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## Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio)

*Chapman, H.*

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# Raphael (Raffaello Sanzio)

(1483–1520)

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Italian painter whose work along with that of his older contemporaries **Leonardo** and **Michelangelo** defined the High **Renaissance** style in central Italy. Raphael was born in **Urbino**, the son of a competent painter, **Giovanni Santi**, who was employed as the court artist of Duke Guidobaldo da Montefeltro. Raphael's social poise, which was later to facilitate his progress at the papal court, was doubtless founded on his early exposure to court life in Urbino. He probably received his earliest training from his father, who died in 1494 when Raphael was 11 years old.

Although **Vasari's** account of Raphael becoming a pupil of **Perugino** before his father's death is probably a fiction, he unquestionably worked in some capacity in the older artist's studio during his youth. Perugino was at this period one of the most admired and influential painters working in Italy, and Raphael's familiarity with Perugino's manner, both in style and technique, is evident from the altarpieces he painted for churches in his native Umbria, such as the *Crucifixion* (c. 1503; London, NG), the *Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1503; Vatican Mus.), and the *Marriage of the Virgin* (1504; Milan, Brera). The paintings include many of Perugino's characteristic mannerisms—the slender physique of the figures whose grace is exaggerated by their often balletic poses; the sweetness of the facial expressions; and the formalized landscape backgrounds populated by trees with impossibly slender trunks. Raphael was clearly a prodigy, as is shown by the request by **Pinturicchio**, then one of the leading artists in Italy, for Raphael to supply detailed compositional drawings, of which two survive (1502–3; Florence, Uffizi; New York, Pierpont Morgan Lib.), for frescoes in the Piccolomini Library in Siena.

Despite his success as a painter of altarpieces and of smaller courtly paintings, such as the *Dream of a Knight* (c. 1504; London, NG) and the *S. George* (c. 1505; Washington, NG), Raphael clearly felt the need to leave Umbria in order to widen his experience of contemporary painting. Armed with a letter of recommendation dated October 1504 from the Duke's sister-in-law Giovanna della Rovere to Piero Soderini, the ruler of Florence, he probably arrived in the city soon afterwards. He was to remain in Florence for four years, and during this time he gradually familiarized himself with the new style being developed by Florentine artists, notably Leonardo and Michelangelo whose cartoons for the proposed frescoes of **battle** scenes in the Palazzo della Signoria date from this period. With characteristic energy of purpose Raphael set about mastering the new requirements of Florentine art: the depiction of figures in movement, the expression of emotional state through expression and gesture, and the creation of complex narrative. This process of assimilation is best appreciated through his drawings of the period. His course of rigorous study is reflected in his drawings of

**Donatello's** *S. George* (Oxford, Ashmolean), Leonardo's lost *Leda* (Windsor Castle, Royal Coll.), and Michelangelo's *David* (London, BM), as well as a series of drawings of fighting nudes (Oxford, Ashmolean).

In the paintings of the Virgin and Child which are the chief product of his Florentine period he experimented with new compositional forms and figural motifs. In the *Madonna of the Meadow* (1505; Vienna, Kunsthist. Mus.) and *La Belle Jardinière* (1507; Paris, Louvre) Raphael employs a pyramidal structure derived from Leonardo, while in the *Bridgewater Madonna* (c. 1506; on loan to Edinburgh, NG Scotland) the diagonal movement of the Christ child is inspired by Michelangelo's sculpted figure in his Taddei Tondo (c. 1504–7; London, RA). The spiralling movement and the sophisticated psychological interplay between the figures in Raphael's *Canigiani Holy Family* (c. 1507; Munich, Alte Pin.) display his new-found command of the modern Florentine style; at least in compositions of relative simplicity.

Raphael painted a few portraits in Florence, the best documented of which (they are mentioned by Vasari) are those of *Agnolo Doni* and *Maddalena Doni* (c. 1507–8; Florence, Pitti). Further proof of his rapid development is furnished by the series of preparatory drawings for the *Entombment* (1507; Rome, Borghese Gal.) painted for a church in Perugia, which show how he began with a static composition based on Perugino but ended up with one in which all the figures are in movement. The studied quality of the final composition betrays this radical shift in conception, though there are passages, such as the contrast between the living flesh of the Magdalene's hand and that of the dead Christ, which are painted with great sensitivity.

In 1508 he was summoned to Rome by Julius II, and he was to remain in the city serving successive popes until his death. His first commission was the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura, a room almost certainly used by the Pope as a library. The function of the room is reflected in the subjects of the frescoes—Theology, Poetry, Philosophy, and Jurisprudence, which correspond to the classification of books according to the faculties. In the frescoes Raphael shows a genius for finding simple pictorial means to convey these complex abstract concepts. In the most celebrated of all the frescoes, the *School of Athens*, a group of philosophers with Plato and Aristotle at the centre are shown beneath a majestic vaulted building which probably reflects Bramante's plan for S. Peter's. The brooding figure of the philosopher inserted in the foreground of the composition is the first evidence of Raphael's study of Michelangelo's recently unveiled Sistine chapel ceiling. The various preparatory drawings related to the *Disputa*, the first fresco to be painted, show Raphael's painstaking process in establishing a harmonious composition, in which the mass of figures is divided into smaller groups linked by gesture and pose.

The Stanza della Segnatura frescoes were completed by 1512 and soon after he began work on the Stanza d'Eliodoro which was completed in two years. The frescoes treat historical and legendary themes sharing the theme of divine intervention on behalf of the Church. The differences between the two rooms is marked, as the dramatic nature of the two principal frescoes, the *Expulsion of Heliodorus* and the *Repulse of Attila*, demanded scenes of tumultuous action. Pope Julius did not live to see their completion, and the

features of Leo X are substituted for those of his belligerent predecessor in the *Repulse of Attila*. Leo continued the programme of decoration and the Stanza dell'Incendio was painted between 1514 and 1517. The pressure of Raphael's growing number of commissions meant that much of the work is painted by studio hands following his designs. In the finest of the scenes, the *Fire in the Borgo*, after which the room is named, the flames are a minor element of the composition but the devastation is registered through the varying emotions of the fleeing crowd in the foreground. Preparation for part of the decoration of the largest of the suite of rooms, the Sala di Costantino, was already in hand on Raphael's death, and the frescoes were painted largely by **Giulio Romano** guided, at least in part, by drawings by the master.

Other papal projects included the design of ten **tapestries** with scenes from the Acts of the Apostles to hang in the Sistine chapel. The tapestries were woven in Brussels from cartoons of which seven survive (c. 1515–16; London, V&A on loan from Royal Coll.). Sensitive to the pictorial limitations of tapestry, Raphael took care that the expressions and gestures of the figures in the compositions are bold and direct. The cartoons themselves are visually something of a disappointment largely because they are mostly the work of Raphael's well-organized and highly productive workshop. This included young artists of talent like Giulio Romano, **Penni**, **Perino del Vaga**, and decorative specialists such as **Giovanni da Udine**, to whom Raphael entrusted the execution under his supervision, and in some cases part of the design, of major projects, such as Leo X's Loggia in the Vatican Palace (1518–19) which was decorated with *all'antica* stucco and painted ornament, and Old Testament scenes in the vault.

Throughout the period he was working in the Vatican Raphael also managed to work on other commissions. These included major altarpieces, the earliest of which is the *Madonna di Foligno* (c. 1512; Vatican Mus.) painted for the Franciscan church of S. Maria in Aracoeli. Venetian elements in the painting, such as the shimmering landscape and a greater subtlety in colouring, may be due to Raphael's contact at this time with **Sebastiano del Piombo**. The atmospheric handling of chalk and the choice of blue paper in Raphael's study for the Virgin and Child (London, BM) are also typically Venetian. In probably the most famous of all his altarpieces, the visionary *Sistine Madonna* (c. 1512–14; Dresden, Gemäldegal.), painted for a church in Piacenza, the Virgin and Christ child appear to be floating forwards out of the painting. The figures of the Virgin and Child appear to be as weightless as the clouds on which they stand while at the same time they convey a strong sense of corporeality. From the same period he painted for a Bolognese church the *S. Cecilia* altarpiece (c. 1513–16; Bologna, Pin.) which introduced an ideal of classical beauty that inspired Emilian artists from **Parmigianino** to **Reni**. In his last altarpiece, the *Transfiguration* (1518–20; Vatican Mus.), originally planned for Narbonne Cathedral, he included two contrasting episodes—the transfigured Christ in a blaze of light in the upper section, and in the darkness below the apostles who are unable to cure the possessed boy. The expressive heads and the dark overall tone depend on Leonardo's unfinished *Adoration of the Magi* (1481; Florence, Uffizi).

Unlike in Florence Raphael seldom had time to paint small devotional works in Rome, but he did manage to execute two—the *Madonna Alba* (c. 1511; Washington, NG) and the *Madonna della Sedia* (c. 1514; Florence, Pitti). In both works Raphael brilliantly exploits their circular format (see **tondo**). In the Washington painting the circular form gives impetus to the strong diagonal movement of the Virgin and Child, while in the later painting it tightly encompasses the figures, adding to the sense of tender intimacy.

Raphael worked extensively for the rich Siennese banker Agostino Chigi in both secular and ecclesiastical commissions. The earliest of these is the classicizing mythological fresco of *Galatea* (c. 1512), which was painted for his villa on the banks of the Tiber, now known as the Farnesina. In 1512–13 Raphael painted above the entrance arch of the Chigi chapel in S. Maria del Popolo a fresco with sibyls and prophets. The twisting movement of the sibyls is markedly Michelangesque, but the figures have an ideal feminine beauty perhaps best appreciated (the frescoes are damaged) in Raphael's superb red chalk studies (London, BM; Oxford, Ashmolean). A year or two later he also supplied designs for sculpture, architecture, and mosaic in Chigi's lavish chapel in S. Maria del Popolo. In 1518 Raphael's workshop decorated the loggia of Chigi's villa with scenes from the life of Cupid and Psyche. Giulio Romano and Giovanni Francesco Penni, who were responsible for the figurative parts of the scheme, were such faithful interpreters of Raphael's style that it is hard to establish if they or their master drew the red chalk figure studies related to the loggia.

Raphael continued to work as a portrait painter, but even for important clients he sometimes relied on studio help, as in *Joanna of Aragon* (1518; Paris, Louvre). His portraiture exhibits a sense of psychological penetration new to the genre. In the *Julius II* (c. 1512; London, NG) the Pope is shown half-length seated in a chair diagonal to the picture plane, and this spatial dissociation from the viewer adds to the sense of the sitter's self-absorption. The sensual feel of the contrasting textures of velvet and silk in the Pope's costume is even more of a feature in the sumptuous portrait of Leo X with his nephews (1518; Florence, Uffizi). Raphael also painted portraits of his circle of friends: *Baldassare Castiglione* (c. 1514–15; Paris, Louvre), *Andrea Navagero and Agostino Beazano* (before Apr. 1516; Rome, Doria Pamphili Gal.), and the presumed self-portrait with a friend, often called *Raphael and his Fencing Master* (c. 1518; Paris, Louvre). These portraits actively engage the viewer's attention either through the intensity of the sitter's gaze, as in the *Castiglione*, or more directly as with the outstretched pointing hand in the *Fencing Master*. The sitter of the *Donna velata* (c. 1514; Florence, Pitti), one of the few Roman-period female portraits, is unknown but the gesture of her hand pointing to her heart would be appropriate for a matrimonial portrait. The *Fornarina* (c. 1518; Rome, Barberini Gal.), said to be a portrait of Raphael's mistress, is despite the signature on a bracelet around her arm probably not autograph. The hardness of handling in the rendering of flesh is characteristic of Giulio.

Raphael was quick to see the value of engraving in the dissemination of his work, and through his collaboration with the Bolognese reproductive engraver **Marcantonio Raimondi** his reputation and influence spread throughout Europe. Raphael seems to have mainly given him drawings

related to his painted projects, but some of Raimondi's more elaborate plates—for example, the *Massacre of the Innocents* and *Il Morbetto*—were probably made from drawings especially intended for the purpose.

Raphael died at the age of 37 in Rome at the height of his powers. His artistic legacy was immense and it is hard to appreciate his originality because his inventions have been plundered by generations of artists. In the modern era Raphael's past canonical status has counted against him and he has inevitably been compared, often unfavourably, to Leonardo and Michelangelo, whose personalities and artistic expression more readily accord with 20th-century sensibilities.

Hugo Chapman

# Bibliography

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