marriages; they were used to teach children to read. It is not uncommon to find a Book of Hours that stayed in the same family through many generations, passing often through the female line, from mother to daughter. If a family owned one book, it was most likely to be a Book of Hours, treated as a cherished object. It is quite telling that, more often than not, Books of Hours were kept not in stately libraries or even upright on bookshelves, but wrapped up in velvet or precious textile and stored in boxes like jewelry, to be taken out on special occasions, shown to family and friends, carried about in the pocket to church or on pilgrimage (see figure 2). The Book of Hours was, simply put, a religious mainstay of family life—and, in many cases, an intimate witness to that life. Handling a Book of Hours today puts us in touch with the medieval past in a way that almost no other artifact can.

Central to most Books of Hours is an assortment of different texts and illustrations to which a buyer might request modifications or additions. Recited in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Hours of the Virgin is often illustrated with the Christmas story, made up of scenes from the early life of Christ. Other sets of daily readings include the Hours of the Cross and the Hours of the Holy Spirit. The afterlife loomed large in Books of Hours. Typically illustrated with an image of King David, the Penitential Psalms were recited to help one resist temptation to commit any of the Seven Deadly Sins (and thereby avoid the torments of hell). In a similar vein, the Office of the Dead was prayed to reduce the time spent by one's friends and relatives in the fires of purgatory (see figure 3). Prefacing each Book of Hours is a calendar listing the important feast days throughout the year, often enlivened by pictures of the signs of the zodiac and the Labors of the Months, activities that characterize a particular time of year. Suffrages, or prayers to special saints, were a common way of tailoring each book to its owner—someone might wish to include a prayer to Saint Margaret for a safe childbirth, or to Saint Apollonia for the happy resolution of dental problems, or to Saint Christopher for protection in one's travels, and so forth (see figure 4).

The Book of Hours was infinitely variable. The texts differ slightly from country to country, region to region, and even town to town, and their liturgical content is referred to as "use" (use of Rome, use of Paris, use of Rouen, etc.). Simple manuscripts without much personalization were probably available off the shelf from booksellers in larger towns, while lavish versions with texts and pictures selected for a particular owner were commissioned (often at great expense) from the very best artists of the day. Nearly all Books of Hours are in Latin; only in the northern Netherlands were Books of Hours written entirely in an everyday language, Dutch. Buyers faced many choices, including support (paper or parchment), color of ink, number and size of pictures (at what junctures, in the calendar or not), how much blue and gold leaf (these were billed separately), borders (on every page or just at the beginnings of sections), and type of binding. Each decision affected the price he or she paid.

How much does a Book of Hours cost today?

The prices of Books of Hours on the market today are sometimes perplexing to the non-specialist. There is perhaps no other type of book where the range of cost is so great and therefore so confusing. What follows is a general guideline only. For a Book of Hours without pictures, count on about $8,000–10,000. For a volume with a limited set of five pictures (typically, one for each major section of the book), $30,000–50,000 might suffice. For a "correct" well-illuminated version by an accomplished artist with ten to fifteen pictures, a buyer with a budget of $100,000 should have a good choice. After that, the sky is the limit, and the factors are variable. The most expensive Book of Hours sold to date—the Rothschild Prayerbook, which boasts sixty-seven full-page miniatures, as large as small panel paintings, by some of the best Flemish painters of the day—sold for more than $13 million at Christie's in

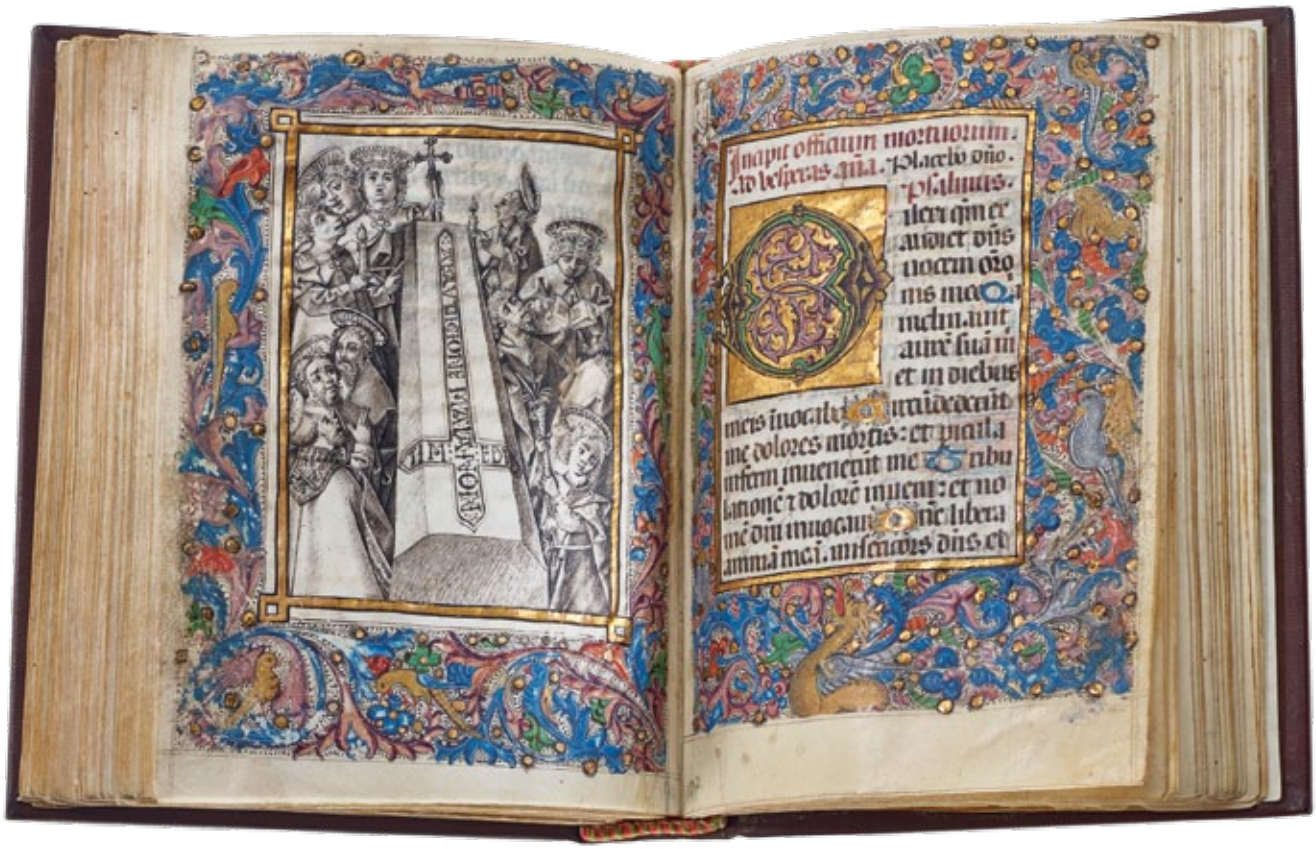


Fig. 3: Mourners pray on either side of a sepulcher in this black-and-white ink drawing imitating engraving at the beginning of the Office of the Dead.
The Funeral of the Virgin, f.106v-107, Jorge Inglés or his workshop, The Sandoval Hours, central Spain (probably Toledo), c. 1475. New York, Les Enluminures.

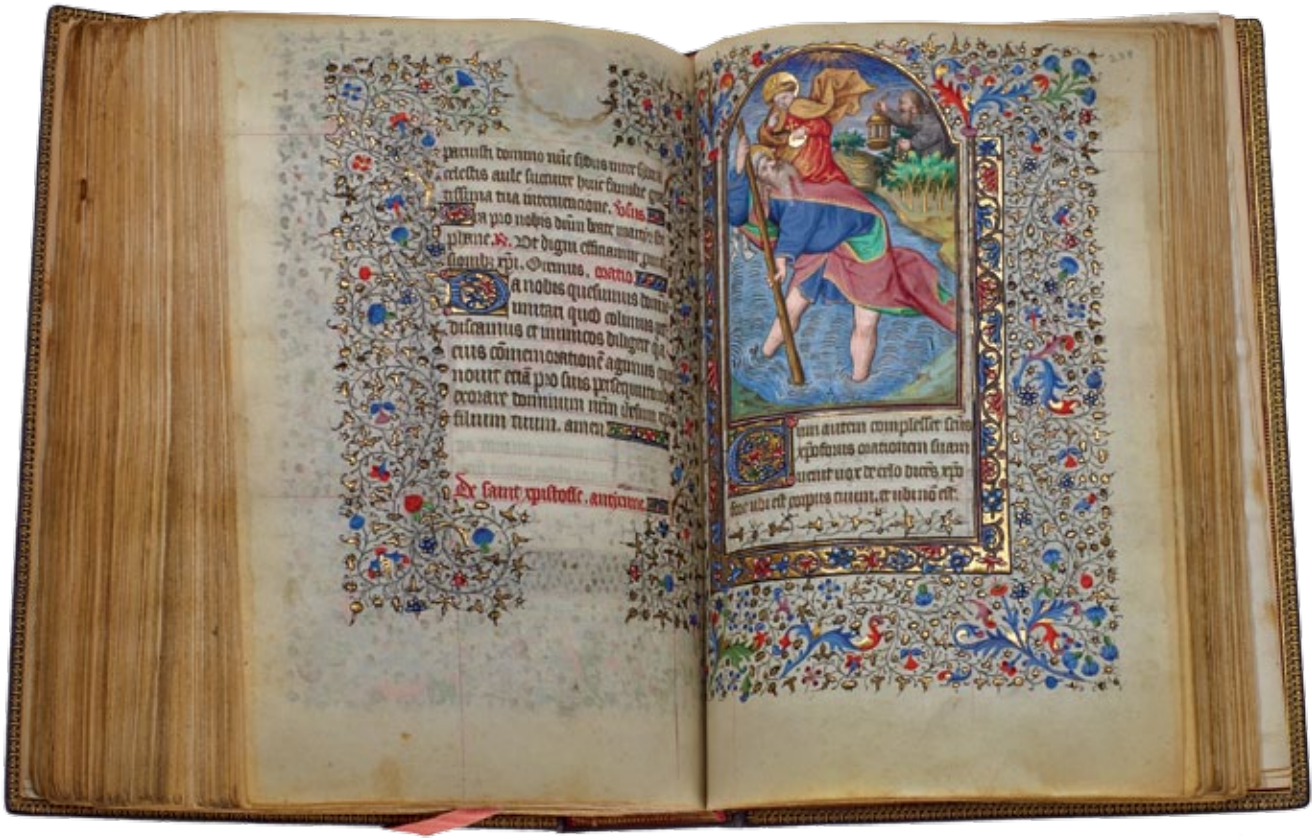


Fig. 4: The giant Christopher transported the Christ Child across a river, thus becoming the patron saint of travelers to whom readers prayed for protection.
St. Christopher, f. 238v – f.239, Dunois Master (or his workshop), The Hours of Isabeau de Croix, France, Rouen c. 1425-1450. New York, Les Enluminures.

2014 (see figure 5). In fact, over three centuries, Books of Hours have frequently held the record for the most expensive manuscript ever sold; in 1929 when the Bedford Hours was sold it even surpassed the auction record for a Gutenberg Bible.

But for the most part, prices are calculated per miniature. Already in the eighteenth century, catalogues differentiated Books of Hours by the number of miniatures, and as a rule of thumb the manuscript was worth the sum of its parts. Therefore, if each miniature was valued at $10,000 then a book with ten miniatures was valued at $100,000. The same holds true today, with some notable caveats. Condition plays a part; retouching or repainting is a serious deterrent. So does quality: the better the artist, the more valuable each miniature. Ironically, some renowned Books of Hours were destroyed in the past precisely because people valued their pictures so highly as art. The Hours of Étienne Chevalier by French illuminator Jean Fouquet, for example, was cut up by 1790 into separate framed masterpieces, most of which are now in the Musée Condé in Chantilly (see figure 6).

In today's market, competition for the very best Books of Hours can be stiff. Major museums collect them as art: for example, in the United States, there are significant examples at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and the Cleveland Museum of Art. The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore houses more than three hundred Books of Hours, perhaps the greatest number ever assembled by a single collector, Henry Walters. If sold today, the Très Riches Heures by the famous Limbourg Brothers would fetch an almost unimaginable price—certainly many hundreds of millions of dollars.

How rare are Books of Hours?

Of course "rare" is a relative word, like "expensive." Hundreds of thousands of Books of Hours must have been made over the three centuries they were in use. By this token, they are not rare. Made for private use as personal possessions, Books of Hours have often passed back into private hands, and many important examples remain privately held. This fact also helps to explain their continuing availability on the market. As a rough estimate, at least sixty Books of Hours change hands at auctions and

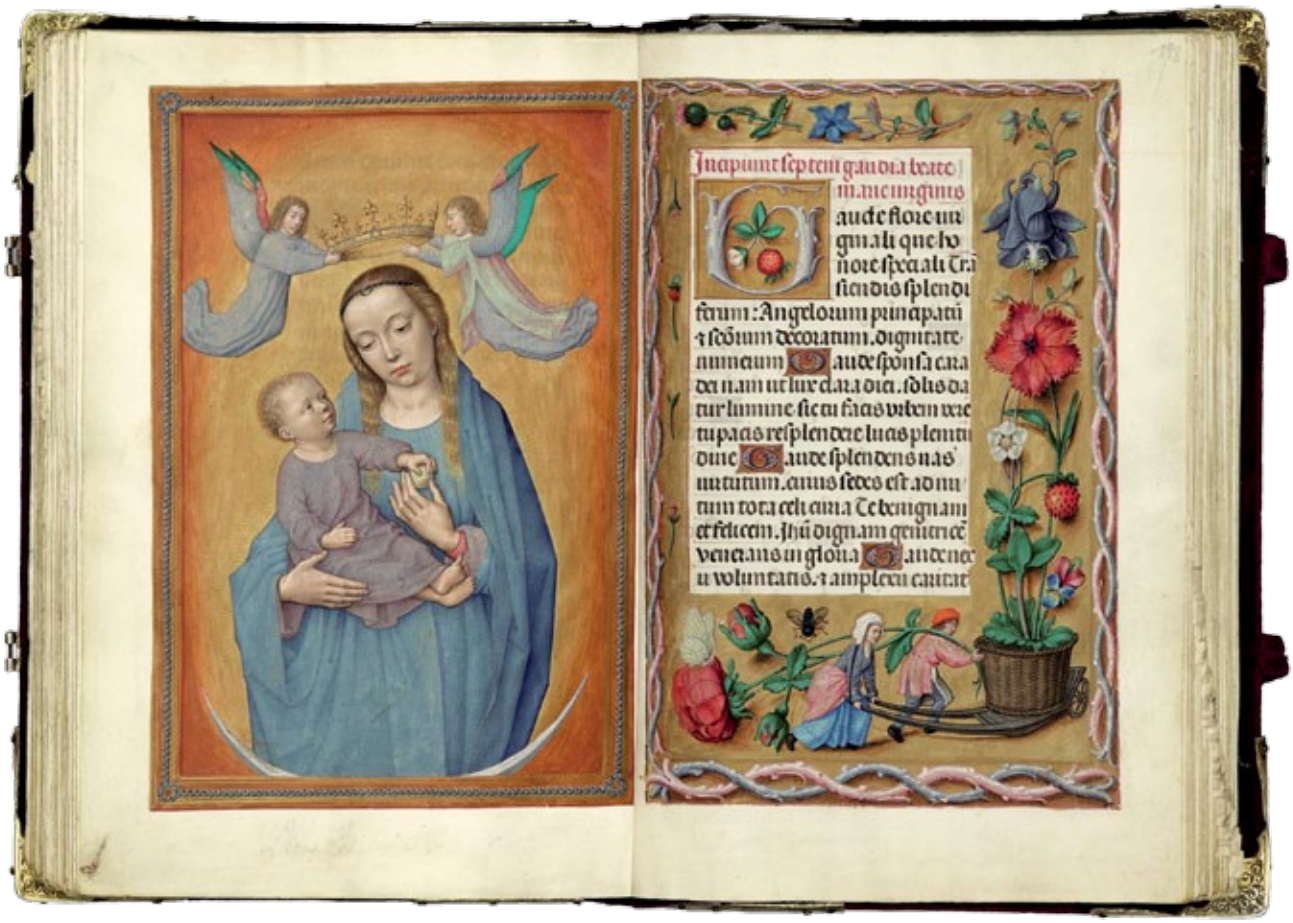


Fig. 5: A full-page miniature by the panel painter Gerard David in the most expensive Book of Hours ever sold. ***The Virgin and Child on a Crescent Moon (Seven Joys of the Virgin), f.197v – f.198, Gerard David, Rothschild Prayerbook, Belgium, Ghent or Bruges, c.1505-1510. Australia, Kerry Stokes Collection.***

Fig. 6: In the 1790s the Hours of Étienne Chevalier was cut up into separate framed miniatures probably by the Swiss dealer Peter Birmann in Paris. Valued as "art" not books, many manuscripts had the same fate. *Pentecost, Jean Fouquet, fragment from Hours of Etienne Chevalier, France, Tours, c. 1452-1461. Chantilly, Musée Condé, Ms. 71.*

through book dealers in a single year. That being said, the ready buyer with an appropriate budget (and armed with the right questions) has a relatively wide choice even in the course of one year.

Within the scope of what's available, there are certain criteria worth noting. Books of Hours from before 1300 are most rare, whereas those created during the heyday of their production in France (especially in Rouen and Paris) at the end of the fifteenth century are most common. Second to France in production is Flanders—the then-international city of Bruges rivaled Paris for quantity and quality—followed by the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and Germany. Books of Hours from England are fairly scarce because the Reformation in the sixteenth century resulted in the large-scale destruction of "papist" books.

How do people collect Books of Hours?

All collecting is partly about taste, and people inevitably buy what they like and can afford. Because so many Books of Hours were produced across Europe, it is possible to collect by country, by region, and by town. Thus, a collector from Besançon or Limoges in France, or Padua or Milan in Italy, can hold out for a book from his or her very own town as a mark of pride and a connection to the past. Or one might assemble a collection from every major center in France, or Belgium, or the Netherlands. One can still even construct a pan-European collection of Books of Hours, one or more from each country and from each thriving production center within that country. Alternatively, a new or established collector could just buy the best Book of Hours he or she likes and can afford, regardless of origin. The possibilities are endless.

There are trends in book collecting, some obvious and some not so obvious. Depending on whose opinion you value and how you view the antiquarian book market, "leaf books" and autograph books are out of fashion, as are Aldines, Elzevirs, and early printed books in general (perhaps including incunabula). Travel and science are "in." Good copies of modern firsts are "hot." But, there has never been a time when Books of Hours were not sought after. Already in the fifteenth century, Jean, Duc de Berry, owned eight Books of Hours, each of the Dukes of Burgundy owned nearly a dozen, and the Duke of Bedford and Regent of France owned three. Books of Hours continued to be collected from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries: J. P. Morgan had sixty-five (now in the Morgan Library & Museum), Henry E. Huntington had seventy (now in the Huntington Library), and Robert Hoe had eighty-five (dispersed in the sale of his library). Regardless of their other collecting interests, nearly every major bibliophile in history collected Books of Hours, including John Ruskin, Henry Yates Thompson, Dyson Perrins, Chester Beatty, William Bragge, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, and Ambroise-Firmin Didot. This list is by no means complete. By owning a Book of Hours today, the keen collector will not only capture a bit of the magic the medieval past has to offer, but also join a line of the greatest connoisseurs of the last six hundred years. &

Books About Books of Hours

Sandra Hindman and James Marrow, eds. ***Books of Hours Reconsidered***, London and Turnhout, 2013.

Eamon Duffy, ***Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240–1570***, New Haven, 2006.

Roger S. Wieck, ***Painted Prayers: The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art***, New York, 1997.

Roger S. Wieck, ***Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Life and Art***, New York, 1988.

…And on the Internet

Hypertext Book of Hours (in Latin and English):
www.medievalist.net/hourstxt/home.htm

Tutorial on the content of Books of Hours:
www.medievalbooksofhours.com/basic_tutorial/tutorial.html

On determining "use:"
http://manuscripts.org.uk/chd.dk/tutor/index.html

Dr. Sandra Hindman is the Founder and President of Les Enluminures and Professor Emerita of art history at Northwestern University.