French Book of Hours, second half of 15th century
Classmark: Liverpool University Library MS.F.2.14, fol.37r
(Nativity scene).

This is one of nine pictures illustrating the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary in this French manuscript, with richly decorated borders featuring flowers, insects, birds, animals, people and grotesques.

There are ten 12-line pictures used to introduce separate liturgical sections of this Book of Hours of which eight are in the main section, the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary (use of Châlons), on folios 17-64. This is a series of devotions to be recited at set points in the day, and the pictures follow the usual narrative sequence of events in the Virgin’s life, as described below.

Two 12-line pictures are used before other sections of the manuscript: the Penitential Psalms (65r, King David) and the Office of the Dead (82r, Death leading a pope, an emperor and a cardinal, below).

Usual sequence of images in the Hours of the BVM:

Matins: the Annunciation (17r, with fly, snail and shells in border)
Lauds: the Visitation (27r, with flowers, people and grotesques in border)
Prime: the Nativity (37r – shown above)
Terce: the Annunciation to the Shepherds (42r, with flowers and monkey grotesques in border)
Sext: the Adoration of the Magi (46r, with fly and bird in border)
None: the Presentation in the Temple (50r, with flowers, rabbits and dogs in border)
Vespers: the Massacre of the Innocents or, as here, the Flight into Egypt (54r, with flowers and birds, including peacock in border)
Compline: the Death, Assumption or, as here, the Coronation of the Virgin (60r, with flowers and grotesques in border).

There is one 7-line picture of John the Evangelist with a border featuring shells, a snail, a monkey and a peacock (15r), introducing verses from St John’s Gospel. The sequence of Gospel lessons in Books of Hours is commonly illustrated using the iconography of the Evangelists in the act of composition, paired with their symbols of the four beasts from Ezekiel 1:10: Matthew (man), Mark (lion), Luke (ox) and John (eagle).
Provenance:
LUL MS.F.2.14 is in a contemporary blind-stamped binding (shown left) with fish, flowers and fleur-de-lys tools.

It was presented in 1945 by Miss C.G. Coltart, and the names of two earlier female owners are recorded in French inscriptions on f.2, one dated 20 February 1625.

Miss Coltart’s presentation also included two 16th-century manuscripts:
LUL MS.F.2.15, a Book of Hours (use of Utrecht) dated and localized to the Netherlands, 1551
LUL MS.F.2.16, a collection of indulgences written at Rome about 1533, for the monastery of Santiago de Pallares in Catalonia.

References:
