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Alexa Sand
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INTRODUCTION

SELF-REFLECTION, DEVOTION, AND VISION IN THE IMAGE OF THE BOOK OWNER AT PRAYER

> Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense.
>
> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*[1]

Just as the delicate soft tissues of organisms long extinct sometimes deposit their ghostly imprint in the fossil record owing to a fortuitous confluence of environmental factors, so the interiority of human individuals sometimes leaves a trace in the material of history. Such traces collect in the historical strata of periods when interest in and concern for the experience of inner life flowers, and when a sufficient verbal and visual vocabulary for describing interiority has been developed. The later Middle Ages is one such period, and it is not surprising, given the wealth of expressions of interiority that arise in its varied arts, that scholars, philosophers, and ideologues have often turned to this era when seeking the putative origins of modern selfhood. Yet when examined in their own right, not as forebears to modernity but as representatives of the past as a foreign culture, the words and images that late medieval people used to articulate and to formulate their understanding of what it meant to be "alone, dreaming in a world that is immense" reveal a radically different concept of self and of self-perception.

A demonstration of the historical quiddity of the late medieval experience of interiority can be glimpsed in a full-page miniature in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons, a prayer book dating from about 1290 custom-made for an aristocratic laywoman who lived in the diocese of Amiens in Picardy (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.729). The miniature depicts a woman in three-quarter profile kneeling in prayer before an altar

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on which sit enthroned the Virgin and Child, perhaps a representation of a polychrome sculptural image (Color Plate I).[2] The lady wears a luxurious golden cloak embroidered with heraldic charges in red, and her hair is covered in an elegant snood and band that identify her as married and upper class. Her lapdog waits beside her attentively, her prayer book sits open on her prie-dieu, and behind her an open door suggests that she prays in an enclosed and specially designated space. All these details index her high social status and her wealth. The elaborate gold spires and tracery of the frame, adorned with blazoned shields, further indicate that this space is both sacred and particular to a distinct group of people whose heraldic bearings are represented.

Beyond the constellation of signs that establish the noblewoman's role in the world, the painting also concerns her spiritual identity. The Virgin and Child on the altar seem just as visually attuned to her presence as she is to theirs; she raises her hands, palms pressed together, and lifts her eyes up toward them while the Virgin places a hand on the shoulder of her son and the Child raises one hand in benediction, looking directly at the supplicant. The interaction is charged with restrained but intense spiritual energy: the lady's fervent devotion, the holy pair's solicitude. It draws on the well-known iconography of the Adoration of the Magi, and amplifies and personalizes the subject of the enthroned Virgin and Child often found at this point in Books of Hours – the beginning of matins of the Little Office of the Virgin. To underscore this allusion, just such an image of the Virgin and Child in majesty appears in the large initial D that begins the text on the facing folio (Figure 1). The book that sits open and unregarded by the lady on the prie-dieu can be understood as the book in our hands, just as the lady, clearly identified by her heraldic clothing, can be understood as the owner of the book and the originally intended primary audience for this image. Thus, the painting represents the conditions of its own viewing, and its subject reflects the viewing subject, creating a mise-en-abyme, or interior duplication, well suited to the heraldic sensitivity of its audience and the confessional ideal of making the self visible to the self.[3]

The reflexive character of this painting harmonizes with its setting; a combined Book of Hours and Psalter, this was a highly personalized object, its texts and images carefully selected for a specific person, perhaps at the direction of a family member and with the input of a spiritual adviser. Such self-reflecting books and their self-reflecting images of book owners lie at the center of this study, for although the image of the kneeling lady from the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons and other pictures like it are well known and often reproduced (the Morgan Library at one time sold note cards that featured this particular miniature), their status as images, their function within devotion, and their relationship to the gamut of social and

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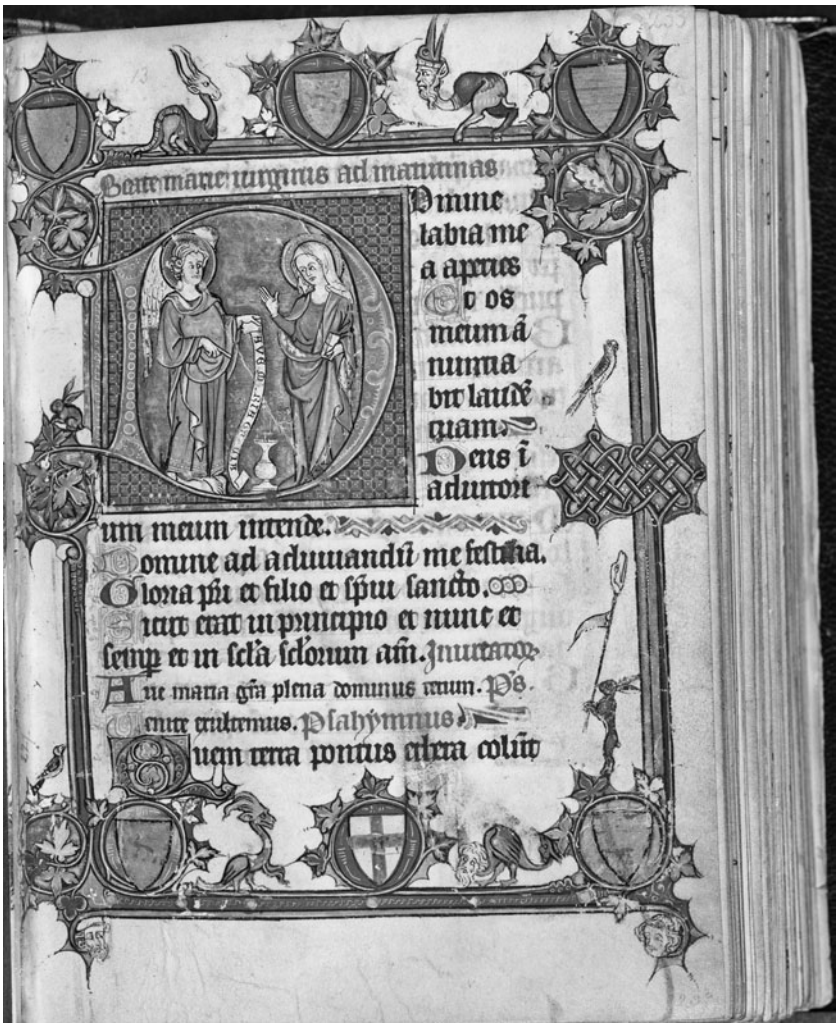

1. Initial D with Virgin in majesty, matins of the Virgin, Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons, Amiens, ca. 1280–1290 (New York, Morgan Library, MS M.729, fol. 233). ©The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

spiritual practices in play around and within them have not been closely examined. This book represents the first critical history of these owner images, situating them in terms of the visual sources on which they draw, the beliefs and concerns with which they engage, and the visual practices and mental habits they both respond to and inculcate. This investigation recognizes the self-reflecting image of the book owner as an example of how incorporeal human experiences like devotional meditation leave indelible traces in the material record of history.

The vast interiority described by Bachelard – the experience of the self by the self – is strikingly visible in the art and literature of the later Middle Ages in western Europe. An astounding array of evidence for a strong

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and widespread fascination with the inner life of individuals speaks to a focus on interiority driven by church reform. At the same time, interest in interiority was also fueled by the vibrancy of vernacular literature, by the growing access to books and learning associated with the development of the urban universities, and by the competitive striving of aristocrats, princes, and wealthy merchants. Above all, the period between about 1200 and 1350, with which I am concerned in this book, saw the flowering of lay piety as expressed in devotional practices that emphasized luxuriously adorned physical settings, richly illustrated books, and intensively sensorial rhetoric, especially the language of visual and visionary representation. The emphasis on the visible complemented and corresponded to increased attention to self-scrutiny in the confessional process and to the visibility of the human soul before God. This was an era of texts that proclaimed themselves mirrors: mirrors of princes, mirrors of the world, mirrors of the Church, and mirrors of the soul. The world itself could be and often was understood as that mirror famously described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:12, through which "we see in a dark manner" that which we will see "face to face" at the end of time.[4] In such a climate, it is not surprising to find that people exerted extraordinary efforts to develop tools that would help them not only see better but understand the nature of their own seeing more clearly and refine their perceptual acuity with regard to the seeing of the self. To peer into one's own soul was, after all, a necessary if grueling prerequisite for eternal life.

The images of book owners found in numerous thirteenth- and fourteenth-century devotional books from France and other francophone regions of northern Europe constitute one technology that could be used in this critical process of self-examination. I call these reflexive images because, like the reflexive form of verbs in French and other Romance languages, such pictures form a recursive loop between subject and object – the viewer sees herself seeing and thereby attains a heightened awareness of her own visibility and her own vision. I argue that these images emerge from a network of pictorial and devotional practices that stretch back many centuries, but that despite this heritage they represent a new way of thinking about – and seeing – the self in relation to the sacred. I contend that although distinct from other varieties of portrait-like representations in late medieval visual culture, the self-reflecting image of the owner at prayer within the pages of a book participated in the emerging interest in the variety of means by which a picture could establish itself as authoritatively conveying some essential truth about a specific person.

Questions of gender and class identity receive significant attention here because of the very specific audiences toward whom these images were addressed – upper-class laypeople, and primarily women. Because these

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images encourage the people they address to regard themselves as both seeing subjects and visible objects, they suggest the relevance of modern theories of the gaze as a tool of social regulation and gender construction to our understanding of medieval practices of looking. The use of the vernacular in many of the manuscripts under consideration and the interaction between devotional pictures and devotional words also figure prominently in my analysis, as word and image are incontrovertibly linked in the performances encouraged by and organized around these books. The influence of the Crusades and of the engagement of the francophone aristocracies of northern Europe with the world beyond the Rhône and the Alps are also of interest. Much of the visual material that contributed to the formation of the reflexive image of the book owner came from the German-speaking lands, Italy, and Byzantium. All three regions were brought into focus for the francophone world through the lens of the Crusades. I am interested in the variety of ways in which books, with the totality of their texts and images, served as idealized and corrective reflections of their owners.

Although the miniature at the opening of matins of the Virgin in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons is the boldest statement of the book's function as a mirror or duplicate of its owner, this concern with the visual and bodily identification between book and owner manifests itself throughout the manuscript. The manuscript's famous image of the Holy Face explicitly introduces the theme of Christ as a mirror of the self (Color Plate II). It also focuses attention on the materiality of images, their manufactured quality, the bodily perception of them, and the relationship of all this to the immaterial, divinely generated, and spiritual realm of visionary experience. Likewise, the Virgin and Child on the altar in the miniature of the book owner at prayer is simultaneously a polychrome sculpture of an identifiable type and a divinely activated object, perhaps even a heavenly apparition.

The images of the owner at prayer and of the Holy Face in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons both testify to the centrality of reflection and reflexivity to the visual culture of devotion toward the end of the thirteenth century. They share this concern with visualizing the visionary experiences toward which prayer and devotion were intended to lead practitioners with numerous other pictures that appear mostly as illuminations in manuscripts dating from the period between the middle of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth. These representations of praying book owners find their earliest widespread expression in the middle of the thirteenth century, quietly appearing in the margins and subsidiary spaces of manuscript books created for individuals of the aristocracy and the emerging urban upper class in France and England – in other words, that small but growing portion of the medieval laity that possessed

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both the means to buy books and the rudiments of literacy to read them. Predominantly, but by no means exclusively, the subjects of these discreet portraits were women. They are often lumped together with a broad category of medieval imagery termed donor portraits, but they do not belong there. A donor portrait primarily concerns itself with commemoration: its subject is, for example, the aristocratic patron of an ecclesiastical institution, or the suave courtier hoping to garner his liege-lord's favor with a gift of a luxuriously illuminated Bible. Images such as that of the kneeling woman in the Psalter-Hours of Yolande of Soissons depict owners and users, not donors; sometimes they may have been the patrons of the works in which they appear, but that is not why they appear there. Just as often, the subjects of these representations were the recipients, rather than the commissioners, of the works, which were frequently given as gifts to brides or to women entering a religious vocation, and were commonly passed down from one woman to another.[5]

As a result, sometimes these images of owners came to function in a memorial capacity, for example when a book's original owner (sometimes called a *destinaire*, a useful term for its implications of intent) died and the book was passed on to another person. The image of the owner could then be construed as commemorative; but equally likely, the book's new owner might be inscribed into the book and view the praying figure in some ways as a proxy. It may have been helpful, in this sense, that these images lack the physiognomic accuracy valued in later devotional portraits – beginning, as Stephen Perkinson has shown, around 1350.[6] As opposed to images that depicted individual physiognomy and body type in greater detail, the signs by which these early representations of book owners identified their subjects were easily adapted or changed to suit a new owner or a new phase of life for the original owner; heraldry can be repainted, a married woman's snood replaced with a widow's hood, secular clothing turned into a religious habit. In many medieval books intended for personal devotion, later owners made changes and additions to the contents, indicating that although their function as memory objects was potent, inherited books remained adaptable tools for the performance of devotion on the part of the present owner. The memorial and reflective positions of the viewer vis-à-vis the image would not necessarily preclude one another; as a mirror of the owner's identity, the book contained memorials of its earlier possessors, who were often important figures in the constitution of that identity. Even where the gender of the viewer did not match the gender of the depicted figure, the mind trained to allegorical thinking, as most educated, upper-class medieval minds were, could make the connection between the praying figure and the soul, gendered feminine in both Latin and French.[7]

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This is not to deny the complex and mutually entangled relationship between representations of donors and patrons, the deceased, and the owners of books in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century visual culture. The appearance of kneeling, praying figures of living individuals in monumental art forms such as sculpted portals and large-scale altarpieces in France and Italy around the same moment in the third quarter of the thirteenth century suggests that the iconography of the reflexive mode developed primarily in book illumination and smaller devotional objects also resonated in more publicly visible venues. The tingle of self-recognition in these larger-scale images would have been felt by an extremely limited sector of their potential audience, but the implications of representing the living in attitudes of supplication could have powerful semiotic thrust in a public or semipublic viewing space. M. Cecilia Gaposchkin has argued, for example, that the king and queen depicted kneeling before the Virgin in the Porte Rouge of Notre-Dame, Paris (ca. 1270) may be intended to represent Louis IX and his queen, Marguerite of Provence, but they are by no means commemorative of any act of patronage or donation; rather, they visualize an ecclesiastical view of authority, in which the Church, embodied by the Virgin, is not only the source of royal legitimacy but its model as well, a message that would have appealed to the canons of Notre-Dame, who entered the building through the Porte Rouge.[8] A less subtle and more frankly propagandistic version of this same formula appears in Simone Martini's St. Louis of Toulouse altarpiece of 1317. Here, the enthroned Louis, clad in his episcopal regalia, receives his crown of martyrdom from a pair of angels while his younger brother Robert of Anjou kneels and prays at the foot of the throne and in turn receives his crown from Louis. As Julian Gardner observed, the political implications of the mise-en-scène in the panel outweigh any anticipated spiritual response on the part of the king that the painting might have inspired.[9] Robert's legitimacy and his subservience to the authority of the Church are more at stake than his future salvation.

The difference between such representations as the Porte Rouge and the St. Louis of Toulouse altarpiece and earlier images explicitly commemorating acts of patronage or donation – ranging from the depictions of donors in Gothic stained glass windows to the apse mosaic at San Vitale in Ravenna and its peers – is notable. Whereas the earlier images often stress the materiality of the offering by depicting it in miniature in the donor's hands, these later monumental images stress supplication and the personal, affective nature of the relationship between the supplicant and the representative of divinity. Recent studies of donor imagery in a variety of contexts have made clear that the memorial function of the donor portrait was closely tied to its emphasis on the tactile, sensorial, material nature of the donation; for example, Corinne Schleif's work on the sensory

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range of late medieval memorials has occasioned her to trace the genealogy of what she terms "haptic" donor imagery, in which donors touch or proffer a miniature or metonymic image of their offering. Calling on both psychoanalytic and anthropological theories of the gift, Schleif investigates the way in which the gift memorialized in the donor image is relentlessly recuperated even in the face of its, or its giver's, absence.[10]

Images of supplication, as distinct from donation, are deeply implicated in the development of affective piety from the late eleventh century forward. However, despite the strong kinship between donor and owner iconography, I do not directly discuss the diffusion of either supplicatory or gift-giving donor imagery in the more public context of portal sculpture or monumental painting, where its political and social implications are so complex, and so different from those of owner images in books and small works of devotional art, as to demand a more thorough investigation than the scope of this book allows.

Also beyond the scope of my discussion is the appearance of the kneeling, praying figure in funerary art, though it is worth noting the clear iconographic relationship that implies a deep conceptual connection between images of book owners and images of the dead. An early example of a tomb relief that employs the emotionally charged formula of a kneeling couple flanking a figure of the standing Virgin and Child is that commemorating Isabella of Aragon, the first wife of Philip III of France, in the Duomo of Cosenza, Italy (Figure 2).[11] Both Isabella, on the left, and Philip, on the right, kneel in supplication under a canopy of Gothic tracery that might equally be found in any number of French prayer books from the same period. Although this type of tomb was hardly the norm in Gothic Europe, it was widely diffused: examples include the Bronnbach epitaph of about 1350 from the Upper Rhine, in which the deceased contemplate an image of the Veronica, and the side panel from a Milanese tomb of the early 1340s (probably for Uberto III Visconti) by Giovanni di Balduccio, now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which features Saint Peter Martyr presenting kneeling figures of a man, a youth, and a woman, all in prayer. Jaroslav Folda describes the tomb slab of William of St. John, bishop of Nazareth, from Acre, dating to 1290; at the feet of the standing bishop kneels a diminutive layman, perhaps, Folda suggests, a relative of the bishop, commemorating his sponsorship of the slab and praying both for the soul of the bishop and for the bishop's intercession on his behalf. Whatever the motive for including the supplicant, he resembles other figures of pilgrims and supplicants in Crusader art, where their appearance is clearly at once commemorative and devotional, whether in the context of pilgrimage churches or icons for individual contemplation.[12]

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2. Philip III of France and Isabella of Aragon kneel to the Virgin, relief panel from the tomb of Isabella, Cosenza (Calabria), Duomo, after 1271. Photo Scala/Art Resource

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As the preceding paragraphs begin to suggest, the kneeling, praying figure is pervasive in the art of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, from the Latin east to the German north. It can be deployed in an immense variety of media, on varying scales, and to very different ends. For this reason, I have not attempted here to provide a comprehensive account or history of the type. Instead, I have chosen to focus almost exclusively on one strand of a complex phenomenon: how a particular visual practice – the reflexive representation of the book owner – emerged in a specific social, historical, and religious context, namely the devotional activities of upper-class laypeople in the French-speaking cultures of Northern Europe. The role of Italy, as a source of some of both the theological and devotional currents that inform the owner portrait, is acknowledged but not exhaustively explored. Intriguingly, the owner portrait never became as central to the visual repertoire of Italian books for personal devotional use as it did in the north. Instead, fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian portraits, as Aby Warburg pointed out, play a subtle but important role in the visual rhetoric that cemented the relationship between the living personalities that formed the nucleus of the early modern city-state and the sacred and heroic narratives that framed and legitimized their power.[13]

The German-speaking regions of northern Europe pose a challenge insofar as this study of the emergence and diffusion of the owner portrait is concerned. Clearly, cultural exchange between the French- and German-speaking courts was lively in the period under consideration: intermarriage of comital, ducal, and even royal dynasties from either side of the language divide was not uncommon, and with such marriages went, among other things, books for prayer and contemplation. Mercantile exchange and the concentration of artists and scribes around major border-region centers such as Metz and Arras encouraged cross-fertilization; one of the factors in the incredible inventiveness and high-level craftsmanship of art from Flanders, the Lorraine, and the Rhineland in the high to later Middle Ages has to have been the confluence of German and French currents. Many of the works discussed in the early chapters of this book come from Germany, where imperial and ecclesiastical patronage in the central Middle Ages spurred the development of a nuanced pictorial vocabulary concerned with authorship, scribal and artistic skill, donation, supplication, and visionary experience. However, what happens with this vocabulary in Germany in the later Middle Ages seems for the most part quite distinct from what happens in France, French-speaking Flanders, and England. The famous image of Duke Ludwig and Duchess Agnés of Liegnitz and Brieg kneeling in agitated prayer on either side of a much larger Saint Hedwig that appears in the Vita of Hedwig, now at the Getty Library (MS Ludwig XI 7, fol. 12v), has far more in common with older, imperial models of depicting

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