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The Transition from Psalters to Books of Hours

Thomas Goodwin

The Psalter was one of the more widely distributed texts during the Middle Ages (Figs. 15 and 19). These manuscripts were used by clergy in liturgical settings, as well as by the laity for private, devotional use. The Psalter's development can be considered a stepping stone leading to the production of the Book of Hours as we can observe it today.

Beginning in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Books of Hours began to gain the favor of both patrons hoping to commission lavish gifts and individuals seeking tools for private prayer. The shift in popularity from Psalters to Books of Hours was due in large part to religious pressures of the time. Though the two forms of text share a variety of aesthetic elements, differences can be identified between them in terms of content and illustrative modes.

Psalters typically consisted of 150 Psalms, or hymns in praise of God, Hebrew Bible texts at the core of the Christian devotional practices in the medieval period. For spiritual practice and edification, the manuscripts would include a calendar at the beginning of the text to outline the correct order of prayers one would recite throughout the day. Much like the calendar seen in later Books of Hours (Figs. 1 and 2), this element could include devotions specific to certain regions. Such inclusions are used by historians to not only geographically situate the text, but also make inferences about the religious customs throughout Europe. Signs of the zodiac and labors of the month traditionally accompanied the calendar as well. Other sections included in Psalters were canticles (songs and hymns), creeds and the litany of the saints.

Illuminations were of course abundant in these manuscripts as well. Psalters set several important precedents that influenced later Books of Hours' artistic decoration.

Christological imagery became the standard for Psalter illumination over the course of the eleventh century. The demand for scenes from the life of Jesus expanded the traditional Hebrew Bible scope of Psalter decoration to include New Testament imagery as well. Synthesizing properties from both testaments, Psalters began to play the role of annotated, illustrated Bibles. However, unlike narrative biblical passages, which readily provided content to be transcribed in pictorial form, Psalter text was not so easily translated to literal images. Instead, artists were left with room to embellish and invent. As a result, Psalters are commonly filled with lavishly decorated initials and marginalia that do not correspond in a literal way to the text they adjoin. The example included here showcases the exquisite degree to which some Psalters were illustrated (Ill. IX). Foliate and bird designs wrap around the central text of the page, while small figures sit in the margins and engage with their surrounding decorations. We know from historic accounts, particularly those of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, that these seemingly extraneous additions were the subject of some debate. Whether or not the decorative features were intended to serve as anything beyond a visual companion to the page

remains unclear, but what they do signify is a wide experimentation with decorative programs.

These developments were instrumental in informing the layout and production of Books of Hours. A defining characteristic of the Hours is an increased focus on the Virgin Mary and the human suffering of Christ, two relatively new concerns in medieval spirituality expressed in manuscripts. Psalters had been known to approach New Testament narratives, most notably with the brief inclusion of the Hours of the Virgin, though their content remained largely conservative compared to evolving religious interests of the time. The waning popularity of Psalters can, in part, be attributed to the ecclesiastical context for their use. Serving a role within the church, Psalters were subject to demands and interests of the clergy. A growing emphasis on the Hours of the Virgin, previously merely an addendum to the Psalter calendar, and a widening enthusiasm for individual prayer offered the opportunity for the development of an entirely separate manuscript. Because Books of Hours were primarily made for private use, outside of formal religious services, we see content varies varied both in terms of illustrative style and devotional subject matter.

The Portland State Book of Hours represents the culmination of all of these shifting elements. It is small in size, encouraging its owner to carry and access the content over the course of the day. Several leaves are given over to full page illuminations, often celebrating the life of the Virgin. Foliate marginalia accents the edges of many of the pages, while colorful initials signal important passages. Each of these features pays an homage to the earlier manuscript types discussed above. The legacy of the medieval Psalter, carried over to other handwritten and printed documents, signifies how effective these manuscripts were in recording the written word and articulating the interests of cultures at large.

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