



**HAL**  
open science

## Objects as supports for individual prayer in late Middle Ages

Haude Morvan

### ► To cite this version:

Haude Morvan. Objects as supports for individual prayer in late Middle Ages. Isabelle Cartron; Marcelo Cândido da Silva; Marcelo Rede. Introduction to the material culture of ancient societies, Ausonius Éditions, pp.199-202, 2024, V@demecum, 978-2-35613-393-9. <10.46608/vademecum3.9782356133939.40>. <hal-05021965>

**HAL Id: hal-05021965**

**<https://hal.science/hal-05021965v1>**

Submitted on 5 Apr 2025

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 - Attribution - ShareAlike - International License

## OBJECTS AS SUPPORTS FOR INDIVIDUAL PRAYER IN LATE MIDDLE AGES

In medieval Western Europe, religious and lay communities practiced common prayers in dedicated places, with special furniture and objects. For the monks, these places were mainly the choir stalls of the church and the chapter house; for the laity, the church, and more precisely the nave, but also some confraternities' chapels. During the late Middle Ages, daily personal prayers took more and more room in religious practices, alongside common prayer. Personal prayers took place mainly in the church too, outside of common prayer hours, but also in more intimate spaces, such as monks' and friars' cells, the laity's bedrooms, and the private oratories of lay princes and Church prelates. Individual prayer could be supported by personal belongings, mainly rosaries, books (psalter or hours book) and painted panels.<sup>1</sup>

Painted panels for personal devotion, either single panel, diptych, triptych, or more complex polyptychs, are identified by their small dimensions (less than 1 m high) that make them portable.<sup>2</sup> They were made to be stored in a box when not hanged on the wall or put on a table, and they could even be carried on during travels. Quality is extremely variegated: some are refined works of art, realised by the greatest artists of their time, such as Simone Martini or Jean de Beaumetz, others are minor workshops' crafts. Preserved works are rarely documented, but we can draw much information on the use of these small panel paintings and assess on how much have been lost thanks to written sources, e.g. inventories and testaments, or hagiographical literature and iconography (such panels are often actors of miracles).

These items display the same iconography as altarpieces. The main subjects are the enthroned or half-length Virgin and Child, often surrounded by saints, and Christ's Passion (mainly Crucifixion and Man of Sorrows). One or more kneeling figures, called supplicants, are sometimes represented. They can be identified as the owner of the

---

1 Os *et al.* 1994.

2 Schmidt 2005.

panel: thus, the painted supplicant prolongs his or her prayer. In other cases, kneeling figures may be identified as relatives or friends, that are possibly dead, the owner want to pray for. As a matter of fact, the prayers for the dead, along with *paternoster* and some other prayers, was at the core of personal devotion.

Small panels for personal devotion were realised on demand or on spec by workshops in Italy, and later also in France and Flanders. They were sometimes exported: small Sieneese and Florentine panels for examples were part of the items rich merchants such as Francesco Datini were exporting in all Europe.

A particularly touching panel for personal devotion is kept at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, in the Lehman collection.<sup>3</sup> The wooden panel is rectangular, topped by a cusp. Within the frame, the panel is 53 cm high and 30 cm large, but we may imagine it was only originally the central part of a triptych. The work was realised by a Sieneese painter whose style reminds Duccio, around 1315-1330. Siena was one of the main centres of panel paintings back at the time. The painting represents the enthroned Madonna on a gold background, with a kneeling man on the right, dressed as a member of the city elite, and a boy in a red robe on the left. The Christ Child is looking at the boy and he is blessing him. The man is probably the owner, and we may assume that the boy was already dead when his father commissioned the panel. The triptych was probably displayed in an intimate space of the house, probably the bedroom. It could be opened by the owners during prayer time, and closed the rest of the day. But thanks to the image, the Christ Child was blessing their deceased son *in aeternum*.

## REFERENCES

van Os, H., Nieuwdorp, H., Ridderbos, B., Honée, E. & Doyle, M., 1994: *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe, 1300 to 1500 (exhibition at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 26 November 1994-26 February 1995)*, Amsterdam.

Schmidt, V. 2005: *Painted piety: Panel Paintings for Personal Devotion in Tuscany, 1250-1400*, Florence.

➤ Fig. 1. Sieneese painter, Madonna and Child enthroned with two donors, 1315-1330 ca., tempera and gold on wood, 52.7 x 29.8 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum, Robert Lehman Collection (public domain).

3 Inv. 1975.1.24.



**HAUDE MORVAN**

Université Bordeaux Montaigne,  
Institut Ausonius UMR 5607, France

Discover the free online version  
and its additional content

