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Decorated Borders: Marginalia

Jackie Anderson

Portland State University's Book of Hours' marginal illumination depicts delicate vines and flowers (Figs. 8, 9, and 10). Many of the tiny leaves are gold, adding to the delightful visual effect found in the margins. There is evidence that using gold in the miniature illustrations and borders of these books indicated status; the more gold in commissioned books, the higher the status.

The small prayer books were used faithfully every day by the religious, as the devout recited at least seven prayers daily. Perhaps the elegant images within the margins of such a Book of Hours would assist the reader with their personal expression of reverence. For example, the red flowers found in the margins of Portland State University's Book of Hours are possibly red clover. Most likely, red clover does not have any special meaning to the modern American; however, to the Early Christians it had a long history as a religious symbol of the Trinity because of the three leaves of the clover. The small blue flowers seen in the margins are likely bachelor buttons; their spiritual representations are that of celibacy and blessedness. Both of these flowers are indigenous to Europe and are illustrative of significant symbolism in Christian history. Though the images of the flowers were subtle, the medieval audience understood the importance of these metaphors.

When examining the contrast between the beautiful and bizarre in its border imagery, it is not difficult to agree with historian Lucy Sandler when she refers to manuscript marginalia "as a phenomenon."¹ The spectacle in the margins of illuminated books began with simple words and doodling by the medieval monks/ scribes. The marvel is that words and doodling evolved in extraordinary ways. Seeking to describe the evolution of this marginal art in a modern way is to say that the weird, nonsensical and grotesque creatures found on a border of a Book of Hours in the thirteenth century was like a modern-day fad, one that preceded the contrasting spectacle of the beauty that would follow, while the other would fade away. Historians today debate the purpose of the images of "lascivious apes, autophagic dragons, pot-bellied heads, harp-playing asses, arse-kissing priests and somersaulting jongleurs."²

The images found in the marginalia of the historical illuminated manuscripts continue to assist us today in our understanding, perception, and sensitivity of the different regions of the medieval cultures that cherished their Book of Hours.

¹ Sandler, Lucy, *Studies in Manuscript Illumination 1200-1400* (London: Pindar Press, 2008), 45

² Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11

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