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Raphael (National Gallery, London, 9 April – 31 July 2022). *Raphael*, exh. cat., David Ekserdjian and Tom Henry, with Matthias Wivel and contributions by Caroline Elam, Arnold Nesselrath and Thomas P. Campbell, National Gallery Global, London, distributed by Yale University Press, 2022, 328pp, 200 colour illustrations. ISBN: 978 1 85709 658 3 1048789

Originally planned to mark the 500th anniversary of Raphael's death in 2020, but postponed due to Covid, this landmark exhibition finally opened at the National Gallery in London in the spring of 2022. Built around the gallery's significant collection of large-scale altarpieces and smaller panel paintings, the exhibition was enriched by an impressive number of loans from all over the world, in diverse media, relating to a range of activities. Indeed, one of the great successes of this exhibition was the way it showcased the extraordinary breadth of Raphael's output. For, as was amply demonstrated here, he was so much more than a painter. From his revolutionary cartoons for tapestries, which redefined what could be achieved in the medium, to his designs for printmaking, and a hugely accomplished foray into architecture, Raphael's career was as varied as it was industrious. Appointed Superintendent of Antiquities by Pope Leo X, he also had a sophisticated understanding of classical art and architecture, which was documented in the exhibition through architectural drawings and studies after the antique [Fig. 1], as well as a manuscript of his famous letter to the pope, in which he warned against the continued destruction of ancient remains.

If the version of the letter on display was penned by its presumed co-author, Baldassare Castiglione, the insightful observations it contains on the arts, including the first recorded description of the distinct figurative styles of different phases of Roman sculpture, clearly stemmed from Raphael himself. His close friendship with Castiglione was attested to by the seductively engaging and elegant portrait that hung in the final room [Fig. 2], a brilliant essay in texture and tonality that has entranced many a portrait painter since, most notably perhaps Rembrandt. The fact that he was also collaborating with Castiglione as an expert antiquarian speaks volumes of the intellectual pretensions that saw Raphael cast as the model of the learned artist for centuries to come. In amply fulfilling Leon Battista Alberti's exhortation to painters to 'associate with poets and orators...who have a broad knowledge of many things', he helped as much as anyone to raise the status of his profession.¹ Following in the footsteps of his father, Giovanni Santi, who was a poet as well as a painter and enjoyed considerable standing at the cultured court of Urbino, Raphael counted several literary men among his friends, one of whom, Fabio Calvi, produced an Italian translation of Vitruvius for the artist. And when he died in April 1520, at the age of just 37, he was lamented as much for his unfinished survey of ancient Rome, as he was for his painting. Fittingly interred in the Pantheon, a building that he had studied extensively, his epitaph, composed by Pietro Bembo, heralded him as the 'rival of the ancients'. His legacy was further assured when he was one of just five contemporary

¹ Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura* [1435], Book Three (*On Painting*, trans. J. H. Spencer, New Haven and London, 1966, p. 90).

artists named in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (published in 1528, but partly written in Rome the previous decade).²

And yet, for all his enduring fame, Raphael's reputation has not always had a positive shine to it. Held up as the paradigm of excellence by the academies of art that emerged in the century following his death, Raphael suffered by association once the hegemony of the Academy, and the often derivative art it produced, had been challenged. In nineteenth-century England, for instance, Raphael was seen by critics, such as Ruskin, as the personification of a flawed tradition in which 'execution was looked for rather than thought, and beauty rather than veracity.'³ Indeed, the notion that the pursuit of beauty in itself was a worthy goal of the artist became outdated in the modern era, and Raphael, who in the sixteenth century had been re-cast as a latter-day Zeuxis, taking the best parts from nature to reproduce the idea of perfect beauty in the mind,⁴ fell out of favour. His fortune was dented too by the Romantic notion of the artist as tortured genius, a role better suited to Michelangelo – who, according to Lodovico Dolce, made 'difficulty his objective in all his works'. Raphael meanwhile produced his paintings with effortless 'ease', so that they never seemed 'laboured or overdone'.⁵ This perceived lack of difficulty, or maybe just an absence of angst, has surely counted against him in the post-Freudian, post-Expressionist world. The recent exhibition could be seen as an attempt to re-dress the balance.

Organised in roughly chronological order, albeit with a strong thematic slant, the exhibition began by charting the precocious talent of the young Raffaello Sanzio (1483-1520), who was named as an independent master already at the age of 17. If some of the works in the first room lacked the sophistication of his later offerings, his ability to learn and develop as an artist was breathtakingly illustrated over the course of the exhibition as a whole. From his rather awkward early drawings, for instance, where he appeared to struggle with volume, to the studies for the Vatican *Stanze*, in which he conjured form, grace and movement in a few deft strokes [Fig. 3], Raphael's command of draughtsmanship was totally transformed in just a handful of years. And the inclusion of a large number of drawings, scattered generously throughout the exhibition, allowed for a real appreciation of his mastery of the form. That he soaked up the lessons of his elder peers, with a sponge-like intensity, is indisputable, and Giorgio Vasari's observation that he assimilated the idiom of Perugino to such an extent that his work was indistinguishable from the Umbrian painter, was self-evident from the early altarpieces. But he very swiftly moved past the Umbrian painter – and while their precise relationship is still a matter of debate, it is now clear that Raphael was already a master in his own right when he was working in Perugino's shop. And if he went on to learn from the innovations of artists such as Leonardo and Michelangelo, first in Florence, and then in Rome, where he settled in 1508, he quickly developed a style that was unmistakably his own. So the somewhat pervasive

² Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortigiano* [1528], Book One, Ch. XXXVII (ed. G. Preti, Turin, 1965, p. 63).

³ John Ruskin, 'Pre-Raphaelitism', in *The Complete Works*, London, 1903-1912, eds. E. T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, vol. 12, p. 150.

⁴ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite dei piu' eccellenti architetti, pittori et scultori...*, [1550 and 1568], eds. R. Bettarini and P. Barocchi, Florence, 1966-87, vol. IV, pp. 8-9.

⁵ Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della Pittura* [1553], in M. K. Roskill, *Dolce's Aretino and Venetian Art Theory of the Cinquecento*, Toronto, 2000, p. 177.

narrative that has seen him largely as an imitator is highly reductive, as it privileges the inventiveness of others over any originality on the part of Raphael himself.⁶

By focusing on his work alone, and avoiding too many digressions into his borrowings, or his relationships with other artists, the curators of this exhibition shone a light on Raphael's own contribution: an almost life-sized facsimile of the *School of Athens*, which took up one wall of a room dedicated to his work at the Vatican, reminded visitors of his entirely original vision of a library classification (philosophy) as monumental, interactive human drama; while his designs for the Chigi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo, represented here through the ground plan, marked the reinvention of the funerary chapel as an ensemble of coloured marbles, mosaic, painting and sculpture in a way that was wholly unique for its time, and deeply informed by his antiquarian knowledge. The inclusion of two bronze roundels (attr. Cesarino Rossetti, c.1511-12, Santa Maria Chiaravalle, Milan) intended for his other chapel for Agostino Chigi, in Santa Maria della Pace, was particularly enlightening, given that they were never installed, and are rarely exhibited. Shown alongside several studies for the chapel, they served to illustrate Raphael's early interest in bringing together different media in a single decorative scheme. His innovative attitude towards architectural embellishment was further manifested in a model of the façade of his celebrated Palazzo Branconio dell'Aquila. Based on contemporary drawings of the palace, which was demolished in 1660 to make way for the colonnade of St Peter's, the model revealed the multi-layered application of mouldings, pediments, engaged columns, balustrades and sculptures in thrillingly three-dimensional reality.

What the exhibition also managed to do quite spectacularly was to drive home what a large and varied catalogue of panel paintings Raphael produced. Aside from his monumental achievements in fresco, Michelangelo did not leave an abundant legacy as a painter, and for all his extraordinary innovations, neither did Leonardo. Just a handful of works survive by his hand, whereas the walls of this exhibition were covered with autograph paintings, reminding visitors of Raphael's preeminence in this respect. If he died tragically young, he was exhaustingly prolific, and his constant experimentation tells the story of Central Italian art of the early sixteenth-century more comprehensively than the oeuvre of any other single artist.

Take the evolution of the altarpiece, for instance, which unfolded in a number of examples on show here, from the early, Peruginese *Virgin with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Nicholas of Bari* ('*The Ansidei Madonna*', c. 1505, National Gallery, London; Fig. 4), to *The Ecstasy of St Cecilia* (c. 1515-16, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna; Fig. 5). Executed just a decade apart, the difference in composition, space and treatment of form is striking. The *Ansidei Madonna*, beautifully painted, with a warm, Umbrian palette, and a soft rendering of contours, follows an established, hierarchical format, with the Virgin elevated and enthroned at the centre, flanked by the two saints. The composition is perfectly symmetrical, the figures framed by an arched window against an idyllic countryside, which melts hazily into the distance. The Saint Cecilia altarpiece, also beautifully painted, in brighter hues, is entirely different in conception, even taking into account the different

⁶ See, e.g., Bernard Berenson, who stated that Raphael 'passed from influence to influence' (*The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, London and New York, 1897, p. 113).

iconography: all the figures are now rendered as standing monumental forms on the same plane, the titular saint at the centre crowded almost uncomfortably by those around her. The Magdalen, whose insistent gaze demands our attention, is defined with almost sculptural precision, the sharp contrast between light and shade replacing the sfumato of the earlier painting. Without the perspectival props of the throne and the arch, the space is articulated not so much through setting as through the volume and positioning of the figures themselves, who take up most of the surface area. There is little sense of recession beyond the immediate foreground, which is scattered with exquisitely rendered musical instruments, and is tilted up slightly, adding to the verticality that leads the eye upwards, through Cecilia's own enraptured stance, to the chorus of angels who serenade her above. Executed for a church in Bologna, the altarpiece unquestionably influenced subsequent generations of Emilian artists, including Guido Reni, who would paint a copy of it a century later for the Polet Chapel in Rome's San Luigi dei Francesi. The walls of the same chapel, frescoed by Domenichino, also pay homage to Raphael in their self-conscious emulation of the Vatican *stanze*, and point the way to the grand manner of the classical baroque.

Raphael's experiments with space and composition were evident in his smaller devotional paintings as well. Fittingly, for an artist most famous for his 'Madonnas', there were a large number of them displayed in this exhibition, giving full expression to the variety of his solutions. From relatively simple Virgin and Christ Child images (eg the *Tempi Madonna*, c.1507-08, Alte Pinakothek, Munich), to more complex Holy Family figure groups, such as the '*The Madonna of Divine Love*' (c. 1516, Capodimonte, Naples), Raphael was continually playing around with the positioning and inter-relationships of the protagonists. Once again key stylistic shifts were discernible over the arc of time represented. With the odd notable exception (eg. *The Madonna de Granduca*, c. 1505-06, Uffizi Galleries, Florence), his earlier examples were characterised by clearly-defined spatial settings, either in idyllic landscapes, or simple interiors, the figures often moulded into volumetric pyramidal compositions (*Garvagh Madonna*, c. 1510, National Gallery). In later works, however, including the *Madonna of the Rose* from the Prado (c. 1516-17), the figures were instead arranged, relief-like, against a dark, undefined background, any sense of symmetry or centralisation downplayed. The sheer range of examples on show enabled an appreciation of Raphael's journey away from characteristics generally associated with the 'High Renaissance' towards so-called 'Mannerist' tendencies, including a departure from recessional space and an exaggerated idealisation away from nature. Given that the term 'Mannerism' is usually used to describe the period after the artist's death, this exhibition underlined just how unsatisfactory these labels are.

That said, the historiography of the period, and the place of Raphael within that, was not touched upon to any great extent in the didactic material provided to visitors. The information panels in each room were clearly written and provided useful context for the works on display, highlighting, for instance, the artist's personal connections with important patrons, from popes to bankers, but they did not engage with anything particularly problematic in the scholarship on Raphael. This was of course understandable for such a high-profile exhibition, with significant appeal to the public at large, and was perhaps indicative of a desire to involve the viewer without subjecting them to scholarly overload. And if the individual labels for the works were rather brief, this was more than made up for in the entries in the accompanying catalogue, which also boasts essays by the curators, David Ekserdjian and Tom Henry, and by Matthias Wivel, Caroline Elam, Arnold Nesselrath and Thomas P.

Campbell. It is, of course, beautifully illustrated, and the essays represent a useful, and highly accessible overview of Raphael's life and career. Not overly specialised, they touch on several important aspects of his output, as covered in the exhibition, including Raphael's architecture – entrusted to the expert hand of Elam, who highlights his sensitive and imaginative rendering of architecture in paint, as well as in bricks and mortar – and his frescoes in the Vatican, perfectly summarized by Nesselrath, who knows as much as anyone about the 'adventurous' painting techniques he developed there, which, he posits, 'make him appear avant-garde, almost a magician'.

The Introductory essay by Ekserdjian and Henry, 'Raphael, The Universal Artist', makes clear that the ambition to cover the entire spectrum of the artist's work was always central to the genesis of the exhibition, and represented a deliberate attempt to fill a gap in the way he is generally presented outside Italy. The curators also point to the rich holdings of the artist's work in British collections, and the National Galleries of Scotland, the British Museum, the Ashmolean, the Fitzwilliam and the V&A, among others, were very well represented. Given the abundant scholarly expertise on Raphael in the UK, and the fondness for the artist that saw the *Madonna of the Pinks* purchased for the National Gallery in part by public fundraising in 2004, the choice of the gallery to stage one of the big celebrations to mark his fifth centenary was more than justified. If the other showpiece exhibition, at the Scuderie del Quirinale, in Rome, in conjunction with the Uffizi, did manage to open in 2020, albeit in fits and starts, it was definitely worth waiting the extra two years for this one.

Illustrations

1. Interior View of the Pantheon, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe degli Uffizi, Inv. GDSU n. 164 A recto, reproduced with kind permission of the Italian Ministero della Cultura
2. *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, c. 1516, © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre), Tony Querrec
3. Study for a kneeling woman, black chalk, c. 1512 (39.5 x 25.9 cm), WA1846.198 verso © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
4. *The Virgin and Child with Saint John the Baptist and Saint Nicholas of Bari* ('*The Ansidei Madonna*'), 1505 © The National Gallery, London, NG1171
5. *The Ecstasy of St Cecilia*, c. 1515-16, Pinacoteca Nazionale, Bologna, inv. 577, reproduced with kind permission of the Ministero della Cultura-Pinacoteca Nazionale di Bologna