With the possible exception of Rosary beads, the Book of Hours was the most popular devotional accessory of the Middle Ages. First produced in the early thirteenth century for wealthy lay patrons (many of them women), it was democratised in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by the production-line techniques in the stationers' shops of England and Europe, and even more by the arrival of printing. By the end of the fifteenth century, modestly well-to-do shopkeepers and small farmers could afford a devotional aid which had once been the exclusive prerogative of the aristocracy (see Personal Spiritual Life).

Content
Dedicated to the cult of the Virgin Mary and based round simplified versions of the eight monastic 'Hours' from Matins to Compline, the Book of Hours came eventually to include also a Calendar showing all the feast days of the year (see The Church Year), local as well as national, the Office of the Dead, the Penitential Psalms and Gradual Psalms, the Litany of the Saints, and a selection of other prayers - on the Passion of Christ, on the Joys and sorrows of the Virgin, in praise of and in petition to the saints (see The Communion of Saints). The 'Hours' themselves were often illustrated with pictures of the key Gospel incidents involving the Virgin, from the Annunciation to Christ's burial. Books of Hours might also contain other devotional images, such as pictures of the face of Christ ('the vernicle') or of his wounds. A book of Hours might therefore constitute a sort of anthology in words and pictures of the best-loved and most familiar elements of the Christian faith.

Annunciation to the Virgin Mary: the popularity of the Cult of the Virgin is demonstrated in the art of Books of Hours of this period.
Origin/Date: 15th century
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Key:
Interactive glossary terms
Links to other pages on the DVD-ROM

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