



## FRANCE 1500:

### THE PICTORIAL ARTS AT THE DAWN OF THE RENAISSANCE

This exhibition is coordinated with a major international exhibition, "Entre Moyen Age et Renaissance France 1500," organized by the Réunion des musées nationaux (Paris) and the Art Institute of Chicago. The museum exhibition takes place first in Paris (Grand Palais, October 6, 2010 to January 10, 2011) and then in Chicago (February 26, 2011 to May 30, 2011). Our exhibition brings together approximately 45 diverse works that include manuscripts, Books of Hours, single leaves and cuttings, coffrets with early xylographs, and stained glass. The many themes our exhibition touches on--French Humanism and Royal Patronage, the Dominance of Paris, the Influence of Italy and the North, Other Centers, etc.—encourage a re-appreciation of the flourishing of the arts at the dawn of the Renaissance. There is a fully illustrated catalogue describing all the works exhibited.

The decades on either side of the year 1500 cover a period of great stability and prosperity in France, whereas Italy was a political vacuum, albeit one viewed by its northern neighbors as a "lost paradise." Works included in the exhibition span the entire reigns of two kings, Charles VIII (1470-1498, reigned 1483) and Louis XII (1462-1515, reigned 1478), and parts of the reigns of their predecessors and successors, Louis XI (1442-1483, reigned 1463) and Francis I (1494-1547, reigned 1514). In addition to these kings, the reigning Queens were significant patrons of the arts during the period: especially Anne of Brittany, married to two successive kings, Charles VIII and Louis XII; Charlotte of Savoy, married to Louis XI and Claude de France, the first wife of Francis I.

The increased power of the hereditary monarchies, with their enormous resources of wealth, accounts in part for the lavish patronage. Kings and queens alike were avid patrons of the arts. For example, the illuminator known as the Master of the Très Petites Heures of Anne of Brittany, who also designed woodcuts for printed books and for Gothic coffrets (**IMAGE 6**), as well as stained glass and tapestry, takes his name from a marvelous Book of Hours he painted for the Queen. Both printed Books of Hours designed by him and woodcuts in Gothic coffrets are included in the exhibition. A fragment from a splendid Choir Book made for Louis XII and Anne of Brittany regrettably dismantled in the nineteenth century is also in the exhibition prominently bearing the initials and arms of the royal couple. Jean Bourdichon of Tours is a fine example of a royal artist, having served as official court painter to four consecutive kings and their queens (**IMAGE 3**). Many of these artists were active in Paris, which as Braun and Hogenberg described as follows in their pictorial atlas of the sixteenth century, "owing to its incredible size, the multitude of nobles, merchants, citizens, the great number of its students and the magnificence of its buildings is superior not merely to all the cities of France and Italy but also to those of the rest of Europe."

France became a kind of melting pot, attracting artists from all over Europe. Thus, the Master of François de Rohan included here is decidedly Germanic in his style and was perhaps trained on German or Swiss soil (**IMAGE 4**). When King Francis I wanted a Book of Hours, he commissioned it from this artist, which is a measure of the esteem in which he was held during the period. Noel Bellemare, born of a Parisian mother and Antwerp father, brought Antwerp mannerism to France with his attenuated figures, their swirling drapery, and the blue-green landscapes resembling those of the Flemish landscape painter Joachim Patinir (**IMAGE 5**).



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Increased contact with Italy, that “lost paradise,” marked the entire period, with the result that Italian forms were imitated and then assimilated, into the French Gothic style. Jean Fouquet (died 1480), the court painter of King Charles VII, went to Italy already in 1446, where he painted the portrait of the Pope. Marked by certain Italianisms, familiar with Alberti’s system of perspective, Fouquet’s style is nevertheless also quintessentially “Gothic” at the same time that it displays extraordinary inventiveness. Two works by his close associates or pupils are included here. Other artists, such as Maître François, seem resolutely Gothic, showing virtually no influence of Italian models; instead his style harks back to “golden age” Parisian art at the turn of the century, such as the Boucicaut and Bedford Masters. Two of his works are included here.

The breakdown of stringent medieval conventions that confined artists to practicing in a single media characterizes art production during the period. Jean Pichore (fl. c. 1500-1520) was active in Paris, although Cardinal Georges d’Amboise, archbishop of Rouen, was one of his major clients (**IMAGE 1**). Therefore, his style had been mistakenly referred to as “School of Rouen.” Pichore is documented as having worked on two manuscripts, the first volume of Augustine’s *De civitate Dei* of c. 1501/03 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 2070) and the *Chants royaux* for Louise of Savoy of 1517 (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 145). Pichore managed a large family enterprise that was responsible for the illumination of a great number of classical, secular, and theological texts. He also played an important role in the market for printed books by providing Renaissance designs, replacing the Gothic designs by the Master of the Apocalypse Rose of the Sainte-Chapelle. Pichore is not the only artist who worked in multiple media. Noël Bellemare, among others, executed stained glass, retables, and illuminated manuscripts. The Master of François de Rohan supplied drawings for printed books. Jean Fouquet tried his hand at enamels and stained glass.

Centers other than Paris (“superior to all the cities in Europe”) emerged to enjoy great prominence. The second largest city in France (after Paris) and a leading port, Rouen witnessed a flurry of building programs and was home to many famous writers and poets. The Echévinage Master was the most successful Norman illuminator of the third quarter of the fifteenth century, and his compositions were used by the next generation of Rouen artists, such as Robert Boyvin and the Master of Amboise le Veneur. A splendid Book of Hours by the Master of Amboise le Veneur is included here. Lyons, poised as the principal gateway for Italian trade with the north, the Low Countries and Germany, also enjoyed a remarkable fortune, becoming a cosmopolitan center. It hosted artists from elsewhere in Europe and rivaled Paris as the hub of early printing. Made for an unknown patron, the manuscript copy of the proto-humanistic *La Vie des philosophes* exhibited here may have been made for one of Lyon’s wealthy merchants. Its images, distinctly Germanic in the origin of their style, present the portraits of the philosophers of Antiquity dressed in Renaissance garb and situated in verdant landscapes.

Promoting a “new learning,” French humanism is also reflected in works in this exhibition. There is a manuscript from the library of Jean Bude, friend of Erasmus, founder of the Collège de France and the Bibliothèque du Roy (**IMAGE 2**). Jean’s son, who inherited his library, Guillaume was



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considered the “most learned man in France at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.” The first French printing press was established late in 1469 or early in 1470 by three German printers who came to France at the invitation of the Sorbonne. A manuscript commentary of Cicero is closely related to imprints from this Press. The thoroughly Renaissance monarch, King Francis I, who founded the College de France, which offered instruction in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, began the Louvre art collections, and invited Leonardo de Vinci to France, had over 500 books in Greek at the time of his death. His son, Charles of Valois, special ordered the first translation of Plato from Greek to French from John of Luxembourg.

This exhibition does not tackle head on the tricky question of whether or not there was a French “Renaissance.” It does not pose the question: Did the period around 1500 see the end of medieval civilization and the dawn of a modern age? The astute viewer will, however, confront many “modernisms”: the importance of printing, the relaxing of artistic conventions, the assertion of the individual, the expansion of communication outside of city walls and national boundaries, and the production of classical and humanist texts, etc. The varied works in the exhibition, with their rich aesthetic idiom, speak for themselves and encourage the viewer to enjoy their artistic merits on their own terms. Whether medieval or modern (or both), “France 1500” emerges as an extraordinary moment in European history, one that was remarkably complex and gloriously productive.

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