

# Collectors' New Must-Have? Medieval Prayer Books.

Interest in the book of hours has been growing steadily, thanks to the volumes' sumptuous illustrations, and the rich insights they provide on life in the Middle Ages.

By Alec Scott

Feb. 29, 2024

As she tells it, Marguerite Steed Hoffman fell for a medieval book of hours at once, at the 2010 European Fine Arts Fair in Maastricht, the Netherlands. Reached at her Dallas home, she said a dealer asked if she wanted to hold a book of hours — an illuminated manuscript used to help laypeople pray — in her hands. “I said, ‘Are you kidding me, could I?’ It felt like somebody handing me a newborn.”

Ms. Hoffman found herself drawn to the small, old volume, despite how different it was from the bold, contemporary pieces she and her husband, Robert Hoffman, tended to collect. With funds from his family's Coca-Cola bottling firm and the National Lampoon franchise he founded, the pair had built a valuable collection, part of which they donated to Dallas Museum of Art in 2005, a year before Mr. Hoffman died, at 59.

Ms. Hoffman explained that the faith embodied in the books spoke to her, as did the illustrations. “As a contemporary collector, I bring those eyeballs to it,” she said, finding in one book “a sense of surrealism, an artistic freedom and license to it” that felt curiously modern.

Collectors like Ms. Hoffman have helped steadily drive up prices for the most lavishly illustrated surviving books of hours. The most ornate of these prayer books are valued in part for their beauty — the miniature illustrations in vividly colored inks have often survived the centuries well — but also for their ability to shed light on medieval life, especially the lives of girls and women.

Ms. Hoffman has since built a collection of 25 of these books, she said, as she paged through one she had on her lap, with a provenance indicating the King of France, Louis XII, had presented it to Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon. “It is sumptuous, it reeks of everything you imagine it would.” The book, though rare, fits into a relatively common category of these books — ones commissioned by or for women, mainly, but not always, aristocratic ones.



The book of hours was wildly popular in medieval times. "If you owned one book in this period, it was going to be a book of hours," said Roger Wieck, a curator at the Morgan Library & Museum. Dr. Jörn Günther, Rare Books AG

"These books were best sellers for 300 years, from the 13th to the 16th century, with women becoming core users of them," said Roger Wieck, a curator at the Morgan Library & Museum and the author of "Time Sanctified: The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life." He later added, "Anybody who was anybody had to own a book of hours. If you owned one book in this period, it was going to be a book of hours and not a Bible."

Jörn Günther, a rare-book dealer with a doctorate in German literature, based in Basel, Switzerland, is bringing several such books to TEFAF Maastricht next week, including two done for women. He notes that one was created for Bianca Maria Sforza, the Duke of Milan's daughter, in celebration of her wedding, in the 1490s, to Maximilian, the German king who would later become Holy Roman Emperor elect, and the other for Isabella d'Este who married, in 1490, Francesco II Gonzaga, the Marquis of Mantua.

"The women were so different, Bianca Sforza, childish her whole life, she had to be convinced not to play on the floor," Dr. Günther said, "while Isabella d'Este, remarkable, learned, one of the great figures of her period."

The book done for Lady Isabella — the Latin- and Greek-reading patron of Leonardo da Vinci and Titian — is advertised at 750,000 Swiss francs (\$852,967). With its historical significance and copious illustrations, the asking price for the book created for the Sforza heiress is considerably higher, 4,400,000 Swiss francs (over \$5 million) — if realized, this would break what Dr. Günther said was the record known sale price for an Italian book of hours.

"The prices have gone much higher since the 1980s," Mr. Wieck said. "In the 1970s, you could get a nice book of hours for \$3,000 or \$4,000 — those days are long gone."





The book of hours created for Isabella d'Este, which Dr. Jörn Günther, a rare-book dealer, plans to bring to TEFAF. Dr. Jörn Günther, Rare Books AG

Sometimes encased in jewel-encrusted bindings and carried into Mass, they served as status symbols certainly.

“They indicated you belonged to a certain class, in much the same way we might use a specific type of handbag now,” said Elizabeth Rice Mattison, an art historian and curator of European art at Dartmouth College.

But their appeal to women often went deeper than fashion. The central text in most books of hours was devoted to lavishly illustrated episodes in the life of the Virgin Mary and prayers based around those.

“She was a virgin, but also a mother, and whether you were a housewife or a nun, she was an ideal,” said Mr. Wieck. Another of the books exhibited by Dr. Günther was apparently used and amended by a nun in a convent near Donaueschingen, Germany.

Book owners were instructed to start their days with prayers often accompanying illustrations of the Annunciation, where, according to the Gospel of Luke, the angel Gabriel tells Mary she’s to bear the Son of God.

“In most of these scenes, Mary’s reading some sacred text, which was an encouragement of female literacy,” Mary Erler, a distinguished professor emeritus at Fordham University and a specialist in English Books of Hours. She later said, “There’s even a famous illustration where she’s reading on a donkey on the

flight to Egypt, as her husband Joseph carries the baby.”

In part, these books originated, according to Mr. Wieck, in imitation of the Psalters that only (male) priests and members of religious orders were authorized to bear. “They came out of a sort of bibliophilic envy,” he said.

At the back of most books, there were prayers to particular saints, including, often, some female saints. Having survived being devoured by a dragon, St. Margaret of Antioch would be prayed to by expectant mothers worried about the pain and danger of giving birth. “The saints could serve as what we’d now call female role models,” Dr. Erler said.

But the massive popularity of the books can’t just be explained along gendered lines. They often served multiple practical purposes, as well.

Often owners recorded births, deaths and marriages in them, and many were passed down generation to generation, according to Virginia Reinburg, a history professor at Boston College and the author of “French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayers, c. 1400-1600.” In it, she writes that some books of hours had recommended cures for sore throats and recipes for mulled wine scrawled in them by their owners; others had the alphabet printed in them and were used, evidently, to teach children how to read.





A book of hours with abbreviated Psalter made for Francesco Borromeo. Many books of hours have retained their vivid colors over time. Dr. Jörn Günther, Rare Books AG

The calendars in most noted impending holidays — the major ones printed in red, from which, Mr. Wieck said, the expression “red-letter days” comes. Often, the calendars also had illustrations depicting seasonally appropriate activities for the high born and the humble — with nobles hunting by hawk and feasting, while peasants reaped and sowed. Mr. Wieck noted that the zodiac signs depicted alongside the calendars in many helped doctors decide when to bleed their patients.

But when the bleeding and family remedies failed to restore to health, the books tended to show how best to die, often containing depictions of the faithful receiving last rites and giving the appropriate prayers for those left behind. Produced in a plague-ridden era, the books often featured reminders of death’s inevitability.

Another Book of Hours to be exhibited at TEFAF by Dr. Günther, produced in Bourges, France, around A.D. 1500 , features an illustration common to these books, of three young, richly dressed nobles, out for an outing, running into three skeletons — the corpses they will become before too long.

Later in the 16th century, according to Mr. Wieck, the church moved to sideline the prayers to the Virgin Mary and, after the Protestant Reformation, to take control of the publications used in prayer — and the book of hours soon fell out of favor.

But the remaining books still give mute testimony of their former owners' lives. Dr. Reinburg's text speaks of one owned by a grocer's wife in which she offers a reward of beans and Swiss chard for its return — it was not uncommon for members of what we'd now call the middle class to possess the books, though theirs often featured fewer illustrations and were not as bespoke as those done for the high nobility.

The text also mentions a woman named Colette asking the Virgin to commend her to her son. According to Dr. Erler, the books were often given by one woman to another. She has written: "Its characteristic inscriptions reiterate this theme of connection: 'Remember me'"

Dr. Günther noted that many of the world's most significant private collectors of these devotional texts were women, mentioning Ms. Hoffman by name.

Thinking more about the books, and what draws her to them, Ms. Hoffman said, "My best days are when I have a couple of hours of free time, usually, weirdly, on a Sunday, and I will sit with one, study it deeply and put it back on the shelf. I don't think I'm that different from the women who commissioned these books."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section S, Page 5 in The New York Times International Edition