

The folio from the Miscellany Collection at Tisch Library of Tufts University is a single leaf coming from a devotional manuscript, a fifteenth-century French Book of Hours. The text of the Tisch folio represents the last two of the Seven Penitential Psalms (Psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142 in modern numbering). On the recto, the last lines of the Psalm 129 (Psalm 129:6-8) can be read (*in Domino. Quia apud ...*). Between the two Psalms the abbreviated *Gloria patri* is inserted. The beginning of the last Penitential Psalm, the Psalm 142 is indicated with the rubric “psalmus,” then the actual psalm begins (*Domine exaudi orationem ...*, Ps 142:1-5), and continues on the verso. The fifteen lines of the two sides of the folio are written in an angular Gothic hand, in dark brown ink on a parchment. The decorated initials are embellished with gold on a blue and red background, highlighted with white. The Psalm 142 opens with a two-line D initial. Blue and red line fillers adorned with gilt complete the shorter lines.

A Book of Hours is an extra-liturgical prayer book for laity that rose to popularity in late thirteenth century, and remained extremely popular for the rest of the medieval period and beyond. Typically, the format of the book is small, allowing for portability. Referred to in Latin as *horae*, the hours, Books of Hours took its main component, the Hours of the Virgin, from the breviary,<sup>1</sup> a liturgical book used in the performance of the Divine Office, a pattern of daily prayer observed by the members of monastic orders and clergy. A Book of Hours is divided into eight sections: the calendar, the four gospel lessons, the Hours of the Virgin, the Hours of the Cross and the Hours of the Holy Spirit, two prayers to the Virgin (*Obsecro te, O intemerata*), Penitential Psalms and Litany, the Office of the Dead, and suffrages (or memorials, short prayers to saints). These prayers would be recited – in the ideal case – in eight canonical hours at seven different times of the day.<sup>2</sup> The lay

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<sup>1</sup> A breviary, lat. *breviarium*, contains the prayers, hymns, antiphons, psalms and all other parts of the Divine Office, also called the Liturgy of the Hours, taken in general from the biblical texts. It can contain musical notations.

<sup>2</sup> These are the so-called canonical hours, observed by clergy and the monastics, but not necessarily by laity, at least not in its full form. The following are the hours: matins and lauds (at daybreak), prime (at 6 am), terce (at 9 am), sext (at

people would most likely pray during morning hours before leaving home and during mass. Books of Hours proliferated especially, but not exclusively, in France at the time when, generally speaking, new, private, forms of devotion became accessible to the laity, and the cult of the Virgin Mary thrived.<sup>3</sup>

The convergence of several factors enabled the emergence and success of Books of Hours. Apart from the appeal of the cult of Virgin Mary and the rising importance of private devotions, slowly expanding literacy and economic factors meant that a wider spectrum of the society could afford and would be interested in purchasing and owning a Book of Hours. Their rich imagery and often sumptuous illustrations undoubtedly only strengthened the appeal. Reflecting the demand and the preferences of the particular customer, the images ranged in quality and extent, but Books of Hours rarely do not contain any images at all. The images, in turn, are thought to have served an important role within the manuscript and the devotions associated with it, possibly bridging the distance between the Latin text and its lay audience.

Books of Hours have also been discussed in the context of the actual literacy of its medieval audience. Paul Saenger connected the Books of Hours with two distinct forms of literacy coexisting in medieval Europe at that time. He distinguishes between phonetic and comprehension literacy. The former describes a reading ability to “decode text syllable by syllable and to pronounce them orally.”<sup>4</sup> This type of reading is closely related to memorization and language of prayer that would not be used as a language of daily communication. The reader would understand the sense of the text, often drawing on outside experience, such as repeated prayers in mass, but could not decipher

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noon), none (at 3 pm), vespers (at sunset), and compline (in the evening before retiring). Even though we use the term ‘prayer,’ the reader should be aware that this comprised a variety of forms: psalms, hymns, canticles (liturgical songs from the Bible), lessons (readings from the Bible), ejaculatory phrases (such as antiphons, short sentences recited or sung before or after canticles or psalms) etc.

<sup>3</sup> For a general introduction on Books of Hours, on which this summary is based, see Roger Wieck, *Time Sanctified* (New York: G. Braziller, 1988) and Roger Wieck, *Painted Prayers* (New York: G. Braziller, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Saenger, “Books of Hours and the Reading Habits of the Middle Ages,” in *Culture of Print: The Power and Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Roger Chartier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 142.

the text in the grammatical sense. Comprehension literacy, on the other hand, allows the reader to decode a written text in silence, word by word, understanding it without speaking it aloud.<sup>5</sup> According to Saenger, these two types of literacy could mix together, e.g. a lay person could have only phonetic literacy in Latin, but comprehension literacy in their vernacular. These reading habits were in interaction with the performance of prayer in the fifteenth century. A truly silent prayer was a relatively new concept, still developing in the fifteenth century. Up to this point, to pray almost always meant reading a prayer aloud. This would provide it with the force stemming from both the pronounced Latin and repetition and memorization, which was accorded special worth in the Middle Ages. The fifteenth-century devotion, in the context of the developing literacy, opens up the space for silent, spontaneous prayer, which derived strength from its pious intent. The efficacy and benefits of the various types of prayer were debated, and the forms coexisted and meshed. It is important to note that it is also quite possible a dedicated Christian worshipper could have been familiar with Latin through his or her life-long exposure to Latin in church liturgy.<sup>6</sup>

The Penitential Psalms are an integral part of the Book of Hours. However, their history looks back to an ancient Christian tradition. “The notion that certain of the Psalms had a penitential significance for the Christian reader is already to be found in Origen († ca. 254) and Augustine († 430), but the first commentator to single out psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142 as being specifically penitential is Cassiodorus († c. 580).”<sup>7</sup> Between the eighth and tenth century, the seven Penitential Psalms, together with the Office of the Virgin, the Office of the Dead, and the fifteenth

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<sup>5</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Saenger, “Books of Hours,” *passim*.

<sup>7</sup> Michael S. Discroll, “The Seven Penitential Psalms: Their Designation and Usages from the Middle Ages Onwards,” *Ecclesia orans* 17 (2000), 153–201, here 153–154. For example, Denis the Carthusian recounts a story from the life of St. Augustine where Augustine on his deathbed has the Penitential Psalms painted on the wall so that he can contemplate them. Saenger, “Books of Hours,” 147, 164. *Unde S. Augustinus agens in extremis, septem psalmos poenitentiales fecit in pariete scribe et oculis suis opponi; quos legens ac intuens, fleuit uberrime.*

Gradual Psalms, were regarded as supererogatory<sup>8</sup> prayer beside the general praying responsibility of monks in Frankish monasteries. However, by the twelfth century, the Penitential Psalms are included into the *Ordo officiorum Ecclesiae Lateranensis*, with detailed descriptions regarding their usage. Thus, as Michael Discrill has pointed out, the Penitential Psalms as the part of the breviary of the Curia became the integral component of a non-monastic environment. The Franciscans adopted this -breviary for their own use, widely promulgating the Penitential Psalms as well.<sup>9</sup>

In a fifteenth-century Books of Hours, the Seven Penitential Psalms are usually opened with a miniature depicting the repentant David kneeling in prayer, or a scene of David's life (The Slayer of Goliath or David watching Bathsheba).<sup>10</sup> This reflects a development of the iconographic tradition where the Christ as Judge or Last Judgment images at the beginning of the Penitential Psalms are replaced by David scenes in the fifteenth century.<sup>11</sup> This opening image is generally the only miniature of the Seven Penitential Psalms; only the margins of the other folios are embellished with border decorations. Also the right margin of the recto of the Tisch folio is lavishly illuminated: an ivy spray border decorated with flowers runs the length of the text. The lush blue curling leaves enhanced with orange and gold, the various flower types, as well as the gilded ivy tendrils are characteristic of fifteenth-century French Books of Hours.<sup>12</sup> The exaggerated execution of the motifs, however, suggests that the Tisch folio must have been executed in the second half of the fifteenth century, and belonged to a less meticulously executed Book of Hours. The peculiarity of the border is that the details of flowers are rendered in black instead of white.

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<sup>8</sup> Supererogatory prayers are prayers performed over and above those prescribed as obligatory.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 175–176.

<sup>10</sup> On these depictions, see Clare L. Costley, "David, Bathsheba, and the Penitential Psalms," *Renaissance Quarterly* 57 (2004), 1235–1277.

<sup>11</sup> Wieck, *Time Sanctified*, 97. The Christ as Judge/Last Judgment image tradition continues in Belgium and Holland. For more detail see on iconography see Wieck, *Time Sanctified*, 97–102

<sup>12</sup> On fifteenth-century French Books of Hours, see François Avril and Nicole Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France, 1440-1520*, (Paris: Flammarion: Bibliothèque nationale, 1993); John Plummer, *The Last Flowering: French Painting in Manuscripts, 1420-1530: from American collections*, (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, Oxford University Press, 1982).

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USEFUL LINKS:\*

- <http://www.brynmawr.edu/library/exhibits/hours/penitential.html>
- <http://aurora.wellesley.edu/BookOfHours/bookhome.html>
- [http://www.medievalbooksofhours.com/advancedtutorial/tutorial\\_advanced\\_boh.html](http://www.medievalbooksofhours.com/advancedtutorial/tutorial_advanced_boh.html)
- <http://www.medievalist.net/hourstxt/home.htm>

\*These are only some basic titles and websites that should enable an interested reader to get started on the topic. Due to their often stunning and intriguing images, books on the Books of Hours are numerous, including facsimiles. Major manuscript collections of university libraries, such as Houghton Library at Harvard University, are also a good resource, as are some museum collections, such as the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York.