

# Chicago dealer helps solve 500-year-old mystery



A page from the "Sforza Book of Hours," painted in Italy in the late 15th century using gold leaf and other precious pigments.

## Stolen artwork painted in 1490 reunited with book after centuries

BY ANDREW HERRMANN  
*Staff Reporter*

A picture lifted from a prayer book by a sticky-fingered friar some 500 years ago has been reunited with the late 15th century tome — with help from a Chicago art dealer.

The picture, small enough to fit in one's hand, is of a couple hunting on horseback. The lost art was originally part of the "Sforza Book of Hours," a volume of psalms, prayers and a calendar now owned by the British Library in London.

The piece — called an "illumination" because its paint of gold leaf and other precious pigments makes it shine — was sold to the British Library for about \$350,000 by Chicago dealer Sandra Hindman, officials in London announced this week.

"The acquisition ends a 500-year odyssey," said British Library official Scot Mckendrick.

The Book of Hours was commissioned in 1490 by the Duke of Milan's widow, Bona of Savoy, who tapped artist Giovan Pietro Birago, a leading illuminator of the time. Such handmade books contained prayers to be said on the hour and

calendars. The horseback piece illustrated October.

Before the book was completed, a friar from the Convent of San Marco in Milan named Johanne Jacopo stole dozens of Birago's illuminations. The friar visited the artist's studio several times to gain trust and may have slipped the works under his habit.

Jacopo was later arrested and jailed but the artwork's whereabouts remained a mystery for centuries.

The British obtained the book in 1893. In 1941, one of the illuminations was received anonymously. In 1984, the Library purchased another illumination — a spring scene depicting the month of May — from New York collector Bernard Breslauer for about 20,000 British pounds.

Few knew he had another, said library spokeswoman Catriona Finlayson. Hindman said the October hunting picture hung in Breslauer's Manhattan apartment among hundreds of other rare miniatures. The son of a German book dealer, Breslauer died in August.

Hindman said she knew she had to have the hunting shot: "It's one of my favorite miniatures in the world, not just because of the story but because it's so beautiful." The illustrations were done on parchment, probably calf skin, which helped keep the colors vivid.

A professor emeritus of art history at Northwestern University,

Hindman said she also felt it belonged with the original 350-page book where people could see it.

She said she could have earned more on the open market. "I tried to set the price so it was not so prohibitive that a public institution like the British Library would be out of the running," she said.

Are there more Birago illuminations out there? Hindman knows of none but doesn't rule it out.

"These showed up after 500 years," she noted.