Raphael, the “Prince of Painters,” at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Raphael: Sublime Poetry, *through June 28 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City is holding what it describes as the first comprehensive exhibition devoted to Renaissance painter Raffaello di Giovanni Santi (better known as Raphael) in the US, *Raphael: Sublime Poetry*.

On view through June 28, the exhibition offers a feast of sketches, drawings, paintings and tapestries that trace Raphael’s rapid development into the “Prince of Painters.” His work is marked by clarity and apparent effortlessness, and he imbues his figures with remarkable grace. Considered an artistic paragon for centuries after his death, Raphael embodied the Renaissance dedication to the arts and the natural sciences, both of which are under merciless attack today.

Raphael was born in the Italian city of Urbino in 1483. At the time, Italy was divided into rival states that competed politically, militarily and culturally. Though feudal relations still dominated, overseas exploration, trade and economic expansion were contributing to urbanization and the development of a layer of merchants and craftsmen: a bourgeoisie. The increasing need for administration, accounting and literacy encouraged an emphasis on humanism, reason and empirical observation. The rediscovery of the art, science and philosophy of classical antiquity corresponded to these needs and gave the period its name: the Renaissance.

Though small, Urbino was renowned as a center for the arts. Raphael’s father Giovanni Santi was a court painter for Duke Federico da Montefeltro and seems to have been highly integrated into the duke’s circle. In this atmosphere, Raphael received a strong education and learned excellent manners and social skills. The ambitious young man’s ability to interact easily with the highest levels of society would become an asset to his career.

Apprenticeship in Perugia

At the time, it was common for aspiring artists to learn by joining an established artist’s workshop. Raphael’s father brought his son to Perugia to study with the brilliant Pietro Perugino (1446/50–1523). This apprenticeship was a formative experience for Raphael. He absorbed Perugino’s emphasis on balanced, geometrically ordered compositions and clear linear perspective. Perugino’s gentle, calm figures, color harmonies and soft tonal transitions also became enduring influences for Raphael. Perugino was much in demand and had developed an efficient way of dividing tasks among his assistants, developing compositions and fulfilling commissions. Raphael adopted and later expanded this disciplined method of artistic production.

Like other Renaissance artists, Raphael also followed scientific advances and applied their lessons to his work. The clearest example of this tendency is his sophisticated use of linear perspective, which artists had begun developing earlier in the 15th century, to organize complex environments. Raphael also brought new anatomical findings to bear in his depiction of figures’ poses and movement (though he was less absorbed in this field than other artists we will discuss). He also kept abreast of optics and demonstrated an understanding of illumination and spatial recession. Raphael thus represented a time of transition from a more symbolic form of representation to one more firmly rooted in empirical observation.

By 1500, when he was 17, Raphael’s distinctive style was developing, and was he already being described as a “master” (that is, an independent artist). His compositions were unusually clear and well organized, like Perugino’s, but his figures were less formal and more alive. His figures also had greater dignity and idealized beauty, compared with those of his mentor. Raphael’s palette was luminous and harmonious, and he had become skilled at conveying texture. The artist was demonstrating his talent for synthesizing various influences into a unified, balanced whole.

Among the early works in the exhibition is a wealth of sketches and studies. Raphael was a more procedural and disciplined draftsman than most of his contemporaries. He drew studies of faces and figures that he saved as potential compositional elements for future paintings. When starting a new work, he created a series of drawings, experimenting until he arrived at a finished composition. In the exhibition, Raphael’s method is visible in, for example, studies for paintings of the seated Virgin and Child between 1501 and 1505.

During this period, Raphael received many commissions for altarpieces. One of them, “Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints” (c. 1503–1505), also known as the Colonna Altarpiece, is in the exhibition. The composition is strongly anchored around Mary, Jesus and Saint John the Baptist. Already, one can see Raphael’s command of perspective and vibrant colors.

Artistic development in Florence

Beginning in 1504, Raphael spent much of his time in Florence, where he learned a good deal from the work of Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519). The latter’s more complex, dynamic figures stimulated the younger artist’s creativity. Raphael also studied the way da Vinci’s figures exchanged glances; he tried to capture, as the older artist put it, the “motion of the mind” and the “passion of the soul.” Raphael’s work soon incorporated da Vinci’s pyramidal compositions and *sfumato* technique (a method of softening the transitions between colors, as if to indicate an

area that the eye was not focusing on).

While in Florence, Raphael also learned from studying Michelangelo (1475–1564). His relatively weightless, slender figures became more muscular and substantial like those of the older artist. Raphael also learned to render physical tension and rotational movement more convincingly. Dramatic tension and emotional contrasts began to appear in his work, even though it remained balanced. Michelangelo, who was prone to feuding with other artists, took an increasing dislike to Raphael, whom he saw as a rival.

One of the most striking paintings from this period is "Portrait of a Young Woman" (c. 1507–1508), which is also known as "La Muta." A beautiful, austere young noblewoman gazes at us calmly, every detail of her dress and jewelry finely observed and rendered. One could almost touch the fabric. The woman, rendered with psychological realism, seems to emerge from darkness, and the palette is restricted to rich earths, rust, and green. The subject presses her index finger against the bottom edge of the canvas as though testing the illusion. "La Muta" is regarded as among Raphael's best portraits.

Another striking painting from this period is "Portrait of a Young Woman with a Unicorn" (1505–1506). A young noblewoman in sumptuous attire sits between two columns, gazing watchfully. In her lap, she cradles a small, tranquil unicorn, which was a traditional symbol of chastity. Pale blue hills recede into the distance behind her. This blonde woman with fair skin evokes the ideals of beauty expressed by the poet Petrarch (1304–1374).

"The Virgin and Child" (1508), or the Niccolini-Cowper Madonna, is among Raphael's most outstanding treatments of this subject and conveys great intimacy and tenderness. The infant Jesus grasps his mother's dress as she gazes at him with a loving yet somber expression. Mary's transparent veil with a fine gold border gives both figures an otherworldly character. The absence of other compositional elements, apart from a cloudless sky, heightens the painting's emotional power.

An invitation to Rome

Raphael's renown grew with his skills, and Pope Julius II, possibly on the advice of his architect Donato Bramante, invited him to Rome. Raphael moved there in 1508 and remained there for the rest of his life. In Rome, Raphael received major commissions from Julius II and his successor Pope Leo X. During this period, the artist reached the height of his powers and created some of his most outstanding work.

Soon after arriving in Rome, Raphael was commissioned to create frescos for the Vatican Palace. The first room that Raphael painted includes "The School of Athens," "The Parnassus" and the "Disputation of the Holy Sacrament" (all 1509–1511). These works are ranked among not only Raphael's masterpieces but also the greatest artistic achievements of the Renaissance.

"The School of Athens" depicts a gathering of ancient scientists, mathematicians and philosophers, with Plato and Aristotle at its center. The fresco is remarkable for its lifelike figures, its superb command of perspective and its *sprezzatura*, or apparent nonchalance. "The Parnassus" shows Apollo surrounded by the Muses and poets such as Sappho, Dante, Homer and Virgil. These two frescos embody Renaissance humanism and the rediscovery of classical culture.

The "Disputation" is a majestic scene depicting God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and various Biblical figures presiding over the Earth, where various popes, saints and artists are gathered. The exhibition recreates these frescos through projections on the walls of a small room. The arrangement gives at least a fleeting impression of these beautiful works.

One outstanding painting from this period is "The Virgin and Child with the Infant Saint John the Baptist in a Landscape," also known as the Alba Madonna (c. 1511). In this pyramidal composition, Mary, who has a more substantial physical presence here than the Niccolini-Cowper Madonna, sits on the ground with a blonde Jesus in her lap. Both look at the infant Saint John the Baptist, who holds a cross and gazes reverently at Jesus. Though the figures are grouped to the left, Mary's left arm and leg form an angle that points to the right, thus balancing the composition.

Also striking is "The Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia" (1516–1517), an altarpiece. Cecilia, the patron saint of musicians, is shown listening to a heavenly choir and dropping a small organ, suggesting her abandonment of the earthly for the divine. Four other saints gather around her, and the glances that they exchange direct the viewer's eyes and contrast with Cecilia's rapt, heavenward gaze. Unusually, the painting depicts the act of worship rather than the object to be worshiped.

During his final years, Raphael was extraordinarily prolific. In addition to his work as a painter, he was named architect of Saint Peter's Basilica. Working for a small circle around the pope, Raphael designed several buildings and became one of the foremost architects of Rome. He also was given oversight of all antiquities unearthed within Rome and its environs and proposed a method of cataloging them systematically.

Pope Leo X commissioned Raphael to design monumental tapestries to be hung in the Sistine Chapel on special occasions. He painted enormous works of gouache on paper to guide the weavers in Brussels who would create the tapestries. These works depict the "Acts of the Apostles" and incorporate inventive compositions that convey narrative and motion. The exhibition includes Spanish editions of the original tapestries, which became the envy of European monarchs and helped bankrupt the pope. These works were among the last that Raphael saw through to completion before his death of an acute illness.

Raphael's evolving reputation

Raphael's continual artistic development, the height of his achievement and the breadth of his activity help to illuminate the character of the Renaissance. The artist embodied the active engagement with scientific and artistic developments that was cultivated by layers of the nobility and the rising bourgeoisie. His career unfolded within workshop and patronage systems that fostered the development of talent and skill, the transmission of ideas and the emergence of innovation. Like his peers, Raphael closely observed the work of other artists, actively appropriating their best methods. He excelled at synthesizing other artists' advances into a style that remained his own. By learning from Perugino, da Vinci and Michelangelo, Raphael strengthened the realism and emotional force of his own work while retaining his orientation toward harmony and balance.

After his death, Raphael was revered as the paragon of artistic perfection. This canonization reflected the need of the nobility and the papacy to project their authority and claim continuity with the classical world. As absolutist states consolidated themselves in the 17th and 18th centuries, Raphael was presented as the model of academic art. His work exhibited the order, hierarchy and balance that were the ideological supports of these regimes.

But with the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie in the 19th century, Raphael's ties to the nobility and the papacy made him suspect. Critics began to emphasize individual expression and social reality. They opposed what they saw as Raphael's overly idealized figures and lack of emotional intensity. A group of artists called the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood advocated for a return to earlier, more "truthful"

art.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, critics and scholars have come to approach Raphael not as an ideal figure but as an artist who lived and worked in a specific historical context. His synthesis of the achievements of da Vinci and Michelangelo has been more broadly recognized, as has the role of the nobility and the papacy in influencing his work.

While Raphael's work still speaks eloquently to us, it is necessary to compare the historical situation in which he lived with the one we face today. In Raphael's time, the bourgeoisie was a nascent economic and social force. Over a long period, driven by its material needs, it fostered major developments in art, science, technology and politics that ultimately superseded Medieval conceptions. These advances culminated in democratic revolutions and industrial production.

But the bourgeoisie could not produce a Raphael today. In every country, it is repudiating its previously held democratic and scientific ideals in a historically doomed effort to maintain its social dominance. Having long since exhausted its progressive character, the bourgeoisie is censoring artists, attacking education and denigrating science. In their place, it advances religious obscurantism, fascism, genocide and war. Not only cultural progress but also the defense of previous human achievements requires the fight for socialism.