

# ILLUMINATE ME

The purpose of this program is to better understand what books looked like, and how they were used, in the Middle Ages. This program is based on observation and comparison. In the case of the 1475 Book of Hours and the 17<sup>th</sup> century printed Breviary, multiple pages are provided so students can be divided into groups.

In the Middle Ages, books were written by hand - a long, exhausting task. Additionally, formal education and literacy were largely rooted in the church (and religious literature was also popular outside the church), which is why a majority of the books we see from this time period were religious. Today, we're going to look at pages from a couple different versions of religious books, and seeing what these pages can tell us about how people used books in the Middle Ages.

## 1: PAGE FROM MISSAL

This page is from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> century. It's from a Missal, which was a book that held all the prayers and ceremonies for daily Mass at church. Not only did it contain prayers, recitations, and readings, it also contained detailed instructions on how the priest moved and acted throughout the ceremony. Missals could be found all over Europe. This one was probably created in eastern France or western Germany.

*Ask your students to examine at the Missal page and share their observations. Here are some things they might mention...*

### **It's large**

This page is much larger than your standard book. That is because it is from a book that was intended for use during a Mass. It likely would have been placed on a lectern within easy reach of the priest celebrating the Mass.

### **It's unfinished**

There is a big blank space at the top of the page (and a smaller one a little further down the page). Most likely, this space was intended for a large decorated or illuminated initial that was never made. Often, this is because the people paying for the book ran out of money, or they wanted a useable book first, and planned to decorate it later.

### **It has red ink too**

The red ink is called a rubrication. It was used to highlight sections of the text or signal the beginning of different kinds of texts. This rubrication tells us that the text is for the Mass celebrated on the first Sunday of Advent.

**It has wide margins**

These books were intended for regular, heavy use, and the wide margins helped protect the text. How? The margins allowed space for fingers to reach in, grab the page, and turn it without rubbing the text off.

**It's not in English**

This particular book is in Latin

**It's not written on paper**

This page was written on vellum (i.e. processed animal skin – in this case, calf) that has been scraped, stretched, dried, and cut to create pages for books. The cool thing about vellum is that you can see signs of the animal's life on the skin, such as scars, vein patterns, hair follicles, or for signs of the skin's conversion to vellum, such as small accidental cuts or concentric half-rings in the surface of the page that demonstrate how it was scraped by a crescent-shaped blade.

**It's dirty**

This is true. It's been around a long time! However, all the discoloration around the edges means that this page was reused as a pastedown in the binding of another book. Missals were sacred texts, but they often became out-of-date as church rituals changed. But because vellum was too valuable to just throw away, it was reused in other ways.

The brown marks and discoloring at the edges of this page are the result of tannins from the leather book covers wrapped around the piece of wood forming one of the covers seeping into the vellum over time (or possibly from the glue used to assemble the binding). One side of the leaf is clearly more damaged, with some text missing. This tells us that this side of the page was the one pasted down to the binding.

**It's written by hand**

This page, and entire book, was written by hand. Scribes would often practice their handwriting for years before they were allowed to work on books like these.

*Ask your students to examine the Book of Hours page and compare it with the larger Missal page. Here are some things they might mention...*

## **2: PAGE FROM BOOK OF HOURS**

This is a page from a Book of Hours from France, circa 1425-1450. They were a popular genre of religious books for use by everyday people (or at least the people with the money to afford them and the education to read them!). The book contained prayers according to a schedule of hours throughout the day – hence the name. The Book of Hours was a special, simplified, reduced set of prayers from the daily prayers used by monks, priests, and nuns.

### **It's much smaller**

The Missal was designed for group use and church service use. This book was meant to be used, and carried by, an individual. So it's much smaller.

### **It's fancier**

Those decorated initials – often called “illuminated letters” - are burnished with gold! The gold was beaten to be very thin and then attached to the page with glue. The artist would then use a small smooth tool – often a dog's tooth – to polish the gold and make it shine. The beautiful blue ink you see was likely made from lapis lazuli (Lap-is lah-zu-lee), or “ultramarine,” a stone that in the Middle Ages came from Afghanistan. It was expensive!

The thick border of leaves and vines is a common feature in French Books of Hours. The borders would have been added to the manuscript independently of the written text. Unlike the Missal, which got right down to business with few frills, this beautiful book with its borders, color, and gold was meant to be cherished.

Those fancy initials aren't just decorative. They help readers navigate the text easily and effectively. Our modern system of punctuation didn't exist in the Middle Ages, so bookmakers relied on letters of different sizes, colors, and sophistication to set off important units of text.

### **It has a single column**

Unlike the Missal, where you had to find your place quickly and follow the text (and the white space between the two columns really helped the reader do this), this book is more personal with its single column of text.

**It's cleaner**

Yes, this page is much cleaner than the Missal page! Again, this was from a personal book that a few people used, not a book used by the entire church community.

**It has numbers penciled in at the bottom**

Those are the number the book seller wrote on them to identify the item number. Rare booksellers only use pencil to do this. Why? Because unlike pen ink, pencil is reversible and non-acidic.

**It's on vellum too**

This vellum is definitely thinner and more delicate. Unlike today's paper, which is uniformly made by machine, each vellum page was unique.

**It has large margins too**

Like the Missal, this book has large margins so fingers don't mar the text. For personal books like these, the margins – especially at the bottom – could also be used as a valuable surface area to add your own writing. It was common for book owners to add their own prayers, or record family information such as dates of birth, death, confirmation, marriages, etc.

*Break your students into groups and give each group a page from the 1475 Book of Hours and a page from the 17<sup>th</sup> century Breviary.*

**3. MULTIPLE PAGES, BOOK OF HOURS**

These pages are also from a Book of Hours produced in France circa 1475. They are on vellum, written by hand, and decorated. By now, you know about size, margins, rubrications, and how the illustrated letters acting as placeholders in the text. But something else that's very cool – when you line these pages up, you can see patterns of wear at the lower outer corners of each leaf. The darkening of the vellum here shows the frequency with which the owner turned the pages. Finger stains, from another century!

**4. MULTIPLE PAGES, BREVIARY**

These pages are from a Breviary, printed in Italy in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Breviaries included the script for the daily weekly prayer cycles of monks and nuns, which could be more complex than the prayers and rituals you see in a Book of Hours.

*Ask your student to make observations and compare them. Here are a few things they might mention...*

### **Difference: Hand-written vs. Printed**

No more cramped hands toiling over quill pens! Feel up and down the page and feel how the text is imprinted into the page. Today's printers lay the ink on top of the page, but back then, the metal type pressed into the paper to leave its mark.

With the introduction of Gutenberg's printing press in the 1450s, book production sped up considerably. More books at a cheaper price meant that more people could learn to read. We went from a looking-listening-speaking culture to a culture of reading and writing.

### **Difference: Vellum vs. Paper**

The first set of pages is written on vellum. The second set of pages is printed on paper! At this time in history, paper is replacing vellum because it is cheaper and faster to make. It's a lot less messy to make paper than chase down a cow or sheep and turn its skin into vellum!

### **Difference: Page Numbers**

Did you notice the page numbers on the upper right corners of printed pages? The Book of Hours pages don't have them! That is because sequential reading (i.e. reading a book from page 1-300) wasn't how books were typically used in the Middle Ages. Instead, books were divided into short sections (such as a single sermon, Gospel reading, Mass text, or cycle of prayers for a particular purpose or specific day). Other tools, such as running titles at the head of the page, marginal notes and line numbers, consistent ordering of particular texts in particular ways, and even the style and color of handwriting served as the visual cues that allowed people to navigate through their books.

With the rise of printing, page numbers became standard elements of books during the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and were extremely helpful with navigation in complex books like this Breviary.

### **Similarity: Decorated Initials**

Here you see the large initials signaling the different sections of text, with the very big fancy letters with the illustration introducing a major textual division.

**Similarity: Rubrication**

The red ink we see here acts in exactly the same way it does in the Book of Hours. The colors and initials help the reader makes better- and quicker – sense of the text.

**Similarity: Size**

While the sizing isn't exactly identical between these two books, both of them are technically considered to be "small format." Clearly, they were intended to be used by individuals, not large groups.

**CONCLUSIONS**

- Most early texts were religious. They were written by hand on vellum. Each book is unique.
- Larger-sized books often denoted group use. Smaller size denoted individual use.
- Books were expensive, and sometimes old book pages would be reused for other things (such as book binding). Some books were decorated with expensive materials, such as gold and lapis lazuli.
- Rubrications were red words, clauses, or sentences that highlighted the different sections of text.
- The wide margins of the books kept fingers from marring the text.
- Paper and the printing press made books cheaper and faster to produce. More people could start learning to read and this ultimately changed world culture.