

THE DOUGLAS HYDE GALLERY

Devotion

**Book of Hours and Kirsten Pieroth
by Dr. Jill Unkel**



Aesthetically [the works] have a sort of an overboarding richness to them that also certain books of hours have. There is a calligraphic element as well ... how the existing image and text page relates to the way I apply the black paint on the page ...

— Kirsten Pieroth

The artist refers above to her work *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, composed of thirty-five sheets from a German newspaper. Taking inspiration from the mass-produced images, Pieroth selected a variety of objects, food and body parts to create printed patterns as a visual

commentary on what lay beneath. The deep black ink of the artist's printed objects creates a boldness and richness that pops off the pages like the gold used by medieval workshops for books of hours. The production of these manuscripts was itself a well-oiled machine, like the workings of a daily newspaper, with numerous hands each playing their part, from the parchmenters who provided the pages and the rubricators who structured the layout to give space for both textual and decorative elements, to the scribes, illuminators and binders. Here, Pieroth creates her own space, her images commenting on the articles and pictures already found on the page, almost like the drolleries (people, birds, animals and monsters) that feature in the margins of many medieval manuscripts.

Pieroth further alters the newspaper sheets by rotating them counter clockwise by ninety degrees, to reflect the 'landscape of society'. The pages are arranged across two walls in the gallery in a stepped-pyramid shape, a shape possessing its own spiritual connotation. The experience is not dissimilar to the display of dis-bound pages from a fifteenth-century book of hours in the Chester Beatty exhibition *Miniature Masterpiece: The Coëtivy Hours* held in 2018. While the individually mounted pages are clearly related to one another, they are removed from their original context, experienced as individual works of art rather than as a complete book. Each page retains its individual relationship between image and word, but is experienced in a new frame through the lens of the curator, or here through the reinterpretation and recontextualisation of the artist.

Like newspapers, books of hours are a collection of disparate stories (or prayers) organised into themed sections. The title 'book of hours' is derived from the main set of prayers contained within them, a simplified version of the Divine Office, called the Little Office of the Virgin. The Divine Office is the collection of prescribed prayers sung or chanted daily at set times. These times are known as the canonical hours—from matins (also known as the 'Night Office') well before dawn to compline before bed. The versions contained within books of hours was intended for private use by the laity. Books of hours also frequently contained a calendar of feast days, an abbreviated gospel story told chronologically, the seven Penitential Psalms, prayers to the Virgin, prayers to the saints (suffrages), and, often, prayers written in the vernacular language of the patron (the majority of the text being in Latin). While the general outline of the content was repeated from book to book, the number of prayers and the quality and quantity of illumination could vary greatly, depending on the importance of the commission and the heft of a patron's

purse. Early printed versions reflected the structure and ornamentation of their manuscript precursors. Today described as the medieval ‘best-seller’, books of hours could be said to be as ubiquitous as the newspaper is today.

Pieroth sees the newspaper as a “kind of *ora et labora* [pray and labour] item”. The devotion to reading a daily paper is a modern, secular version of the practice of daily prayers. While we as modern viewers will see books of hours as works of art (which they undoubtedly are) they were also objects of devotion used to assist with prayer in a private, reflective experience. The daily reading of newspapers is also an individual experience, its content reflected upon by the reader.



*Prigent de Coëtivy praying and St Michael slaying a demon, The Coëtivy Hours, 1443-1445
courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin*

The regularity, or pattern of prayer, in books of hours is introduced by a liturgical calendar where the year is presented as a sequence of feast days, often emphasising saints local to the production of the manuscript. These pages are typically illustrated with the cycle of zodiac signs and/or the labours of month. The labours are mostly agricultural, seasonal practices, such as the hay harvest in June and threshing in August. The ordering of these occupations is seen as a response to God as the great mathematician, and his ordering of the universe. The images construct an association between the physical labours of the land and the devotional practice of prayer—the annual round of seasonal labours likened to the cyclical nature of the liturgical calendar.



left: 'Threshing and Virgo for August' from a Book of Hours, Tours and Rouen, 1485–1490 courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

right: 'St. Michael vanquishing the devil' from the Chester Beatty Hours, Mazarine Master, Paris (France), 1408 courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

"Most objects that I printed ... I see like modern devotional devices. They give a certain idea or concept of life and life standards to live by in the modern world."

— Kirsten Pieroth

In *ruler* (pictured below), Pieroth printed this object over the background of a steel-mill worker. The shape of the ruler corresponds to the tool held by the worker, and reflects, as Pieroth puts it, the battle and conquest of production and industrialisation. The steel-worker's output is measured as a ruler measures, as the harvest can be measured, only for the steel-worker her labour is not seasonal but constant. In both cases the fruits of the output are primarily enjoyed not by the labourers but by those removed from the physical activity. The patrons of gilded books of hours saw the labours as illustrated within them not as physical acts but rather symbolic devotional ones. The battle Pieroth sees in the *ruler* between the worker and industrialisation could be equated with the eternal battle between good and evil as presented in books of hours. This spiritual battle is often portrayed as a earthly one, such that the Archangel Michael is armed with lance and shield. So too Pieroth comments here on how the body manoeuvres through the struggle of industrialisation.



above: Kirsten Pieroth, *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, 2019 (detail), ruler. Newspaper pages, paint, in thirty-five parts, 40 x 57.5 cm each. Image: Courtesy of the artist

below: Kirsten Pieroth, *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, 2019 (detail), peach stones. Newspaper pages, paint, in thirty-five parts, 40 x 57.5 cm each. Image: Courtesy of the artist



The literal fruits of labourers are the subject of Pieroth's *peach stones* (pictured above). The artist notes how important fruits are in symbolic terms, in particular how grapes were seen in Greek myth as a symbol of prosperity. Here the artist purposefully employed not the fruit itself but its residue. The lemon seeds and peach stones are printed onto stock-market pages creating a kind of galaxy cluster of marks to represent something far from reach.

In medieval Christian thought, not only was the richness of the harvest seen as a sign of God's glory, but individual plants and flowers often held particular symbolic value. The strawberry plant made frequent appearances in medieval paintings, tapestries and illuminated manuscripts. Its distinctive trifoliate leaves were thought to refer to the Trinity,

the white flowers reflect Mary's purity and the red fruit is an allusion to Christ's sacrificial blood. The strawberry plant was often illustrated beside images of the Virgin Mary, relating both to her role in the salvation of mankind as the mother of Jesus, and her purity as demonstrated by her Immaculate Conception (pictured below left). The strawberry plant is painted besides the *Meeting at the Golden Gate* of Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim, in the lower margin of the Coëtivy page (pictured below right).

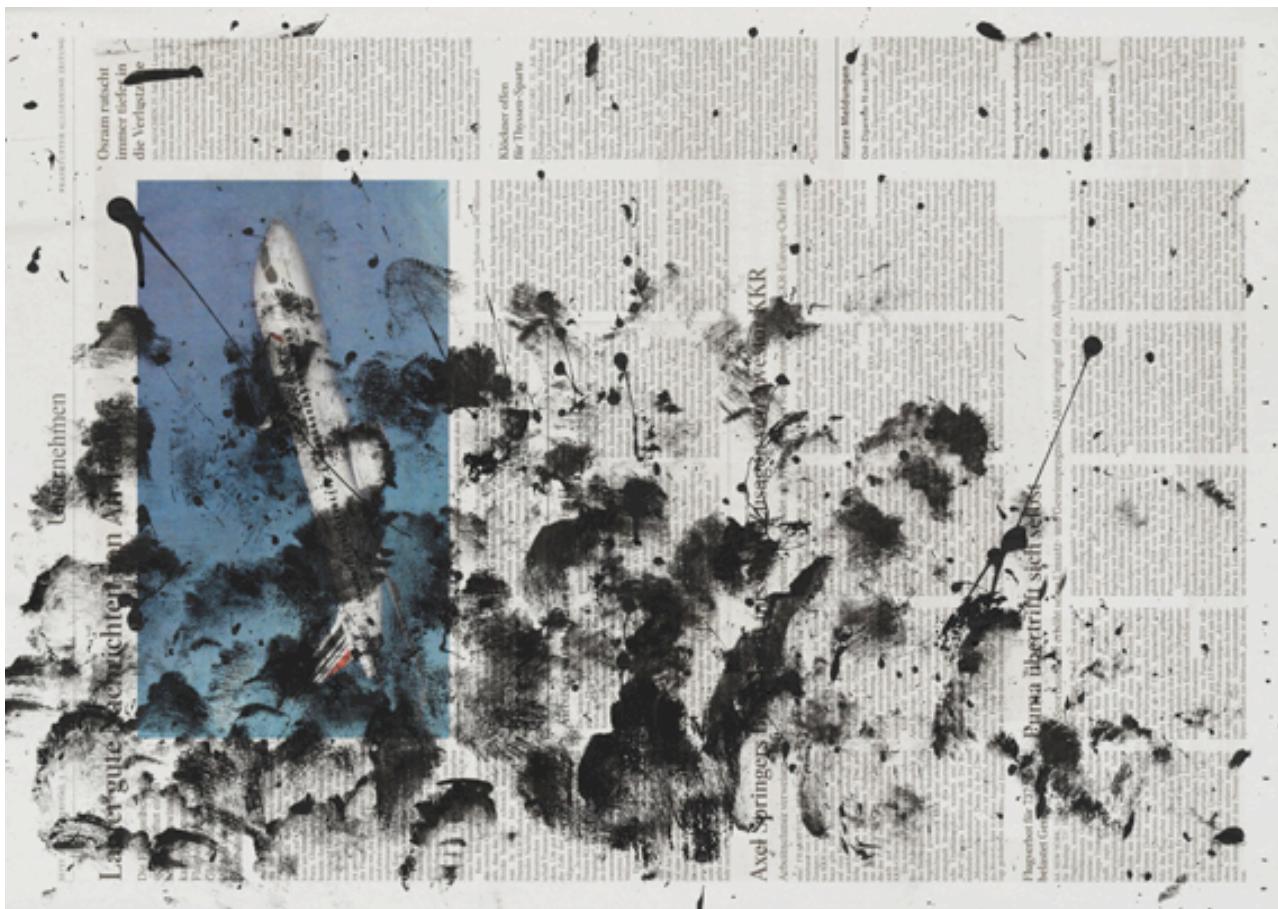


left: 'The Visitation' from the *Hamilton Field Hours*, Master of Walters 219, Châlons-sur-Champagne (France), 1412–1430 courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

right: 'St. Anne, The Virgin and Child' from the *Coëtivy Hours*, Dunois Master, Paris (France), 1443–1445 courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

"The photographic images on a lot of the prints show certain aspects of what ... to thrive for, to be part of in order to be rewarded at some moment in time. Aircraft, the conquest of space, financial towers, stock markets charts, personal physical performance images, labour ..."

— Kirsten Pieroth



Kirsten Pieroth, *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, 2019 (detail), knee. Newspaper pages, paint, in thirty-five parts, 40 x 57.5 cm each. Image: Courtesy of the artist

Printed atop an image of an airplane taking off, now upended and resembling (pictured above), the artist noted, a firework shooting into the sky like a celebration of industrial devices and advancement, is the devotional gesture of the artist kneeling on the page. Kneeling is a commonly accepted act of devotion and is found with frequency in the miniature paintings of books of hours. It is a gesture of prayer and employed to denote faith, gratitude, repentence and the request for assistance. The gesture is often accompanied by an upward glance, toward the heavens, as King David does in this miniature (pictured below left).



left: 'David in prayer' from the Coëtivy Hours, Dunois Master, Paris (France), 1443–1445, courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

right: 'Adoration of the Magi' from the Hamilton Field Hours, Master of Walters 219, Châlons-sur-Champagne (France), 1412–1430, courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin



Below the kneeling, repentant king is text from Psalm 6:2, 'Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath'. David is repenting for his sins, represented in the lower margin by the bathing Bathsheba who he seduced and whose husband he sent off to die in battle. As David asks for forgiveness he looks up toward God, who is seen in heaven through an opening in the sky, bordered with golden seraphim. In many of Pieroth's works she comments on the conquest of the heavens, of the firmament, as an achievement of industrialisation.

"All of these [works] are about self expansion, furthering and dominance of man, the notion of power and rule, devotion, obedience, reward, belief, and mental stimulation through imagery thereof ..."

— Kirsten Pieroth

In addition to the act of kneeling and gift giving in scenes of the Adoration, one magi is here shown kissing the feet or toes of the infant child, an act of both veneration and humility (pictured above right). In *toes* (pictured below), Pieroth stands on tiptoes on an image of the moon, printed on the anniversary of the moon landing. Pieroth sees the moon as the furthest man has succeeded in physically reaching, and that the toes are not only the farthest limit of the body but can be used to elevate the body by rising upon them.



Kirsten Pieroth, *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, 2019 (detail), toes. Newspaper pages, paint, in thirty-five parts, 40 x 57.5 cm each. Image: Courtesy of the artist



Kirsten Pieroth, *My cup runneth over* (detail), 2019, plaster mould of the artist's knee kneeling, paper, artist's plinth, 196.5 x 29.5 x 30 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Douglas Hyde Gallery

In another work, entitled *My cup runneth over* (pictured above), Pieroth literally lifts her knee off the ground. A hollow mould of the artist's knee sits atop two stacked plinths, reflecting, as the artist notes, entitlement, the enlargement of society, and raising yourself up. It reaches 1.8m, equivalent to human height. The mould of the artist's knee in the act of kneeling, the devotional state of being on the ground, is here elevated to the position of a crown. Its hollow state turns the devotional gesture into a vessel, hence its title, which refers, as she states, to a surplus and to living in a land of plenty.

'My cup runneth over' is from Psalm 23. It is indeed a reference to plenty, to a surplus, to generosity, but a spiritual one granted through faith and the promise of everlasting life. This idea of a vessel whose contents nourish the faithful is often presented as a literal object in paintings of the *Man of Sorrows*, where Christ displays his wounds, especially that from the spear in his right side. In this miniature (pictured below), he is surrounded by angels holding the instruments of his Passion, including the chalice into which his blood pours from the spear wound. This sacramental vessel holds the wine changed into the true

blood of Christ, the 'grapevine which springs forth from the body of the true vine' (John 15.1). The imagery recalls the *Virgo Lactans*, or Nursing Virgin, suggesting Christ is here nursing humanity, his blood becoming milk for the faithful.



Water is the title of both a work within the newspaper series and the show itself. In the newspaper work Pieroth responds to the literal need of athletes to rehydrate, the printed marks like waves flowing across the page (pictured below). But in a more overarching sense it is the importance of water for survival that she comments upon in the exhibition. Water “in the sense that [it] is one of the most elemental things for survival … what the body needs, the most central thing is water” (Kirsten Pieroth).



Kirsten Pieroth, *Abrasives (Equestrians)*, 2019 (detail), water. Newspaper pages, paint, in thirty-five parts, 40 x 57.5 cm each. Image: Courtesy of the artist



'Fountain of Living Waters' from the Coëtivy Hours, Dunois Master, Paris (France), 1443–1445, courtesy: Western Collections, Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

In a Christian context God is the ‘spring of living waters’ in Jeremiah (2.13) and the ‘living water’ in the Gospel of John (4.10). ‘Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (John 4.14). In the miniature from the Coëtivy Hours (pictured above), the apostles drink and wash freely from the *Fountain of Living Waters* as they give praise and thanks to the Holy Spirit who descends as a dove among heavenly rays. The text reads, ‘God, come to my assistance’.

It is this idea of reward that Pieroth lays out in her images. In considering what we seek ‘to thrive for, to be part of in order to be rewarded at some moment in time’, her work comments on the human need for reward, whether that be external—power, wealth, technological advancement—or an inner quest for knowledge or physical strength. Today, the rewards of personal achievement and satisfaction are often described in almost spiritual terms. Books of hours present in text and image what their owners considered the ultimate reward: eternal life.

Dr Jill Unkel is an art historian and medievalist whose research interests include manuscript illumination, ecclesiastical architecture, and the history of the book. She earned an MPhil and PhD from the Department of Art and Architectural History at Trinity College Dublin. She joined the Chester Beatty as a curatorial assistant in 2005 and was appointed Curator of Western Collections in 2013. She has delivered lectures on the collection and curation at university level. Her exhibitions and publications include *The Art Books of Henri Matisse*, *Costume Parisiens: Fashion Plates 1912-1914*, *Wicked Wit: Darly’s Comic Prints*, *Miniatures Masterpiece: The Coëtivy Hours* and *The Mystery of Mani*.

*All block quotations, personal communication with the artist.

** All other comments from Pieroth from an audio walk through of the exhibition.

Images courtesy of the Chester Beatty Library and Kirsten Pieroth.