

*Book of Hours: An Ancient Devotional*  
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Many think that devotionals or devotional books are a recent addition to publishing companies, but in reality, they existed even before the invention of the printing press. The *Book of Hours* was a prayer book that was used by people from all walks of life in the Middle Ages. The prayer books were highly personalized and cherished by their owners. Before the printing press, devotions called *Books of Hours* were hand copied and cherished. Looking at the uniqueness and purpose of books of hours helps one to understand why the books were dearly valued and remain significant when compared to modern day devotionals.

It is important to understand the uniqueness of each book of hours when looking at their significance. Each of these books made before the invention of the printing press were handmade and thus cherished by the owners. The *Book of Hours* on display in the Dunham Bible Museum, c.a. 1460 France, is a beautiful representation of what the people of the Middle Ages held dear. Opened to a detailed page, the *Book of Hours* is an example of an early devotional book. It contains writing in different colors and artwork to aid the reader in comprehension as well as for decoration. The pages of this *Book of Hours* are made out of vellum. An article entitled “*Book of Hours* at the Ransom Center” explains, “Medieval scribes usually wrote their *Books of Hours* on parchment or vellum, the supple, almost silky, skin of a calf or lamb... vellum probably cost three to five times the price of paper.” These books were an expensive item for most poor commoners. People cherished these books and many used the art to show personal ownership and individualism. “Marks of ownership...includes coats of arms,

initials, monograms, mottoes, and personal emblems, which are used singly or in all combinations possible”.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the purpose of a book of hours and what it contains is of utmost importance: “A Book of Hours is a prayer book designed for laymen, a compendium of psalms, Bible verses, hymns, antiphons, and prayers for private devotional use. The book takes its name from a text called the Hours of the Virgin, a set of eight daily prayers meant to venerate the Virgin Mary.”<sup>2</sup> The devotionals were extremely popular and “during a 250-year period beginning in the late 13th century, these...were produced in greater number than any other single text” (Book of Hours at the Ransom Center). These books were highly personalized and cherished, but then “The mid- and late-15th century saw a decisive move down-market, as the book publishers of the Middle Ages began what might be called the mass-production of manuscript Books of Hours... [with] nearly identical manuscripts with standardized illustration and decoration”.<sup>3</sup> This shift from having personalized and unique manuscripts to identical copies of manuscripts marks a change in how the people valued the books of hours.

The first books of hours were highly treasured for several reasons, with the most prominent being that people genuinely used the book to make it through the tough times. “Book of Hours at the Ransom Center” elaborates, “Pestilence, famine, war, and death: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were close companions to life in the 14<sup>th</sup> century... During this calamitous phase of European history, a devotional text called the Book of Hours emerged as a medieval bestseller.” The people used the manuscript for the prayers and to find peace. In fact, “From the mid-thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, more Books of Hours were commissioned

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<sup>1</sup> "What Is a Book of Hours?" *Books of Hours: The Books of Hours Website of Les Enluminures*. N.p., 1997. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Hale, Russell. "Books of Hours at the Ransom Center." *Harry Ransom Center: The University of Texas at Austin*. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>3</sup> Book of Hours at the Ransom Center.

and produced, bought and sold, bequeathed and inherited, printed and reprinted than any other text, including the Bible.”<sup>4</sup> The *Book of Hours* is similar to current devotionals in that both contain scripture and prayers, but the major difference is in the value of the books to their owners. Today, people often own hundreds of books, several of which may be devotionals. In fact, many people buy a new one each year. For the people of the 1400s, however, the *Book of Hours* was possibly the only book they ever owned. As more books are made available, the less people seem to cherish them. The law of supply and demand seems to impact even devotional books. In the past, when books were hard to access and times were difficult, people loved and clung to their individual books of hours.

One might think that these manuscripts are out of date and have no significant meaning in today’s world, but that does not necessarily hold true. A book of hours provides a window into the past like few other books. Such books remain important as a window to the past. The mere existence of so many of the old books demonstrates the value the owners had for such books. In an article about the *Books of Hours* at Harvard, it is explained that “The sheer number of books of hours that survive make them an indispensable source not only for the study of late medieval piety and prayer, but also for the history of late medieval art. Books of hours provide...record of well-preserved medieval painting in numerous locales and centers where most monumental painting... has been lost.” Fortunately, the fact that the owners highly valued the books allowed the art to survive along with the texts.

Dating from the Middle Ages, the text and art in the books of hours help to demonstrate the uniqueness and purpose of the devotionals. An article titled “What is a Book of Hours?” beautifully describes the books by saying, “In an age when... the laity's access to God was very much controlled and limited by others than themselves, Books of Hours bestowed direct,

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<sup>4</sup> What is a Book of Hours?

democratic, and potentially uninterrupted access to God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints.” The purpose and value of a book of hours relates directly to what was at the very core of its creation – a book to provide a pathway to God. Hopefully, the devotion books available today fulfill that same goal for the owners.

#### Works Cited

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