

Maître François (Paris, active c. 1460-1480)

***Nativity* (288 x 191 mm.) from Jean Chapis, *Sept Articles de la Foi*
France, Paris, c. 1470**

This is a monumental miniature securely attributed to the Maître François. The original manuscript must have been large and quite exceptional. Known as *Le Trésor* or the *Sept articles de la foi*, the work was once attributed to Jean de Meun, but is now accepted as being by Jean Chapis, who wrote it in the fourteenth century. A meditation on the life of Christ, the *Sept articles* is organized around seven main events in the life of Christ, beginning with the Nativity, illustrated here. Only one other miniature from the parent manuscript is known, the illustration for the seventh event, the Last Judgment, now in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago (Ada Turnbull Hertle Fund, 1957.162; published in Nielson, 2004, no. 52). Presumably, five additional miniatures illustrated the parent manuscript, and the fact that one miniature (the present one) came to light as recently as 1991 gives reason for hope that others may still surface.

One of few named artists of his day, the Maître François was the leading illuminator in Paris in the third quarter of the fifteenth century, working for the court and the nobility. He is the documented painter—referred to in a letter of 1473 as “the most distinguished painter François”—of a French translation of Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, a magnificent two-volume work made for Charles de Gaucourt, counsellor of Louis XI and now in Paris (BnF, MS fr. 18-19). Other manuscripts commonly attributed to his hand include volumes in the British Library and the National Gallery, Victoria, Australia (Wharnccliffe Hours, MS Felton 1072-1073). The latter manuscript is especially close to the present miniature and its sister leaf (compare Manion, 1981, pls. 20-21).

The Maître François is known for his complex, densely populated compositions in classical, secular, and theological texts, often of large format and in several volumes. The present miniature, in the same way as the Art Institute of Chicago leaf, has been transformed into a panel painting by being laid down on wood and given an additional border, which has been refreshed.

Provenance: London, Sotheby’s, 18 June 1991, lot 26 (to H. P. Kraus, New York, his inventory number R19468).

Literature: Avril and Reynaud, 1993, pp. 45-52; Nielson, 2004, no. 52; Manion, 1981.