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Threads of Time

Bethany Kraft

The evidence found within our Book of Hours manuscript can help identify aspects of its creation like whether the patron was wealthy, where and when the patron may have lived and who may have produced the manuscript. Even still, many clues lie within this manuscript that can be utilized to locate its approximate place in history. The contents of our Book of Hours supply us with a glimpse of life in late fifteenth-century France. An important element of this is the costumes of the figures, which can be examined to peel back the curtains and reveal the contexts of the manuscript's production.

In a Book of Hours these pictures usually depict the lives, martyrdoms, and miracles of saints and of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Traditional religious iconography helps make these saints identifiable and part of that iconography is what the saints are wearing. Though their dress changes slightly with variances in the conventions of time and place, the characters of these kinds of religious scenes can still be identified by what they wear or what they hold. Dress as part of an iconographic program is another aspect of clothing that historians can explore to ascertain the significance they are looking for. There are a total of ten illuminations in PSU's Book of Hours, four of them large and full page, six of them small miniatures, all including figures and therefore clues. The scenes presented in these illuminations are rather easily identified by the characters and iconography depicted in them. For instance, the Annunciation scene can be identified by the Virgin Mary in a bedchamber with the Angel Gabriel with a small dove representing the Holy Spirit flying through a window on the rays of light that symbolize Christ as the bringer of light to humanity (Fig. 4). The Virgin herself can be identified because of the symbolism associated with her golden halo and the elements of her dress.

While inspecting the illuminations in Portland State University's Book of Hours, a figure appears throughout, a woman draped in a rich blue robe. This woman is present in three of the large illuminations and two of the small ones. While her surroundings help to identify her, many people only need to look at her blue dress to know that she is the Virgin Mary. The sumptuous color of her blue dress, the color she is most often depicted in, signifies her place as Queen of Heaven, which is a tradition that artists have used throughout time, adorning her with the fabrics and jewels associated with royalty.¹ While she is also sometimes seen depicted with elements of white such as a veil which conceals her hair, a symbol of her purity,² and in red, representative of the presence of the Holy Spirit and as a connection to the Eucharist through the color of Christ's blood,³ she is most often seen in the Gothic period in shades of blue. Because of this

¹ Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*. (Milano, Italy: Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, 2005),30-37

² Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*. (Milano, Italy: Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, 2005), 98-105

³ Timothy Verdon, *Mary in Western Art*. (Milano, Italy: Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, 2005),.93-97

iconographic tradition, the Virgin Mary today is identifiable to not only historians, but to the everyday person.

Despite her traditional iconography, the figure of the Virgin Mary is very telling of the time period of the manuscript's production. The rendering of the Virgin Mary in PSU's Book of Hours is not in the clothing of the ancient Roman period in which the Biblical events transpired but is actually very contemporaneous to when the representation was made. Aspects of her dress like the high waist line demonstrate the fashion of showing off a woman's most appealing attribute, her fertility, with an emphasized stomach, as well as her mantel, the cape like part of her dress, which clasps at its neck, and the golden chain around her waist, all follow the conventions of women's dress at the time of the manuscript's production⁴ (Figs. 4 and 13).

Mary is not the only one of the characters present in the scenes in our Book of Hours to be dressed in contemporary clothing, in fact almost everyone's costume follows the conventions of the time. Even Christ, seen in the garden scene at Gethsemane, wears a long, richly colored robe with front pleating that would have been worn by noble men during the time of the manuscript's production (Fig. 8).⁵ Others, like the men who present Christ to Pilate and those that flog him during the Flagellation, wear the hose and tunics that lay people would have worn in fifteenth-century France (Figs. 9 and 10). These tunics, or *pourpoints* as they would have been called, which are much shorter than those of earlier in the century, are representative of the popular fashion of the period just as the pointed toes of the hose that they wear.⁶

The only figure who does not appear in strictly contemporary clothing appears kneeling in the Pentecost scene as he turns to view the miracle (Fig. 5). This figure, perhaps John the Evangelist as denoted by the symbolism of the codex he holds,⁷ is depicted in a robe similar to Christ's but with a mantel-like element draped over his right shoulder more like a Roman toga than any fashion of the Gothic period.

The use of these contemporary conventions had a purpose for the makers and the users of the manuscript. The inclusion of these kinds of images functioned as windows into devotion. As the owner would read through this text, his or her eyes would contemplate the scenes presented in these small snap shots; these images were aids meant to help

⁴ Mary G. Houston, *Medieval Costume in England and France* (London: A. & C. Black Limited, 1979), 159-79

⁵ Mary G. Houston, *Medieval Costume in England and France* (London: A. & C. Black Limited, 1979), 173-4

⁶ Mary G. Houston, *Medieval Costume in England and France* (London: A. & C. Black Limited, 1979), 181-2

⁷ Myra Dickman Orth, "Two Books of Hours for Jean Lallemand Le Jeune." *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery*, Vol. 38, (1980), 73

incite a higher form of meditation.⁸ Because of the contemporary aspects present in them, the owner had something to relate to and to draw him or her in.

When a historian looks through these windows at an object from the past, he or she looks for relevant evidence that can help place that object in a historical past and root it to a time and place. What people wore when has been studied through images, entries and descriptions in journals, inventories, and commission letters, as well as through existing pieces. These studies have provided a relatively extensive base for the subject of historic dress; it is a helpful tool for historians to be aware of. Thanks to this knowledge, PSU's Book of Hours offers a glimpse at the life lived by the people of the Marne region in France around 1470 because the producer of this work unknowingly filled it with clues.

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⁸ Yassana Croizat-Glazer, "Sin and Redemption in the Hours of François I (1539–40) by the Master of François de Rohan," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (2013), 134