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The Medieval Best-seller: Part II

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The Medieval Best-seller: Part II

By Jillian Ewalt, Librarian

The Iconography of Christmas Day

If you are around Christian homes or churches this time of year, one image you might be seeing a lot of is the Nativity. But have you ever wondered what a Nativity might have looked like in the Middle Ages? The [Books of Hours](#) in the Marian Library's collection can give us a glimpse into the 500-year-old iconography of Christmas Day.

Ever wondered what the Nativity looked like to Medieval eyes? Why is Mary always on the left (... and frequently blond)? And what does Bridget of Sweden have to do with it? Keep reading to find out!

Some background

The heart of a Book of Hours is the devotional series of prayers centered on Mary. This is known as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Hours of the Virgin for short. The standard cycle contains eight canonical hours: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. Each section is typically introduced by a *miniature*, which is quite literally a very tiny, detailed painting.

An image of the Nativity was almost always the opening miniature for the hour Prime. Prime, or the "first hour," was said at daylight or sometime around 6 a.m. In praying the hours, a Medieval patron would use the miniature as a theme for meditation.

Books of Hours in the Marian Library

PREVIOUS POST

Weekly Marian

Features: Dec. 17, 2018

It is already the third week of Advent! Continue to prepare for Christmas with this week's features from All About Mary.

[Read More](#)

NEXT POST

Deck the Christmas
Tree with the Nativity

The nativity sets of the Marian Library are a very popular this time of year, but did you

In the four Books of Hours in the Marian Library's collection, the Nativity images have a few things in common. They all illustrate the hour of Prime, as is typical for most Books of Hours. They all depict Mary to the left of Jesus, kneeling in adoration. Joseph is placed either to the right of Jesus or slightly behind Mary. This placement signifies the centrality of Jesus with Mary as a secondary but significant figure. This right/left placement is influenced by the Jewish tradition of the Queen being placed to the right of the King (1 Kings 2:19). If Mary appears on the left of an image, she would physically be to the right of her son, Jesus.

All three of the images below date from a span of about 40 years during the late Middle Ages. So why do these Nativity images all look relatively similar? They were probably influenced by the visions of 14th-century saint and mystic Bridget of Sweden. In her visions of the Nativity, St. Bridget described a glowing infant Jesus lying on the ground whilst a blond-haired Virgin and Joseph knelt in prayer at his side. St. Bridget's visions of the Nativity had a significant impact on Christian art in the Middle Ages and thus are evidenced in the illustrations within Books of Hours.

Browse images and learn more

Click through the images below to learn more about the Nativity miniatures in the Marian Library's collection.

Check out [Part I](#) of this series to learn more about the history and hype surrounding Books of Hours in the Middle Ages.

Have a question about Books of Hours or the Marian Library? Please feel free to contact me at jewalt1@udayton.edu

know there are ornaments in the collection as well?

[Read More](#)

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The Nativity miniature in this unfinished manuscript Book of Hours, circa 1500, features a pastoral, almost alpine-like scene in the background. The ox and ass guard the Infant Jesus as Mary kneels in adoration. Compositionally, Joseph plays an ancillary role in this scene and two shepherds join in the adoration. The border features peacocks, a symbol of eternal life and eagles, the symbol of John the Evangelist.

