

Raphael. The Feast of Raphael.

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MYTH AND THE WORLD

The Exhibition “RAPHAEL. FROM URBINO TO ROME”

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“One can imagine what a feast for our eyes it would be if some day it proved to be possible to put together an exhibition of all the works by Giovanni Bellini...”

Roberto Longi, “From Cimabue to Morandi”

This year, following the exhibitions of El Greco and “The Russian landscape of the Tolstoy era”, the National Gallery is presenting an unprecedented feast of Raphael.

This exhibition was not marked by the wide-spread excitement and advance booking as has been the case with a number of recent exhibitions.

Some people say that Raphael is nothing extraordinary; true, he stands for harmony, moderation, a model of correctness and dull classicism. This is art permeated with a sense of wellbeing and created by the happiest of mortals. What kind of message can it carry for the modern man gone mad from the cynical horrors of the prevailing world order?

The exhibition is not a life-long retrospective, as was the case with El Greco and Titian. Out of the brief life of the boy from Urbino the curators of the exhibition selected a short time span: from Urbino to Rome. From the pivotal year 1500 (the end of the world was expected!) until the time when Raphael, not yet thirty years old, became the Painter of Apostles, the Guardian of Roman Antiquities, and the architect of the City of Rome.

This is how the brochure of the exhibition puts it: over a period of time spanning a little more than a decade, a Renaissance painter Raphael turned from a decorator of provincial churches into the greatest painter that had ever lived. On the fresco map of Italy by Ignatio Danti, kept in the famous Vatican gallery of cartogra-

phy, the duchy of Urbino can be easily located by guiding the eye northward from Rome, over the beautifully painted mountains, towards the Adriatic.

Florence was a detour on the way to Rome, but a painter could not make it to the Capital without having made a name for himself first in Florence. Young Raphael went through Citta da Costello, Perugia, Siena and on to Florence, seeing and absorbing all he could on the way, and changing like Proteus, not from year to year but with each new work...

Raphael is a legend, a myth created during his own lifetime, someone like Apollo, Dionysus, Orpheus, or Hermes. The latter name here is somewhat equivocal, if one recalls that Hermes was considered a cheat and a trickster, a shady patron of thieves.

A favorite of fortune? A messenger of angels?

His mother died when he was eight, his father when he was twelve. When he became famous, ill wishers were saying that Bramante had helped him climb to the top, but there was nothing unusual in that, since the two men were related. And what Italian does not enjoy the support of his grandfathers, uncles, brothers, distant relatives, or fellow countrymen, even today?

The first of his well known works was produced at the age of eighteen. At the time he looked like a fifteen-year old. His self-portrait shows an angelic-looking boy, an impressionable and good student. His first teacher of painting was his father, and his initial style was acquired from Perugino. He also imitated his elders, Guirlandajo and Botticelli. He learned to draw hand gestures from Luca Signorelli, various angles from Mantegna, while Pietro della Francesca taught him perspective, and Fra Angelico shared with him the secret of subtly constructed sincerity. He observed Leonardo, and Michelangelo was his rival working next door in the Sistine Chapel. Of all people, Raphael had nothing to teach him... And the Venetians, too, with their palette, especially one Giorgione who died so young. He was a true rival of all rivals, for years and centuries to come. A motive, a tune, a tone. Try and do it. A move, a technique, a subject, a composition. Everybody did it that way. With the exception of Buonarroti.

Much on the subject has been said by the experienced Giorgio Vasari and by the simple-minded Antonio Condivi.

It was a common practice for artists to play pranks on fellow painters, to make them appear foolish, to snatch commissions from them that had been procured at great pains, or to lure away female models.

But not for Raphael.

And just as any other myth, his life is full of omens and miracles.

The Miracles

Raphael was born on 6 April, 1483 into the family of Giovanni Sanzio, a painter and a poet at the court of Duke Montfeltro of Urbino. He died in Rome on 6 April, 1520, on Good Friday. He is buried at the Pantheon as an Emperor, the Prince of painters.

Some strange coincidences: Petrarca met his Laura also on April 6 (in 1327), at the church of St Clara in Avignon. And his Laura, his goddess, his eternal love, the embodiment of Helen of Troy, also died on April 6 (in 1348), and also on Good Friday.

Both Michelangelo and Titian were buried with honours. (The Florentines even stole Buonarroti's body from Rome and secretly carried it home, hidden in a heap of goods, the way the Venetians stole St Mark's relics from the Alexandrians.) The burial processions were set up as a triumph of art, but that was half a century later. Leonardo died half a year before Raphael, but he was an old man, a runaway, no longer involved in painting.

It was believed that arguments about Vinci, Buonarroti, and Sanzi would be settled by death. But since all three have become immortal, the arguments continue.

There is something strange, something of a riddle in the fact that young Raffaello, a man of angelic looks and what they call "good nature", had managed to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, as well as the wisest of the mortals (Hermes, Zoroaster, Pythagoras) in their eternal dispute, by depicting them as *The Ancient Theologians* against the background of columns, naves, and arches of the School in Athens, in a painting that can be seen in a small room (about eight by twelve metres) of the Stanza della Segnatura of the Vatican Palace.

Raphael was universally recognised as a bright and talented artist, even a GENIUS, but no one would go as far as calling him a TITAN, a theomachist, or a Prometheus, as Michelangelo was referred to. (Michelangelo would strike his Moses with a sledgehammer, trying to force the sculpture through the cathedral's door, saying: "Come alive, remember you are alive!")

At the Stanza della Segnatura, opposite *The School in Athens*, Raphael had placed a no less famous fresco, *Disputa* or *The Dispute over the Holy Communion*. And across from the window, above the door, he had put Parnassus, with Apollo playing lyra da braccio in the centre of the composition which includes the blind old man Homer, Sappho holding a harp, a muse with a cithara, as well as Dante and Raphael's contemporaries surrounded by beautiful maidens.

This *Parnassus*, displayed in the private rooms of Pope Julius the Second, is the most beautiful depiction of Eden among world famous paintings. The eternal and shining Elysium of the best and immortal, where Apollo is an equal to Jesus the Bearer of Light and Life, and poets and painters are prophets and seers, the forebears of a single culture and religion to come, an idea which even today undoubtedly is taken by many as heresy.

Parnassus is his inner and secret subject. The gardens of Lorenzo the Beautiful. The gardens of Urbino. The gardens of Italy. The world as a wisely arranged garden.

That was the time of new Hellenism, and Raphael was perceived as the embodiment of Apollo (in the god's most peaceful and artistic image).

Those ten years were unique. The humanists spoke of the Third Kingdom, the kingdom of culture. That kingdom had sunk into blood and dirt. And the coming times were as full of contrasts as the paintings by Caravaggio. The Sistine Madonna, the dove, came out of Donna La Felata. And unexpectedly one sees Fonarina in St Catherine.

It may well be that Raphael was not the one who created the codes of harmony in art, so needed by the world, but he was familiar with those codes.

Until the present day experts continue to argue about who provided Raphael with a literary and philosophical scenario for stories, hermetic yet with multiple meanings, used in his "Stanzas". Clearly, the circle of his friends was not typical for a painter: it included humanists, intellectuals, seekers of deep hidden secrets, and individuals of the kind that Leonardo found insufferable.

Very soon the warm wind of the Renaissance was followed by a quite different phenomenon: the icy wind of Reformation.

It has been noted that people of the Renaissance days, the humanists, were entirely different from the human types of the Reformation period. As M. T. Petrov writes: "Not a single reformer has ever become a humanist."

In his collection of essays *The Culture of the Renaissance and Reformation Era* (1981), Petrov writes: "The essence of Humanism is in a well-rounded development of individuals. But this truth is too vague, too multifaceted. And that is why the humanists themselves were not prepared to kill or die for the sake of beauty..."

Reformation was a clearly and unambiguously formulated system of truths, which was implemented in real life. And for that reason one could die for it, as well as kill others. In the name of an idea the reformers (the most sincere among them) were prepared to take other people's lives and to sacrifice their own."

Here we have two types of those who lead people. One type is represented by leaders who are men of thought, of ethics and aesthetics; the other type are people dedicated to practical implementation (and simplification) of ideas in the social realm.

And this, among other things, a viewer can also realise standing before a huge fresco *The School in Athens* at the Vatican Palace.

During Raphael's brief lifetime people were not killed in the name of beauty and truth (although Savonarola was burnt, and the meek Raphael was not afraid to place him behind Dante's back in *Disputa*).

It was a miracle that Pope Julius the Second entrusted the twenty-five year old Raphael with the task of decorating the papal private rooms. When Raphael was thirty, after the death of Bramante the Pope commissioned him to supervise the construction of the new St Peter's Basilica, although Raphael was not an architect of any kind. The artist handled the job well, though the cathedral was completed much later, with contributions by Michelangelo, Giacomo della Porta, Carlo Modena, and Bernini... It was also a miracle that Raphael managed to stay on good terms with two Popes who greatly differed from each other. There were even rumors that Pope Julius had offered him a cardinal's mitre, perhaps out of exaltation, and that Raphael had allegedly declined the offer, which is something quite miraculous in itself.

Having lost his mother at an early age, he often painted images of the Madonna's tenderness.

The Madonna from the Hermitage Museum, by Conegliano, which was on display at the London exhibition, is one of the earliest and, perhaps, one of the best.

He has produced a multitude of frescos with hundreds of figures in them, made in various styles, but all of them bear the mark of Raphael's style.

The admiration for Raphael among his fellow-professionals was akin to a mania. Francesco Francia, a recognised leader of Bologna painters, an aged and highly respected man, dedicated a sonnet to him, calling him "The most excellent of painters, Raphael Sanzio, the Zeuxis of our times":

I am no Zeuxis, nor Apelles, nor am I worthy
of being praised like those great names.
None of my gifts or achievements merit
Raphael's immortal fame.
You are the sun that was set by heavens,
excelling all, reigning above all,
teaching us the highest of arts in which
you have equalled the ancient masters.
A fortunate youth, since your early days
you have been superior to so many.
What will your ripe age produce
as its best?
...you will conquer nature, as an artist
you will be extolled as the painter beyond
compare.

(From "Masters of Art on Art", vol. 2, p. 164)

He even earned the appellation of "thrice the greatest".

Perhaps the high Renaissance of Raphael is not, in the strict meaning of the word, a *rebirth* of the long-dead antiquity, but rather its renewal in a city of an entirely different structure, in ROME AND THE WORLD, *urbi et orbi*. His art is about something else: it is about restoring time and fixing its discontinuity. And, perhaps, even about becoming a part of the universal cultural heritage.

RAPHAEL'S Frescos and Cartoons

A veritable embodiment of miracle are Raphael's famous cartoons which served as a basis for tapestries woven for the Sistine Chapel. Nowadays the tapestries hang in the Vatican picture gallery, in a darkened hall, and are displayed at the Sistine Chapel only when a Pope is being elected. *As for the beautiful cartoons, the same size as the tapestries but with mirrored images, these compositions of many figures depicting the deeds of Apostles were shipped to Brussels, to be used for producing tapestries.* Many kings and dukes wished to acquire them. At one time they were bought by the Prince of Wales, later to become King Charles I. Today Raphael's Cartoons are the pride of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where they are beautifully displayed in a spacious hall constructed especially for them.

Raphael also produced countless portraits of popes and cardinals, of noblemen and scientists, of noble ladies, of his female and male friends, people of spiritual countenance.

His sudden death had given grounds for various speculations.

Prior to his death he was working on the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ (now in the Vatican picture gallery) which was completed by Paris Bordone.

It was believed by many at the time (and still by some) that he modelled the Son of God, ascending to His Father, on himself. (Incidentally, Duerer did the same, and Leonardo depicted himself as God the Father.)

That painting was placed next to his coffin. He was buried with great honours in the Santa Maria Rotonda, or the Pantheon, the only extant antique temple of Rome. This in itself is miraculous. As is the fact that he has stayed there for the past five hundred years.

The Pantheon

The Pantheon, the Roman temple of all the Saints, as timeless as the pyramids, was built during Agrippa's rein. It was burnt by Zeus's lightning, restored by Adrian and looted in the days of Pope Urban VII of the Barberini family. (There is a popular Roman saying, "Quod non barbari fecerunt Barberini", meaning "Barberini did what the barbarians did not". And he did this: he had ordered that the ancient bronze panels decorating the Pantheon be torn off and made into a gigantic

canopy for the papal altar in St Peter's Cathedral, which was exactly what the youthful novice did during the incumbency of the new pope from the Bernini family.)

The Pantheon, grey and huge, rotund like a whale, suddenly appeared on a square where narrow streets merged. It was firmly but gently supported by a powerful portico and massive but surprisingly graceful columns. The columns, the beams of the portico, the heavy doors, and the famous hemisphere of the Pantheon's dome which Raphael liked so much (even the impudent Michelangelo did not dare excel it). The huge round sidelight, with an opening at the top through which for thousands of years the blue Roman sky could be seen, and the Sun, the Moon, and all the stars peer in, the rain and sometimes the snow fall. Everything here was commensurate with eternity.

A small bust to the left, in a niche, where at one time the statues of the Gods stood, – Raphael's tomb is there, as if he were the new avatar of Apollo and Hermes...