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## The Medieval Best-seller: Part III

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MONDAY FEBRUARY 18, 2019

# The Medieval Best-seller: Part III

By Jillian Ewalt, Librarian

As the [best-selling book of the Middle Ages](#), Books of Hours were owned and read by many medieval Europeans. But who were these 14th- and 15th-century readers? What did it really take to own and use one of these exclusive editions? Keep reading to find out about books and readers in a time very few could afford to own a book and even fewer, perhaps, could read it.

PREVIOUS  
POST

## Every Book its Reader

In medieval Europe, Books of Hours were luxury objects. Patrons of these handwritten and hand-illustrated prayer books included nobility and other wealthy partisans. To commission and own even an unsophisticated volume was a sign of affluence. And once you had one, you most certainly wanted to flaunt it. Medieval women in particular covered their books in opulent fabrics for transport to and from Mass. Think of it as a 500-year-old variant of “keeping up with the Joneses.”

In addition to being financially positioned to acquire a book, one would still need to be able to read it. Medieval society was not one of mass literacy, and even among Europeans who could afford a Book of Hours, degrees of literacy varied widely. For an emerging urban middle class, participation in politics and polite society necessitated at least rudimentary literacy. There was also a degree of what could be called passive literacy. That is, while an individual may not have been able to fluently read Latin (the language used in Books of Hours), regular participation in lay religious life was enough to commit at least some of this content to memory.

The introduction of printing in Europe around 1500 had a twofold impact. It increased literacy among a broader subset of European society *and* made these books more accessible to those with less “bread and butter” (both literally and figuratively).

## The Medieval Selfie

Details about the social world and histories of these 500-year old readers remains largely unknown. But in some cases, we can literally see them on the pages of some highly customized Books of Hours. Aristocratic owners loved to include their portraits (and sometimes family members, heraldry, and mottos) on the pages of their primers. And in a trend not so distant from the selfies of today, these portraits were sometimes enhanced at the request of the patron to reflect idealized notions of beauty. Think of it as a kind of medieval Instagram filter.

## Weekly Marian Features: Feb. 18, 2019

Selected articles for this week are centered around the Flight into Egypt, however, we will also look at Our Lady of Fatima, introduce the 2017 Marian bibliography and more.

[Read More](#)

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## NEXT POST

## Weekly Marian Features: Feb. 25, 2019

Features for this week have been selected in the spirit of St. Gabriel Possenti who honored the Sorrowful Mother, approved

Out of the five Books of Hours in the Marian Library, one includes portraiture that may indeed be an image of the original patron.

## Women and Books of Hours

In the Middle Ages, even upper-class women held relatively low status in society and had little control over the direction of their lives. Despite this, they accounted for a significant group of owners and users of Books of Hours. Some scholars speculate that the medieval mentality was that women needed images to “help them” in their piety. Others note that women were more active in emergent religious movements and modes of spirituality including the trend in private devotion that Books of Hours facilitated.

Based on new and newly recognized research, women may have also had a role in the creation of some medieval books such as Books of Hours. Anita Radini, an archaeologist at the University of York in England, published evidence of lapis lazuli — an ancient and rare blue stone pigment — on the teeth of a medieval German nun. You can read the original article [here](#) and the controversy [here](#).

## Read More

To learn more about the social world lurking behind Books of Hours, check out the references below. Want to put yourself in the shoes of a medieval patron? Contact the Marian Library at [mlimri@udayton.edu](mailto:mlimri@udayton.edu) to view Books of Hours in person.

*This post is the third in a series. Check out [Part I](#) and [Part II](#) for more information.*

apparitions in Banneaux and Lourdes, and Pope Pius XII who was called "the Marian pope."

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