The McVitty Book of Hours; Finding a Link to the Illustrations

Ashton Little
Hollins University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards

Part of the Ancient, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Art and Architecture Commons, and the Illustration Commons

Recommended Citation
Little, Ashton, "The McVitty Book of Hours; Finding a Link to the Illustrations" (2012). Undergraduate Research Awards. 5.
https://digitalcommons.hollins.edu/researchawards/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship and Creative Works at Hollins Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Awards by an authorized administrator of Hollins Digital Commons. For more information, please contact lvillel@hollins.edu, millerjc@hollins.edu.
When I started my McVitty Book of Hours research paper, I had only a mental outline of what I was interested in researching. I wanted to research some aspect of the illustrations but I had no idea which path to take. To narrow it down, I decided to go right to the source. I planned to work with the book itself first before I made any attempts at locating and using outside sources. I scheduled an appointment with special collections and was able to see the manuscript first-hand. At first glance, I was captivated by the images, especially those within the Hours of the Virgin, but daunted by my lack of understanding of the Latin in which the text is written. Without a basic understanding of what was written, I would be unable to determine which hour I was dealing with. With the translations complete, I compiled my findings into a research paper for my upper level, art history seminar, Gothic Art.

After completing this crucial step, I was able to extend my research into my senior thesis. This second phase of my research focused on the central and marginal images within the Hours of the Virgin. My focus was on determining whether or not the central and marginal images were done by the same artist, and if possible, attributing them to a medieval manuscript artist. However, I had no idea how to proceed with this task. I decided to look up popular iconography and cross reference it with the images in the McVitty manuscript. This included analyzing color, composition and style of illustrations from other manuscripts from the 15th century as a way of comparing them to the McVitty manuscript. After becoming well-versed on medieval manuscripts I was able to make an attribution for the marginal images of the McVitty manuscript. My attribution is that the marginal images were illustrated by the Master of Geneva Latini. While I was able to conclude the central images were done by a different artist than the Master of Geneva Latini, I concluded they were done by one artist who shall hereby be named the Master of the McVitty Hours. The majority of my original research was with the Book of Hours itself.

After the five months of study that resulted in two academic papers, I have discovered a passion for research. It may sound cliché, but the thrill of attributing an artist has made this entire process completely worthwhile. I look forward to furthering my research skills in both academic and professional settings. It wasn’t until this project that I felt I came into my own as researcher, and gained the confidence I’d been searching for throughout my senior year.
Ashton Little

Senior Art History Thesis

The McVitty Book of Hours; Finding a Link to the Illustrations

A Book of Hours, in the medieval period, was used as religious guide for the common layperson. A Book of Hours, or Horae, is composed of several different sections, beginning with a Calendar and ending with the Suffrages. Comprising the bulk of a Book of Hours were the Hours of the Virgin. The Hours of the Virgin, also known as the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, operates as a liturgical devotion to the Virgin Mary and is comprised of eight hours, where “each hour is composed of various antiphons and responses, psalms, hymns, canticles and prayers addressed to the Virgin Mary and appealing for her intercession.”¹ The hours consist of Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. The different hours were spoken at seven different times during the day, with the Matins and Lauds often spoken together at daybreak, Prime at 6:00 A.M, Terce at 9:00 A.M., Sext at Noon, None at 3:00 P.M., Vespers at sunset, and Compline in the evening.² The prayers within the Hours of the Virgin, in conjunction with the illustrations portraying the separate stages of the Virgin’s life, would “[become] a familiar, steadfast friend”³ over time and would help illuminate the layperson’s religious path in life.

The McVitty Book of Hours in the Wyndham Robertson Library Special Collection was given to the library by Samuel H. McVitty, a prominent businessman from the Roanoke valley.

The McVitty Book of Hours was just one of the many medieval texts Samuel H. McVitty

donated to Hollins University in 1943. As with all other *Horae*, the heart of the McVitty Book of Hours is the Hours of the Virgin, with religious psalms and beautiful illustrations, both central and marginal. The illustrations (figures 1-7) in the McVitty Book of Hours follow a timeline of the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Annunciation of Shepherds, the Adoration of Magi, the Presentation in Temple and The Flight into Egypt. These illustrations follow the Infancy Cycle, which charts Mary’s life from the Annunciation of her miraculous conception, to her Coronation or Flight into Egypt. The central illustrations are painted richly, in red-oranges, blues, gold’s, and greens, encapsulating the holiness of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child’s early life. The marginal illustrations too are ornamented with the same opulent colors, though without the religious overtones held in the central illustrations. However, while these illustrations paint a beautiful picture for the reader, as with most Books of Hours, there is no artist’s signature, nor any other indication of who produced these beautiful marginal images. Until now, the artist of the McVitty hours has been unidentified, but through my research as well as through close study of the McVitty Book of Hours, as well as other medieval sources, I have identified the author of the marginal illustrations to be the Master of Geneva Latini. I have also established a separate, unknown illuminator that created the central images in the Hours of the Virgin apart from the Master of Geneva Latini.

The Annunciation to the Shepherds, attributed to the Master of Geneva Latini, also known as Master of the Échevinage de Rouen, and his workshop has striking similarities in marginal illustration style within the McVitty Book of Hours. The Book of Hours MS M.1093, fol. 57r, Catalogue No. 50 in the Pierpont Morgan Library, bequeathed by Dr. Beatrice Bishop

---

4 McVitty Book of Hours
Berle in 1993, was illuminated by the Master of the Geneva Latini and his workshop, and originated in France, Rouen, ca. 1470. The marginal illustrations in the Annunciation of the Shepherds in the Morgan Manuscript are almost identical to those of the McVitty Hours. According to Roger Wieck, “[this artist] created models for the dozen or so standard illustrations for a typical Book of Hours and hired assistants for their ability to paint in his style. The quality of the shop’s production is consistent and high during the twenty-five years of the artist’s activity.”

By comparing the marginal illustrations from the McVitty Book of Hours to the Morgan Library Master of Geneva Latini Book of Hours, I believe the Master of Geneva Latini illustrated the margins within the McVitty Book of Hours.

The first hour in the Hours of the Virgin in the McVitty Horae is the hour of Matins (figure 1). The accompanying illustration is of the Annunciation, where the Virgin kneels, in a courtyard, at the feet of the angel Gabriel. With her hands piously folded in prayer and her eyes downcast, she calmly receives the news of her divine pregnancy. The scene is framed by what appears to be a window opening, allowing the reader to peek in and silently take part in the beginning of Mary’s great journey. The marginal illustrations, too, look in at the scene before them. Birds and half-human creatures passively gaze upon the Virgin and Gabriel, seemingly caught mid-movement. The background is a dark gold, with blue and red-orange swirls and green plants dominating the page. The same dark gold background is employed and in both Horae (Figure 1 & Figure 8), the Annunciation is the only illustration within the Hours of the Virgin to have a gold background. This seems to be a common design for the Master of Geneva Latini...
Latini’s Annunciation illustrations, as his Annunciation in the Book of Hours for Rouen Use (figure 9) has as solid gold background as well. It seems as if he is using the gold background as a marker for the beginning of the Hours of the Virgin. Also, unlike some of the later illustrations in both, the Annunciation page border has no geometric pattern to it. The background is just a solid square, with decoration overlaid on top of it. In addition, while the imagery might be different from one another, the overall style between the two is incredibly similar. The curling designs, red and blue in the McVitty Hours and white in the Geneva Latini Hours, are very alike in style. The Latini Hours also has red and blue designs that are almost identical to the ornamentation in the McVitty Hours.

The next hour in the McVitty Hours of the Virgin is the Lauds. This was generally spoken together with the previous hour Matins. Illustrated here is the Visitation, which shows Mary and Elizabeth in the middle of discussing Mary’s new pregnancy. Once again, the Blessed Virgin strikes a humble pose, as Elizabeth puts her hand to Mary’s stomach, feeling the unborn Christ Child. While Elisabeth looks startled at this new discovery, Mary simply closes her eyes in peaceful acknowledgement. Like the illustration in the previous hour, there is a window framing this blessed event. Upon comparison between the marginal illustration of the Visitation in the McVitty Horae and the Visitation in the Geneva Latini Horae, it is much easier to draw a connection between them stylistically than it was in the Matins. Atop the background of alternating green and gold squares, birds, flowers and humanlike creatures, like in the margin of the Matins, seem to secretly spy on the Virgin Mary and Elisabeth. The similarities between the two marginal illustrations are striking. The first connection between the two is the flowers and berries drawn on both. They are both prominent in each illustration, taking up much of the

---

marginal space. Also, the vines on which they grow are incredibly similar, both in style and color. However, the biggest resemblance between the two, and the most linking attribute, is much subtler than vines or berries.

Underneath both Visitation illustrations, there is a small passage of text which reads “Deus in adiutorium meum intende.” Translated, this means “Incline unto my aid O God.” This is the opening for all of the hours included in the Hours of the Virgin, with the exception of Matins and Compline. As with most illustrations in the Hours of the Virgin, the beginning letter of the Hour, the “D”, is ornately decorated and larger than the rest of the following letters (Figure 11). What is striking about these letters is that they are almost completely identical. In the Visitation in the McVitty Hours, the “D” is very round, blue with red circled ends, crissed-crossed in the middle with three-petaled flowers filling the gaps and white lines decorating the rest of the open space. The “D” itself is set against a gold background, darker than the rest of the margins gold background. Comparing this to the “D” in the Visitation illustration in the Latini Hours (Figure 12), it is almost impossible to differentiate between the two. This “D” too is rounded and a vibrant blue, with red circled ends, crissed-crossed in the middle with three-petaled flowers filling in the gaps, along with white decoration taking up the empty space of the “D”. This “D” is also set against a dark gold background, separating it from the rest of the marginal background. While there are slight differences, such as how the character in the Latini Hours juts out past its gold background slightly while the character in the McVitty Visitation does not, and there are fewer flowers in the Latini Visitation than the McVitty, such details are inconsequential. I believe it is impossible to compare the two side-by-side and dismiss them as not coming from the same artist.

---

The strongest marginal similarities however, are between the Nativity (figure 3) in the McVitty Horae and the Annunciation to the Shepherds (figure 13) in the Latini Horae. The Annunciation to the Shepherds marginal illustrations in the hour Terce from the Latini Hours is what initially sparked a possible connection between the two for me. When compared alongside one another, it is startling how similar the marginal illustrations between the two are. The margin in the Annunciation of the Shepherds in the Latini Hours has “foliate ornament arranged in triangular framework”\(^{11}\), which is almost identical to that of the McVitty Annunciation of the Shepherds. The colors of the triangles are alike as well. Both alternate between gold and white backgrounds. The marginal creatures that are prevalent in both books are also incredibly similar here. Both are half-human creatures that have brown matted fur and are residing peacefully within the margins. When compared in conjunction with one another, they could be mistaken from coming from the same Book of Hours.

While it is clear that the marginal illustrations in both Horae belong to the same artist, the Master of Geneva Latini, the same cannot be said for the central illustrator. The discrepancies in the central scenes between the two Horae are too great to believe the same artist illustrated both. While “the work of the [Geneva Latini] Master is easily recognizable by his pale stiff figures with large round eyes emphasized by grey shadows”\(^{12}\), the figures in the McVitty Hours are illustrated with rich colors and a sense of movement. And unlike the Master of Geneva Latini, the eyes of the figures done by the Master of the McVitty Hours are not overly round or emphasized in any way. On the contrary, the eyes of the figures in the McVitty Hours are often


downcast and paid minimal attention. By comparing the central illustrations of the McVitty Book of Hours to those of the Master of Geneva Latini hours, I determined that the Master of Geneva Latini is responsible for the marginal illustrations in the Hours of the Virgin, but not for the central illustrations.

In the Nativity illustration in the McVitty Horae (Figure 3), Joseph, Mary and the Christ Child are outside a small shed, as Mary and Joseph kneel over the child. Joseph extends out an arm to Mary, with a candle in hand. While Mary is engrossed in looking at the child lying at her knees, Joseph is in turn engrossed in Mary. Aside from farm animals, the small family is alone in this sacred moment. The same scene takes place in the Morgan Hours (Figure 13), though with several dissimilarities. Instead of Joseph gazing at Mary with an outstretched hand, he bows his head in submission, with his hands folded in prayer, over the Christ child. However, the biggest difference between the two is that in the Morgan Hours, there are several others present. At the back of the illustration, a man and woman peer into the barn, witnessing the blessed event. Behind Mary and Joseph, two angels kneel with their hands in prayer. The presence of angels at the nativity is a common theme found throughout illustrations in various Books of Hours, such as the Hours of Catherine of Cleves13 (Figure 14). In both illustrations, there are angels present at the birth of Christ. It is unusual that the Nativity scene in the McVitty Hours has no angels present. Due to the lack thereof, I think the Master of the McVitty Hours was attempting to create a close intimacy between the viewer and the illustration; a private interlude.

Comparing the two central images of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, there is a glaringly obvious difference between the two. In the McVitty Presentation (Figure 6), Jesus is

propped up by Joseph, while Mary kneels humbly in front of him, her head bowed and hands held together in silent prayer, radiating warmth and serenity. Behind her, a priest kneels while holding onto a basket containing two doves that are to be sacrificed in order to complete the presentation ritual. With the exception of the priest, Mary, Joseph and the Christ Child are the only figures depicted at this Presentation. However, in the Geneva Latini Horae (Figure 16), there is a small crowd gathered around to witness the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. Aside from Mary and the Christ Child, five other individuals witness this scene. Like angels at a Nativity scene, a crowd is the imagery frequently used when the Presentation is illustrated. For example, in the Presentation at the Temple by the Master of the Getty Epistles, there is a large crowd around the child. By electing to omit a crowd gathered around the Christ Child, the Master of the McVitty Hours has once again chosen to give a sense of closeness between the reader and the holy family. Also, the Master of the McVitty Hours has placed the Presentation in an open-air room, with humble furnishings, as opposed to the more ornate, indoor setting the Master of Geneva Latini chose as the backdrop for his Presentation. Along with eliciting a personal relationship, the Master of the McVitty Hours has also made the blessed family much more attainable and tangible to the reader.

In typical Hours of the Virgin, there are a total of eight hours. The last two hours are the Vespers and Compline. The illustrations that can complement the Vespers can be either The Flight into Egypt or the Massacre of the Innocents. For the Compline, the illustration can portray The Flight into Egypt, the Massacre of the Innocents or the Coronation of the Virgin. Though

http://www.medievalbooksofhours.com/advancedtutorial/tutorial_advanced_onlinetutorial_images_virgin_matins.html#virgin
there is a possible overlap in illustrations, they follow one another, making it easy to identify which hour is which, such as in the Geneva Latini Hours. However, the McVitty Book of Hours has a different layout than the typical Hours of the Virgin. Where most Books of Hours have illustrations for the Vespers and the Compline, the McVitty Horae only has one. The seventh illustration in the McVitty Hours shows the Virgin Mary, Christ Child and Joseph on their Flight into Egypt. Because both the Vespers and Compline can both be represented pictorially by the Flight into Egypt, it is hard to determine which hour is actually in the McVitty Book of Hours. The only identifying factor is that the prayer beginning the hour is the standard opening for an hour within the Hours of the Virgin, not the special opening of the Compline. The Vespers begin with “Deus in adiutorium meum intende,” while the Compline begins with “Converte nos Deus salutaris noster.” As a result, I believe that the Vespers and the Compline in the McVitty Book of Hours have been combined.

Judging the Flight into Egypt in the McVitty Hours (Figure 7) against the Geneva Latini Flight into Egypt (Figure 17) the central illustrations are distinctly separate from one another. Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus are fleeing into Egypt in order to escape King Herrod and his massacre of innocent infants. In spite of this urgency, the saintly family pictured in the McVitty Book of Hours does not seem to be fleeing in any sense. Instead, they peacefully stroll down an empty, open path. Joseph does glance behind them, but with no immediate sense of anxiety. In complete contrast to this tranquil picture, the Flight into Egypt within the Latini Hours has not only a sense of foreboding for the Christ Child and his parents, but also graphic imagery painted in the background. While Mary herself looks calm, she is merely the serene eye within a violent

16 The McVitty Book of Hours
18 Ibid: http://medievalist.net/hourstxt/bvm1com.htm
storm. Behind the small family, appalling deeds are taking place. A pair of men clad in blue tunics fight, weapons brandished in the upper left-hand corner. More startlingly, a man holding a dagger grasps a lifeless infant while the child’s mother tries in vain to stop him. All around Mary and her family are violent, senseless acts that they are fleeing. Any reader looking at this image can feel only a sense of horror as well as anxiety for the welfare of the Christ Child, and the rest of the innocent children. The Master of Geneva Latini has painted a frightening scene in order to grab the attention of the reader and instill them with a sensation of dread. The Flight into Egypt in the McVitty Hours however, gives the reader a sense of serenity and quietness. They are able to reflect upon the reading within this hour without being distracted by shocking scenes of murder. The emotion in the central scene is reduced so that the reader may observe their last hours of the day free of unrest.

There is clear evidence through the past three comparisons that the Master of Geneva Latini did not illustrate the central images in the Hours of the Virgin in the McVitty Hours. From these blatant discrepancies between the McVitty illustrations and the Latini illustrations, along with several key similarities between every central image in the Hours of the Virgin, I concluded that a single illustrator illuminated these Hours. This illustrator, hereby named the Master of the McVitty Hours, is characterized not by the Master Latini’s differences, but by his own parallels in the central images of each hour in the Hours of the Virgin. The Master of the McVitty Hours has several themes throughout his illustrations, such as familial intimacy and an attainable closeness for the reader. He has quite a few technical similarities as well, such as the eyes of his figures and a characteristic rock formation that is present in every hour with the exception of the Matins. Looking through each hour of the Hours of the Virgin, it is possible to see a trend in style and iconography which all point to a single author.
Looking through the seven hours in the Hours of the Virgin, there is an overwhelming sense of intimacy between the holy family and the reader. In scenes such as the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple and the Flight into Egypt, where a crowd is common iconography in these scenes, there are no other people besides the family itself, with the exception of a priest. This is not the case in just these two hours either. In other hours such as the Annunciation and Nativity, there is again an overpowering feeling of intimacy and attainableness to the holy family. In lieu of indoor settings, the central images all take place outdoors. There are no ornate rooms in which Mary resides. The reader feels as if Mary and the Christ Child himself are within reach of them at all times. From the beginning, the Master of the McVitty Horae sets out a trend of closeness and familiarity that travels through every hour.

Aside from overall trends in sentiment, there are minute details throughout the McVitty Hours that all point to a single artist as well. With the exception of the first hour, every single hour within the Hours of the Virgin has the same large rock formation residing somewhere in the background. This rock formation, acting almost like an artist’s signature, is evidence that the Master of the McVitty Hours illustrated the central images independent from the marginal illustrations. Another small but significant detail is the attention, or lack thereof, to the eyes of his figures. The eyes of every figure throughout the different hours are almost always downcast. There is no emphasis on facial features, such as hooded eyes or protruding noses. Instead, the attention is cast to the inherent movement his figures seem to possess. Although Mary is often motionless in prayer, her body still has an intrinsic sense of movement and liteness to it. It is because of linking characteristics such as these that I am able to name the Master of the McVitty Hours as the single artist of the McVitty Hours.
Through my research of the McVitty Book of Hours, I have been able to determine two separate artists for the Hours of the Virgin; the Master of Geneva Latini and the Master of the McVitty Hours. The Master of Geneva Latini is the illustrator for the margins in the Hours of the Virgin, while the Master of the McVitty Hours illustrated the central images. This is common practice and would not be unusual for a 15th century medieval manuscript such as the McVitty Book of Hours. By identifying both the marginal illustrator as well as the central illustrator, I have created a path for future study of the McVitty Book of Hours. The attribution of the McVitty Book of Hours to the Master of Geneva Latini provides a link from our Special Collections to all research previously done on the attributed artist, as well as all future research to come. By naming a single artist as the central illustrator, there is now an opportunity for further research.
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5
Bibliography


6. McVitty Book of Hours


