

Extract from Professor Eamon Duffy on *Books of Hours*

BOOKS OF HOURS

With the possible exception of **Rosary** beads, the **Book of Hours** was the most popular **devotional** accessory of the Middle Ages. First produced in the early thirteenth century for wealthy **lay** patrons (many of them women), it was democratised in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the production-line techniques in the stationers' shops of England and Europe, and even more by the arrival of printing. By the end of the fifteenth century, modestly well-to-do shopkeepers and small farmers could afford a devotional aid which had once been the exclusive prerogative of the aristocracy (see **Personal Spiritual Life**).

Content

Dedicated to the **cult** of the **Virgin Mary** and based round simplified versions of the eight **monastic 'Hours'** from **Matins** to **Compline**, the Book of Hours came eventually to include also a Calendar showing all the **feast days** of the year (see **The Church Year**), local as well as national, the **Office of the Dead**, the **Penitential Psalms** and Gradual Psalms, the Litany of the Saints, and a selection of other **prayers** - on the **Passion of Christ**, on the **Joys** and **sorrows** of the Virgin, in praise of and in petition to the **saints** (see **The Communion of Saints**). The 'Hours' themselves were often illustrated with pictures of the key **Gospel** incidents involving the Virgin, from the **Annunciation** to Christ's burial. Books of Hours might also contain other devotional images, such as pictures of the face of Christ ('the **vernicle**') or of his wounds. A book of Hours might therefore constitute a sort of anthology in words and pictures of the best-loved and most familiar elements of the Christian faith.



Annunciation to the Virgin Mary: the popularity of the Cult of the Virgin is demonstrated in the art of Books of Hours of this period.

Origin/Date: 15th century

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Professor Eamon Duffy
Magdalene College, Cambridge

Key:

Interactive glossary terms

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