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In Raphael's studio

by James Hankins

From his death in 1520 to the early–nineteenth century, Raphael was widely regarded as the greatest painter of Europe. He was also the most studied by his fellow artists. The other leading painters of his generation, Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, were much less influential in the world of the Old Masters. Leonardo's most famous narrative painting, *The Last Supper*, quickly became a useless ruin, and his notebooks were hardly known before the work of the art historian Jean-Paul Richter in the late nineteenth century. Michelangelo was more esteemed as a sculptor, and his painting was seen by later artists primarily as a brilliant master class on ways to represent the adult male nude. Raphael's painting, by contrast, was studied and copied not only by the artists who for centuries streamed through Rome—where his most famous work was to be found—but also by anyone with access to the numberless copies of Raphael's *disegni*. These took the form of engravings, tapestries modeled on his *cartoni*, even *maiolica* based on his famous Madonnas. Raphael was perhaps the canniest promoter of his own work before Rubens, and along with Albrecht Dürer became the first major artist to disseminate his designs via prints, collaborating above all with the innovative engraver Marcantonio Raimondi.

After the early–nineteenth century, however, Raphael's reputation went into rapid decline. There were many reasons. One was the Romantic revolt against classicism and the routines of art education that had idealized Raphael's elegant, balanced compositions. Some artists, like those of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, made it their battle cry to seek inspiration in the period before Raphael, recovering the supposedly more spiritual, naïve, and poetic art of Giotto, the "Tuscan primitives" and the *quattrocento*. When Christianity lost its hold on Europeans in the later–nineteenth century it became easier to admire the skeptical Leonardo and the Platonizing Michelangelo than Raphael with his seemingly conventional piety. Photography and the movement of great paintings into public collections enhanced Leonardo and Michelangelo's reputations; Raphael's was diminished. The notion of the artist as a lonely genius fit Raphael's two great rivals better than it did the successful master craftsman from Urbino, especially as it was often Raphael's practice to work up the design of an artwork via drawings but to leave much of its actual execution to assistants. The late–twentieth century's obsession with disruptive genius and its sexual politics found more purchase for its prurience in Michelangelo and Leonardo than in

Raphael's geometric classicism and his regrettable heteronormativity. It is hard to imagine books like *The Agony and the Ecstasy* or *The Da Vinci Code* being written with Raphael as their hero. We will wait a long time, I suspect, before Tom Hanks stars in a movie about "Da Urbino"—as Hollywood, with its defective grasp of Italian toponymics, will no doubt wish to call him.

Raphael, Back view of Michelangelo's David, *1507-8*, *Pen and brown ink over traces of black chalk*, *British Museum*, *London*

How then to present Raphael to a modern museum-going public mostly ignorant of classical mythology, indifferent or hostile to Christianity, and whose approach to parenting is unlikely to find inspiration in his placid Madonnas? The Ashmolean Museum of Oxford has found an answer

to this problem, and the result is no less than thrilling. The answer is not to approach Raphael's work as a contemporary viewer might have done, but rather as his fellow artists did. This means focusing on his creative process, his powers of *disegno*, a word that means both drawing and conceptualization. The exhibition has assembled 120 of his drawings, more than a quarter of those known to have survived, making this the largest display of Raphael drawing since the memorable show of 1983 at the British Museum. In contrast with that earlier show, however, the curators of this exhibition, Catherine Whistler and Ben Thomas, spend little time on patrons, iconography, and the function and placement of the planned painting. Instead they aim to show how Raphael thought through the making of an image, how he communicated. They've given viewers careful, expert descriptions of how Raphael made each drawing, the stages of composition and revision, and how he addressed problems of expression, adapting the medium—pen and ink, charcoal and red chalk, dry-point and highlights—to the message. They explain his techniques, models, and aims; they show the effects of his training under Perugino and his studies of great contemporaries, especially Leonardo and Michelangelo. Above all they show us the evolution of Raphael's major preoccupation as an artist: how to bring alive the thought and emotions behind the old stories through the eloquence of the human face and the human body. The immediacy of drawing takes us to the creative heart of a great artist, as though we could go back in time, slip into his studio for a moment, and look through his working papers.

Part of the intellectual pleasure this exhibition offers comes from watching Raphael's development as an artist and seeing how he responds to his great contemporaries, how he participates in one of the greatest moments of innovation in Western art. We see him, the precocious student of the exquisite but anodyne Perugino, raising his game during two crucial years in Florence. In those years he must have realized that Leonardo's unprecedented attempts to capture the inner life of his subjects in portraiture, and Michelangelo's vast expansion of the vocabulary of the human form, had changed painting forever. We see his drawings of Michelangelo's *David* from those years; we see in his series of Madonnas attempts to capture with chalk Leonardo's chiaroscuro effects and the way the older master could make light wash imperceptibly over the surface of skin. Later, in Raphael's drawings for *The Slaughter of the Innocents*, we sense echoes of the great rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo in their *cartoni* of battle scenes for the Sala del Cinquecento: above all their ability to pack explosive energy into the human form. Yet Raphael is never a copyist; he digests technical advances but always through the filter of his own gentle and reflective sensibility; he studies other masters without being mastered by them.

Raphael, The Heads and Hands of Two Apostles, *1517*, *Black chalk touched with white on greyish paper*, *Ashmolean Museum*

As we watch his technical mastery increase from drawing to drawing, we observe too a growing capacity to think through the pen. The curators have not only devoted great effort to reconstructing the stages of each drawing; they have also shown how one drawing is connected to another via Raphael's intense preoccupation with certain types of human experience: the love and care of noble women for their offspring; the piety of old men; anger and fear, doubt and hope, vision and rapture. Raphael is never satisfied with mere iconography; he always starts with the thought and feeling behind a scene and explores ways to convey to us, the viewers, his own responses to it. We feel his tenderness, his pleasure in his own virtuosity, and eventually—though Raphael was never anything so crude as a theorist—a hint of his wider outlook. We become aware that Raphael's extraordinary skill, in his large frescoes, of articulating figural groupings in dynamic yet balanced postures is built up out of similar concerns on a smaller scale, even within the parts of a single figure. Eventually we grasp that Raphael's classicism, his imposition of geometric forms, his carefully orchestrated, flowing rhythms, is not so much the application of academic rules as it is an emotional response in its own right. It grows from a desire to impose concord and contemplative

distance on both the violent flux of human actions and emotions as well as the calmer contrasts of philosophy and divinity.

Raphael, The Transfiguration (detail), *1516-1520, Tempera on wood, Pinacoteca Vaticana*

The drawings exposed and explained in this exhibition give us in the end a new experience of Raphael's art, one that stands in marked contrast with the experience of viewing his finished panel paintings and frescoes. Raphael's frescoes in particular—often completed by others in his workshop, often restored—leave one with a strange sense of anonymity. Emotions have somehow been toned down, thoughts harder to read, after transferral to the more permanent medium. Unlike the architects of our time, for example, relentlessly drawing attention to their own cleverness, Raphael's frescoes have a kind of humility. They are self-effacing. The story speaks, the figures act, but the artist remains behind the curtain. The drawings, by contrast, introduce us to a different Raphael, a man who reveals his humanity, his *grandissima compassione* as his biographer Giorgio Vasari called it. He knows or can imagine what religious emotions are like. He has empathy enough to feel what it is like to believe but not really believe, yet suddenly, in fear and trembling, to be confronted with divine power in action. The shock to human consciousness on encountering divinity in the flesh was first deeply explored in Western art by Giotto in the Arena

Chapel of Padua, but we find it here fully realized by Raphael in his astonishing drawings for the *Transfiguration of Christ*, which the curators save for the end of the exhibition. Raphael's painting of the *Transfiguration* is one I have lingered over several times in the Vatican Pinoteca, but I confess that I never found it moving and never saw the point of combining the two consecutive stories in the Synoptic Gospels—the Transfiguration and the healing of a boy possessed by demons—on the same altarpiece. The drawings clarify the connection. In the upper register, the contemplative, the human mind is simply blinded and knocked flat by sun of divinity. In the lower register, the drawings make plain that what we are witnessing is the human will responding to divine power. We see the wide-eyed astonishment of the boy's father; a gaping shadowy figure—Judas?—pulling his cloak more tightly around him; a young disciple staring and touching himself on the chest as though asking whether he is asleep or awake; the apotropaic gesture of an older disciple's hands—but is he warding off the escaping demon, or pushing against the shock to his settled beliefs? And we see the slightest of smiles crossing the face of the seated evangelist in the foreground as he motions to us with eloquent hands that say: stop, and look.

Raphael: The Drawings is scheduled to close on September 3, 2017.

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