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A Mystery of Belonging: Original Ownership of the Portland State University Book of Hours

Shirleanne Ackerman Gahan

Many famous French Books of Hours were commissioned by kings, queens, and other members of the nobility. These patrons owned beautifully crafted Books of Hours that have been the subject of much scholarly research. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, people of lesser social status, such as clerics, merchants, and civil servants were also able to acquire Books of Hours.¹ Their books were often “less carefully designed,” with fewer illuminations, and purchased on the open market of Paris, which was the center of book production during this time.² Sometimes bourgeois patrons wrote their names in their Books of Hours as a sort of record keeping for births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths.³ Determining patronage of bourgeois Books of Hours becomes a complex task for historians when there are no identifying marks within the book.

The original patron of the Portland State University Book of Hours remains a mystery. It has no written inscriptions or painted portraits revealing ownership. The Portland State Hours contains four, full-page miniatures and six, small miniatures, though it is missing three leaves which were likely illuminated as well. The amount and quality of the miniatures, and the absence of coats of arms, suggests that the owner was not of noble heritage. The original text is written in Latin and French in a Gothic bookhand, with prayers added in a cursive script later by the owner. By analyzing the calendar, added prayers, and style of the miniatures, we can determine if any connection to place, status, profession, family, or gender can be made.

Parisian bourgeois patrons often purchased Books of Hours from a bookseller, who usually was also an illuminator or scribe. Due to high demand, booksellers would keep sections of Books of Hours on hand to be chosen for binding at a customer’s request.⁴ The seller might have a complete shop copy to show to potential buyers. The patron would have chosen which available offices, prayers and conventional miniatures to have bound in his or her book.⁵ This type of market made the Book of Hours somewhat customizable to a patron such as the owner of the Portland State Hours.

To further personalize the book, two prayers were added to the Portland State Hours shortly after its original purchase, suggesting that the patron travelled to the Marne region in northeastern France. The Portland State Hours was written for the Use of

¹ Virginia Reinburg, *French Books of Hours : Making an Archive of Prayer, C. 1400-1600* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 60

² Reinburg, *French Books of Hours*, 21

³ *Ibid.*, 62

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26

Paris, indicated by the saints' days written in red ink in the calendar; among those highlighted are the feasts of St. Geneviève (January 3), St. Étienne (August 3), St. Lue (September 1), and St. Giles (September 1) (Figs. 1 and 2). These four saints were traditionally venerated in the diocese of Paris during the time period in which the book was produced.⁶ A prayer to St. Godo, in a cursive script, different from the main text, was added to the end of the Hours of the Holy Spirit (Fig. 6). St. Godo founded the Abbey of Oye in the city of Marne (present day Sézanne) in the 7th century AD.⁷ A prayer to St. Fiacre was also added to the book in the Suffrages in the same hand writing. St. Fiacre was a 7th-century Irish saint who traveled to France and founded a chapel and hospice in Marne. St. Fiacre is the patron saint of gardeners. His relics in the Meaux Cathedral were said to perform miracles: healing tumors, venereal disease, and hemorrhoids.⁸ Perhaps the patron made his or her living through agricultural activities, or suffered from one of the diseases St. Fiacre was known to heal. The presence of these two prayers provides evidence for the location of the book, and implies that the saints were significant in the life of the patron.

While many clues point to the Portland State Hours' place of origin, further research is necessary to determine the gender of the patron. Often scholars are able to analyze the Latin adjective endings or pronouns in prayers to determine whether Books of Hours were specifically written for female readers.⁹ However, the prayers were often written with masculine endings even if they were owned by a woman. A layperson who was shopping on the market may not have been able to select a Latin form. One scholar posited that some scribes working for a bookseller were not always educated enough to change Latin grammar.¹⁰ The presence of prayers to St. Anne and St. Margaret in the Suffrages could give a clearer indication that the patron was a female.

In order to further understand the patron's gender or social status, we can compare the style of the Portland State Hours' miniatures to similar books with known provenances. A Book of Hours housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library and Museum in New York, MS Morgan 1027, was also completed in the late fifteenth century in Paris by the Master of Jean Rolin. It contains twelve large miniatures that are painted with the same vibrant colors, in yet a slightly more detailed style, than those of the Portland State Hours. For instance, in the image of the Annunciation (folio 46r.), the artist carefully rendered patterns in the red drapery behind the Virgin Mary. The windows of her room have leaded panes and the stone walls are carved in a Gothic relief. The book rest is delicately highlighted with yellow and structured with several nooks that we can see into. The most interesting aspects of this page are a painted scroll inscribed with the motto of

⁶ Peter Rolfe Monks, "A Singular Book of Hours," *Australian Library Journal* 44, no. 2 (1995): 102

⁷ William Smith and Henry Wace. *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines: Being a Continuation of 'The Dictionary of the Bible,' Vol I* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1880), 692

⁸ Richard Marius, "Vita: Saint Fiacre, Brief Life of the Gardener Saint: 600-670." *Harvard Magazine* 100 (July 1998): 47

⁹ Monks, "A Singular Book of Hours," 102

¹⁰ Ibid

Benoît Damian of Blois, “De Surplus,” within the marginal decoration and the Damian coat of arms painted at the bottom. The scroll and arms are repeated on folio 23r, which features a miniature of King David. The Damian family was raised to noble rank in Provence by the Duke of Orléans in 1460.¹¹ The higher degree of detail in the miniatures and inclusion of arms indicates that Benoît Damian was of (recently) higher social status than the original owner of the Portland State Hours.

Another example of a Book of Hours similar to the Portland State Hours is MS Additional 58 in the University of Sydney Library. This manuscript was probably first purchased by a laywoman from a Paris workshop around 1460.¹² The Sydney Hours first contained sixteen half-page miniatures, which were also painted by a close follower of the Master of Jean Rolin, though the style differs from that of the Portland State Hours. The color scheme is slightly warmer and the marginalia have tiny animals painted in the foliage. The Deathbed Scene (folio 117) and the Pietà (folio 102) feature possible patron portraits (Illustration III). In both miniatures, there is a female figure wearing a mauve colored dress and black head cowl. She might have received this Book of Hours as a gift in memory of a recently deceased family member. The furnishings of the domestic interior of the Deathbed Scene indicate that her household was of considerable wealth.¹³ In comparing the depiction of the Sydney Deathbed Scene with the Portland State Book of Hours’ Madonna and Child (Fig. 13), also an interior scene, we can see that the artist of the Sydney Hours paid more attention to details in the room. A grand fireplace is painted to the left of the figures. A large bed and carved chair are central furnishings. There are multiple windows with leaded diamond and quatrefoil panes in the background. The Portland State Madonna and Child scene is situated in a fairly plain room with stone walls and no windows. A red canopy hangs behind the Madonna. To her left is one arched doorway. Based on the level of detail in the miniatures, the Sydney Hours was probably sold at a higher value than the Portland State Hours.

In 1505, the Sydney Hours was purchased second-hand and several new illuminations were added. It was given as a gift to a nun entering the Paris Hôtel-Dieu, Sister Anne la Routye, which is confirmed by a written inscription bearing her name and a shield and scroll with her initials. The name “la Routye” can be translated as “the fervent one” or “the roasted one,” alluding either to her intense piety or to her position in the kitchen or as a laundress.¹⁴ Interestingly, about twenty years later in her career at the Hôtel-Dieu, Sister Anne was reported for misbehavior after shouting “Let the Devil take you!” and “It’s a Norman trick! The Devil take the Normans!” during Mass.¹⁵ Aside from the clues within the manuscript, the contemporary written reports and inventories regarding the patron of the Sydney Book of Hours provide valuable information for scholars.

¹¹ Gustave Chaix d'Est-Ange. *Dictionnaire Des Familles Françaises Anciennes Ou Notables À La Fin Du Xixe Siècle, XVIII* (Évreux: C. Hérissey, 1914), 72

¹² Monks, "A Singular Book of Hours," 102

¹³ *Ibid.*, 104

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 108

Despite the absence of written names, painted portraits, or coats of arms within the Portland State Book of Hours, we can make educated guesses as to what sort of individual originally owned the book. It was certainly a non-aristocratic, that is, bourgeois man or woman. The patron may have been from a modest family who moved from Paris to Marne. Perhaps it was given to a son or daughter upon his or her betrothal. The book may have been gifted to a Parisian woman who married into a Marne family. The book could have been purchased by a young cleric entering a monastery in Marne, maybe the Abbey at Oye, or another religious community in that region. A merchant who did business in northeastern France could have purchased the book for himself or to resell at a profit. Until further evidence of the original owner is discovered, whether in the text itself, in comparisons with similar books, or in contemporary documents, we cannot yet name with certainty one individual or family as the patron for our Book of Hours.

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