

Ellen Wiener

Artist Statement

My work as a visual artist has been inspired by the intimate one-to-one kind of attention we give to literature of depth and complexity. Many of my paintings and prints are based on the model of books as compact and comprehensive worlds - capable of sustaining layers of allusions, memories and narrative structure. For the most part, these works are small and page-sized or act as scrolls to be looked at a section at a time. They celebrate the tradition of the miniature for its inherent power to effortlessly shift our personal scale to the particular and then to carry us, quietly, to broader perspectives.

Background/ Books of Hours Paintings

Many of the Paintings in this exhibition are based on the model of medieval Books of Hours.

These volumes were, essentially, prayer books- richly illustrated and custom made, for the exceedingly wealthy and, importantly, often commissioned for and by women. By expensive I mean quite costly, one of the curators at The Morgan compared the price of one significant volume as equal to money paid for a small cathedral. They were NEVER used in church- their function was to facilitate private devotions. Eventually, they began to include secular information and advice as well as prayers, and became guides for general right living. After the introduction of printing press in the West, cheaper versions became the first real best sellers – if your family had ONE book it would be this, so naturally, they were they used as teaching tools for basic literacy i.e. ‘Primer’ comes from the Hour of Prime.

Books of Hours were divided into three sections: calendars, the cycle of the hours and lastly the Penitential Psalms with the Offices for the Sick and Dying.

The secular CALENDARS would be marked by day, week and month, picturing mostly agricultural ‘labors’, the seasonal position of the night sky and *local* info- favorite saints days etc. These pages were usually designed in a grid system much like today’s calendars

Each painting in the HOURS series is dedicated to a particular hour whose names derive from the monastic divisions of time, – beginning with *Matins*, usually a few hours after midnight, and then revolving through *Lauds*, *Prime*, *Terce*, *Sext*, *Nones*, *Vespers* and ending with *Compline*- around 9 p.m. In my work, Christian references have often been brought back to their origins in the Hebrew Bible and also extend forward to examine passages and spiritual content from Protestant sects, The Koran and even some Quaker verse.

The most popular theme for text and pictures alike in the HOURS section were events from the life of the Virgin. (This was not the Passion Cycle i.e. Jesus and crucifixion etc.)- But tended more towards picturing Mary’s role as an encompassing mother- with quite human characteristics. The usual events illustrated are calibrated to match up with the diurnal clock- for example, the first morning hour- *Matins* was almost always an Annunciation while the last hour of the night- *Compline* was often a picture of Mary’s ascension into heaven. So HER lifetime is keyed to landmarks in YOUR personal spiritual developments. It is important to notice the politics here—all this is going on without the ‘help’ of the clergy... it tended to place the Virgin rather than the institutionalized church in the role of intercessor. Mary is approachable- close to heart and the daily - a familiar.... some say this habit of independent thinking actually planted some seeds for the reformation and the eventual downward slide of church power

The 3rd section concerns a very different sort of ‘take’ on time. *note:* – we have the secular world portrayed in a linear grid-like fashion.. the hours clearly a constant cycle, but this part is about looking back- and then... way forward into infinity. The Penitential Psalms section is, in my opinion, about getting ready for that leap...you are urged to examine the solid and tangible but then turn your steps and look towards the unknown....

LOOKING BACK and FORWARD: New Work on Seven Psalms

The Penitential Psalms, joined with the Offices for the Sick and Dying usually make up the third and final section of a medieval Book of Hours. The grid-based calendars in the prefatory section of typical volumes serve to introduce secular and linear time. The core system of revolving hours, considered in paintings seen on this site from ‘An Album of Hours’, is dedicated to an internal orbit honoring each day. The seven psalms called the Penitentials (numbered as: 6,31,37,50,101,129, and 142) are marked by a radical departure from both of these time frames.

As concluding passages to an earthbound existence or pertaining to an important illness or sacrifice, these psalms encourage examination of one’s past through retrospection and aim at a forward looking view of a future liberated from mortality. Personal sins and glories, as well as practices that have guided a spiritual template over a lifetime, are contemplated, acknowledged and released in preparation for a new beginning. The necessary abstraction of projecting imagination into such a mythic extreme is the single most vital and distinguishing ability human beings are capable of. Conjuring voyages to places no one has ever been has produced advances in science and technology that extend the boundaries of our vision far beyond the linear. The medieval worldview, as presented in Books of Hours, generously allows us to dwell in three versions of time anchored in just one manuscript.

Books of Hours mark an elemental beginning of a literary bridge that leads to dozens of volumes, illuminations and paintings that combine the secular with the sacred. Making these paintings offered me a similar opportunity; to celebrate the consistent human need to integrate the unseen with the closely observed.

While working on this group of paintings I used central metaphors of looking and self-orientation along with images of tools that sharpen and clarify sight. Cameras, observatories and telescopes reiterate the theme of reflection through time and distance that so profoundly colors Books of Hours. The current produced by alternate backward glances and leaps of faith enables these psalms to light an interior path and to offer a panoramic perspective for even the humblest life.