Seldom are new discoveries made in the course of an otherwise routine restoration project. Yet that is precisely what has happened within a small jewel box of a chapel on the grounds of the great Abbey of Chaalis, 50 kilometers northeast of Paris. There, architects and restorers working to salvage a thirteenth-century building plagued by centuries of water infiltration came upon an extraordinary cycle of murals by the sixteenth-century Italian master Francesco Primaticcio, known in France as Le Primatice (1504–1570). Executed in a mixture of raised stucco and fresco, the paintings—obscured in part by zealous overpainting and clouded by water damage—constitute a rare example of the artist’s foray into the realm of ecclesiastical painting and are the sole surviving works of their kind in France.

Thought to have been inspired by Michelangelo’s 1508 fresco cycle in the Sistine Chapel and painted between 1543 and 1545, the murals within the Chaalis chapel include a main scene depicting the Annunciation, which graces the choir wall, and images of church fathers, apostles, evangelists, and angels bearing the “instruments of the Passion” rendered on the three rib vaults of the ceiling. That this Renaissance wonder could remain virtually unknown to art historians can be explained in part by the mutable history of the abbey.

The Primacy of Primatice

RESTORING AN EXTRAORDINARY SUITE OF FRESCOES BY A SIXTEENTH-CENTURY ITALIAN MASTER IN AN ABBEY CHAPEL NORTH OF PARIS

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHAALIS AND ITS MURALS

Founded as a Cistercian monastery by Louis VI in 1136, the Abbey of Chaalis, spread over 29 hectares, rose to preeminence in the fourteenth century due in large part to its charismatic and influential priors and abbots. Like many abbeys of the period, Chaalis was “placed in commendam,” that is the French king appointed its abbot, usually an outsider, who was entitled to a lion’s share of the abbey’s substantial revenues. In 1541, François I appointed his cousin, Hippolyte d’Este, Cardinal of Ferrara (1509–1572) Abbot of Chaalis. With his penchant for luxury—evident in his building of the Villa d’Este in Tivoli—the cardinal was instrumental in promoting Italian Renaissance art in France. As abbot, he embellished the 400-year-old abbey with Italianate gardens and architectural features, including a crenelated wall enclosing a rose garden by the Bolognese architect Sebastiano Serlio. It was Hippolyte d’Este who, delighting in Primatice’s artistry, commissioned the frescoes within the thirteenth-century abbey chapel.

Born in Bologna in 1504, Primatice had come to France a decade earlier at the invitation of the French king, who had hired the artist to work on his royal palace at Fontainebleau, where he worked closely with fellow Italian Rosso Fiorentino (1495–1540). Together, they began to introduce Italian Mannerist figural elements—elongated and muscular figures in complex poses typified by those of Michelangelo in Rome’s Sistine Chapel—into the French decorative arts, rendering them in an innovative mix of painting and stucco relief, which became a hallmark of the School of Fontainebleau. Upon Rosso’s death in 1540, Primatice
became chief designer for the king. Shortly thereafter, he began work on the Chaalis chapel murals.

A man of many talents, Primatice was charged with everything from designing interiors—including the paintings and tapestries within them—and costumes for extravagant masked balls, to serving as principal architect on entire building projects. At Fontainebleau Primatice executed his most famous commission, the *Ulysses Gallery*, a work long since destroyed but known from a drawing dated to ca. 1560 and now in the collection of the Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio. Aside from occasional trips to Italy, Primatice made France his home, living there until his death in 1570, having served as court artist to the king’s successors, Henri II and François II as well.

**A MUTABILITY OF FORTUNE**

As with so many of our most treasured sites, Chaalis’ history is marked by periods of prosperity and decline. With waning royal patronage in the later years of the seventeenth century, Chaalis fell prey to neglect, which, over the course of only a few decades, left its buildings in a ruinous state. In 1730, the abbey was given in commendam to a prince, Louis de Bourbon, Count of Clermont, who vowed to renovate the property, a process that began in 1739 under the watchful eye of Jean Aubert, architect of both the Hôtel Biron in Paris and the extraordinary stables at Chantilly. Following the French Revolution, however, Chaalis was at risk again. The abbey was liquidated as a national asset—its works of art auctioned off and its buildings quarried for stone. In 1851, the property was bought by a Madame de Vatry, who transformed the former abbey into her private estate, building a magnificent residence on the site and restoring several of its surviving structures, including the tiny thirteenth-century chapel and the murals within it. While the architectural stabilization was undertaken by Édouard Corroyer (1837–1904), a student of Viollet-le-Duc, work on the frescoes was entrusted to a student of Ingres, Jean-Paul Balze (1815–1884), who, with his brother, Raymond Joseph Antoine (1818–1908), restored the murals between 1875 and 1876. In addition to filling in missing and damaged areas and liberally retouching the lower portions of the scene...
of the Annunciation, the brothers added a number of decorative elements, including the blazons of each of Chaalis’ abbots, trompe l’oeil drapery beneath the chapel windows, and painting and gilding of the vault ribs.

It was after this restoration that some scholars—many of whom were seeing the work for the first time—began to question the authorship of the frescoes, suspecting they might be the work of Nicolò dell’Abate, who was known to have assisted Primatice on several commissions, including his famed Ulysses Gallery at Fontainebleau. Studies carried out during the most recent restoration, however, would ultimately dispel this notion.

Following the death of Mme. de Vatry, Chaalis passed to her nephew and then on to his widow who sold the property in 1902. It was purchased by artist and renowned art collector Mme. Jacquemart-André, who, upon her death in 1912, bequeathed the estate and its holdings to the Institut de France, the site’s current owner. Mme. Jacquemart-André is buried in the abbey’s chapel.

**THE RECENT RESTORATION**

Although the Abbey Chapel is one of the few original buildings to have survived intact at Chaalis, until recently it was in a forlorn state. Water seeping through cracks in the masonry had permeated the muralized interior, resulting in a delamination of paint surfaces and the deposition of salts atop the frescoes. In 1998, the Institut de France in collaboration with the French Ministry of Culture embarked on the restoration of the chapel as part of an overall preservation campaign for the site, which attracts numerous visitors each year, particularly during its June rose festival.
A comprehensive conditions assessment was then carried out to develop a plan for its restoration. During this intensive study art historians Sylvie Béguin and Dominique Cordellier, both at the Louvre, were able to date the original paintings within the chapel to 1543–1545 and firmly establish Primatice as their author. The attribution would be underscored by art historian Jean-Pierre Babelon’s 2004 discovery of a drawing by the artist in the Louvre’s collection, *Un homme assis drapé, regardant à gauche*, which was clearly preparatory for the rendering of St. Matthew on the Chaalis chapel ceiling. As for the participation of Nicolò dell’Abate, he could be eliminated based on the fact that he did not arrive at Fontainebleau until 1552.

In 2003, work to stabilize the chapel and arrest further water infiltration was carried out under the direction of Étienne Poncelet, France’s chief architect for historic monuments. Shortly thereafter, a team from ARCOA (Atelier de Restauration et de Conservation Objet d’Art) began the delicate task of cleaning and consolidating the murals within the sanctuary. Carried out under the supervision of a scientific committee led by Jean Pierre Babelón, a member of the Institut de France and curator of Chaalis, the work was underwritten in large part by WMF through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage and the Generali Group of Insurance Companies. Following a detailed analysis of the paintings to determine what was original and what had been added in the nineteenth century, it became clear the two phases of painting would have to be addressed individually, as

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THE CHAALIS MURAL CYCLE BEFORE RESTORATION, LEFT, AND AFTER, ABOVE. CONSERVATION OF THE PAINTINGS TOOK SEVEN MONTHS.
each had responded differently to the water infiltration. Images of the saints closest to the windows had suffered the most, having delaminated in many places from the pictorial ground. In addition to finding the appropriate conservation treatments for the disparate paint layers, it was also important to make a clear visual distinction between the two works yet create a harmonious iconographic program. Restoration of the murals, which cost €870,000, was carried out between December 2005 and June of this year. The chapel formally reopened to visitors on September 17, 2006.

—ANGELA M.H. SCHUSTER

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