

# 15th-century book owners early 'upcyclers'

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Parchment diptych with the measurements of Christ's length and side wound, inserted into a French book of hours. Credit: Paisley, Renfrew District Museum and Art Gallery, unnumbered manuscript, fol. 13-14 forming a diptych

Upcycling may be viewed as a new "green" trend, but an Art Historian at the University of St Andrews has discovered 15th century book owners were way ahead of their time.

In a new book published this week, Dr Kathryn Rudy has documented

the miniature portraits added into medieval volumes, personalised verses written in the pages, and even curtains sewn into the [books](#), to lend more grandeur to the illuminations.

Her findings reveal book owners were keen to personalise second-hand books in the same way that people today use social media to document memories and memorable events such as commemorating a deceased relative.

Centuries ago, medieval books were made by highly specialised scribes, illuminators and book binders with labour-intensive processes using exclusive and sometimes exotic materials (parchment made from dozens or hundreds of skins, inks and paints made from prized minerals, animals and plants). Books were expensive and built to last.

They usually outlived their owners and rather than discard them when they became out-of-date, book owners found ways to update, amend and upcycle books or book parts. By making sometimes extreme adjustments, book owners kept their books fashionable and emotionally relevant.



A particular group of nuns in Delft added chicken heads to their manuscripts (Credit: The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, BPH 148, fol. 61v. Credit: University of St Andrews)

Dr Rudy, Senior Lecturer in Art History at St Andrews, said: "Most manuscripts made before 1390 were bespoke and made for a particular client, but those made after 1390 (especially books of hours) were increasingly made for an open market, in which the producer was not in direct contact with the buyer.

"Increased efficiency led to more generic products, which owners were motivated to personalise. It also led to more blank parchment in the book, for example, the backs of inserted miniatures and the blank ends of textual components. Book buyers of the late fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth century still held onto the old connotations of manuscripts – that they were custom-made luxury items – even when the production had become impersonal."

The research is documented in a new book, *Piety in Pieces: How Medieval Readers Customized their Manuscripts*, made possible through Leverhulme Trust funding. The book has been published in a new electronic format Open Book which will make the research more accessible and affordable.



Credit: University of St Andrews

## Case Study

In the fifteenth century Scotland produced few luxury manuscripts. Wealthy Scots often bought from the Netherlands and France, Scotland's main trading partners, rather than England. In 1499 James Brown, dean of Aberdeen, bought such a manuscript prayer book from a workshop in the Southern Netherlands (modern-day Belgium).

The manuscript, now kept in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, had a portrait of him kneeling in prayer before an image of the Virgin (pictured right). He then personalized it by sewing curtains above the images to give them more grandeur and added verses for remembering the books of the bible, and a poem on his mother's death, into some blank parchment at the end of the book. These changes made the book even more relevant to him. The verses on his mother's death extend the function of the rest of the manuscript, to do what he could for the salvation of his mother's soul.

**More information:** The book is available in free digital and

inexpensive printed editions.

[www.openbookpublishers.com/product/477/](http://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/477/)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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